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*The Graeco-Roman and Jewish Context
of the New Testament*

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1	Introduction.....	1
2	Overview of the historical Context.....	1
3	Circumcision in Judaism and the New Testament	2
3.1	Biblical understanding	2
3.2	The Book of Jubilee	4
3.3	Dead Sea Scrolls	4
3.3.1	Circumcision as a prerequisite for a believer.....	5
3.3.2	Circumcision of the heart	5
3.3.3	Theological inferences.....	6
3.4	Philo.....	6
3.4.1	Who he was.....	6
3.4.2	An Apologetic against Greek criticism	7
3.4.3	Responses to Questions about Circumcision.....	8
3.4.4	Literal Understanding of Circumcision necessary	8
3.5	Rabbinical Writings	9
3.5.1	Circumcision is beauty	9
3.5.2	Repentance equal to obedience through circumcision.....	10
3.5.3	Persecution because of circumcision	10
3.5.4	Circumcision annuls Sabbath law	11
3.5.5	Circumcision and Baptism to produce a new Israelite.....	11
3.5.6	Attitude towards the forbidden circumcision.....	12
4	Miracles in the New Testament and the Graeco-Roman Culture	13
4.1	Greek ways of interacting with the divine.....	13
4.2	Rules for obtaining instructions for Healing	14
4.3	Exorcising a Demon.....	15
4.4	Three accounts of Emperor Vespasian’s Healing Powers.....	17
5	Conclusion	20
6	Sources consulted	21

1 Introduction

The context of the New Testament has always been under extreme scrutiny. The opinions about the influence of the Hellenistic and Hebrew culture and worldview on the New Testament have shifted back and forth over the last centuries. In nineteenth and the beginning of this century we had a very strong emphasis on the dominating presence of the elements of the Graeco-Roman worldview in the New Testament. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the fifties of this century opinions shifted to the other extreme by viewing the New Testament predominantly under the influence of Jewish ways of thinking. Lately there seems to be more balance in the views propagated and it is widely acknowledged that both cultures have in different ways affected the formation of the New Testament and its theology. Complicating the task is the problem of marking a clear boundary between the Graeco-Roman and Jewish culture since they have interacted with one another for centuries before the recorded stories in the New Testament were written down.

The purpose of this paper is to show by extrabiblical literature contemporary with the New Testament, how Jewish and Graeco-Roman thought have influenced the theology and views presented to us in the New Testament. Different literary pieces from these cultures will be surveyed and possible relationships explored. For the Hellenistic context we will focus on miracle stories and compare them with the New Testament. For the Hebrew context there will be a survey of the treatment of circumcision in contemporary (to New Testament times) Judaism with the understanding in the New Testament.

2 Overview of the historical Context

It is important to see the development of the New Testament in the overall historical situation in Palestine of the first century AD. After the return from exile the second temple was build and a new state was founded around the reestablished cult at Jerusalem in a slow development over centuries in the midst of military and political upheavals in Palestine. The new state was always at the mercy of some other greater powers first the Persians from the East. After the conquests by Alexander the Great those powers were replaced by the Seleucids pursuing a Hellenization program in Palestine forbidding Jewish worship in the temple. As a result the Jews revolted in the Maccabean Revolution and successfully got rid of the oppression through the Seleucids. Another independent state was formed which early lost its independence to the newly risen power of Rome.

Judaism was re-formed in response to a number of cultural dangers encroaching upon it during New Testament times. Therefore it is difficult to clearly separate Judaism from the surrounding cultures. The time of the New Testament was a period of tension between Judaism and the Graeco-Roman culture. The New Testament sprung up in that period of time and is characterized in a major way by this tension.

Palestine was under the predominant influence of the Roman Empire during New Testament times but the actual way of governing seemed to be in continual change shifting from more or less despotic Jewish rulers to Roman Governors with the population rarely being satisfied with the government. The Jewish population itself was split into various

groups having different views on Judaism. Disagreement between fractions even within the population often led to violence. Religious, cultural and social conflicts repeatedly led to cruel incidences where a lot of blood was shed. Over time these conflicts intensified until Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Army in 70 AD leading to the destruction of major movements within the Jewish culture. Many elements typical for the culture of the New Testament as depicted in the Gospel vanished through that destruction (Newsome, 1992).

I think it would be fair to say that the period was marked by an experience of evil all around by the Jewish population. The apocalyptic expectations as articulated in various ways at Qumran, in early Christianity and Judaism – the yearning for peace, justice and an end to oppression -- are understandable in such circumstances.

Palestine was not only inhabited by Jews but the population was a mix between Greek and Jewish. In some localities a strict separation might exist. Some villages were predominantly or exclusively Greek or Jewish. For example Galilee which is one of the major areas for the activity of Jesus in the New Testament is known to have had a mixed population in a rather small area of both Jews and Greeks. For example the Decapolis, the ten cities, mentioned in Matt 4:25 which were predominantly Greek were located in the area of Galilee. It was impossible for the Jewish culture to avoid the Graeco-Roman influence (Newsome, 1992, 291).

3 Circumcision in Judaism and the New Testament

It is probably wise to start with the Jewish context of the New Testament since the message of the New Testament started to be developed within the Jewish culture of Palestine and then moved out into the Graeco-Roman world.

Culturally the Jewish society had already experienced centuries of pressure from the Hellenistic world to conform to their ideals and patterns of response to those challenges had already been established and elements of the Hellenistic world have already been integrated into Jewish thinking and behavior. The literature presented here is therefore not to be seen as something that is purely belonging to the Jewish culture but this literature already expresses a form of Hellenized Judaism. A Judaism that was more or less Hellenized was typical for the first century AD.

3.1 Biblical understanding

In the Old Testament circumcision is presented as an embodiment of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Abraham is circumcised in his very old age in a covenant affirming ceremony and God is telling Abraham:

This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised (Gen 17:10)

And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My Covenant (Gen 17:14)

The special covenant between God and Israel is expressed by a physical act of circumcision. Circumcision is the token of membership in the covenant of God (Brown 1986 Vol. I 308). Yet early on circumcision is also understood as a symbolic means to express something different, as for example expressed in the following passages:

Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer (Deut 10:16).

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your hearts, you men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My fury come forth like fire ... (Jer 4:4).

Circumcision here is transferred to the heart, which was seen to be the center for decision making and the center of all thoughts in a person. Today we might be better talking about a circumcision of our thoughts and our will. The heart is circumcised to take away the rebellion against God.

Circumcision of the heart is allowing the will to submit to the will of God and to implement it. The way Paul expresses his understanding of circumcision in the following classic passage in the Letter to the Romans is in harmony with this kind of understanding:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart. In the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God. (Rom 2:28+29)

Paul is going further and completely makes circumcision to be something understood symbolically:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love (Gal 5:6).

The physical act of circumcision is losing its significance with Paul, which caused him to experience major problems with persecution by Jews everywhere. When the Jews finally got a hold of him in Jerusalem they shouted: "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place." (Acts 21:28). Here the major fault-line between Judaism and early Christianity becomes clear. For Paul circumcision is the symbolism for the complete surrender to God, not by necessity a physical circumcision.

We are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. (Phil 3:3).

Christianity made circumcision not mandatory. For Judaism circumcision was a matter of their identity. When the Emperor Hadrian prohibited circumcision around 130 AD the remnants of the Jews in Palestine took a last stand against the Romans in the Revolt of Bar-Kokhba (Newsome, 1992, 312) which failed like the earlier revolt around 70 AD. The outcome of the second revolt was the banishment of the Jews from Palestine. There certainly might have been other factors at work as well contributing to the fury which started the revolt but one of the non-negotiable items of Judaism has always been circumcision.

3.2 The Book of Jubilee

The Book of Jubilee probably originates from the 2nd century BC and may be written by someone wanting to admonish the Jewish believers to hold fast to their tradition in the midst of the turmoil and the oppression of the time (Evans, 1992, 31). The Book of Jubilee is rewriting Genesis and Exodus adding some information here and there expanding the text (a classic form of ancient Jewish literature). Genesis 17 tells of the Covenant with Abraham and the commandment of God to perform circumcision for all subsequent generations. The book of Jubilee expands on the story and adds some important comments giving evidence of the special view of the author(s) on the matter of circumcision.

First there is the emphasis on the accurate counting of days. "... there is no circumcision of the days, and no omission of one day out of the eight days; for it is an eternal ordinance" *Jub.* 15:25). It seems that there was a disagreement about the how the eight days should be observed. Maybe this was related to the question treated by the Rabbis if the circumcision could take place on a Sabbath or not (more under 3.5.4). The author of Jubilee wants those eight days to be accurately observed. They are not to be "circumcised".

Circumcision is a sign that a child is the Lord's: "... nor is there, however, any sign on him [the uncircumcised child] that he is the Lord's" *Jub.* 15:26. Not being circumcised means certain doom for the child: "... not circumcised ... belongs ... to the children of destruction.... (he is destined) to be destroyed and slain from the earth, and to be rooted out of the earth, for he has broken the covenant of the Lord our God." *Jub.* 15:26.

For the author circumcision is a must for anyone relating to God. The New Testament takes circumcision as symbolic for non-Jews and the accurate counting of days or the keeping of feasts is not of vital importance. Paul can say to the Galatians: "You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain." (Gal 4:10+11).

3.3 Dead Sea Scrolls

The writings at Qumran are the writings of a Jewish sect, which is often more or less assumed to be identical with the group Josephus, Philo and others later called the Essenes. It is unclear how this sect stood in relationship to the common Jewish population. Their writings contain evidence of a rejection of the cult at Jerusalem. The people in Qumran probably saw themselves as the true Israel. It is therefore problematic to take the writings found there as necessarily representing the opinion of a majority of the population. I would rather suggest taking the writings as evidence for strands of culture during the New Testament time¹.

¹ More information regarding the difficulties of assigning the writings a role in ancient Judaism might be found in Shanks, 1992. Newsome, 1992 Chapter 5 is also a nice short treatment on the general nature of the literature at Qumran.

3.3.1 Circumcision as a prerequisite for a believer

One of the Scrolls found at Qumran is called the *Thanksgiving Hymns* because it contains about 25 Psalm like hymns. It is probably written in the first century BC (Vermes, 1987, 165; Newsome, 1992, 163). I would like to discuss two passages from that scroll. First there is evidence of the Jewish understanding of the “uncircumcised” as being something that is defiled and not worthy of God:

[How] shall I look, unless you open my eyes?

Or hear, [unless Thou unstop my ears]?

My heart is astounded, for to the uncircumcised ear a word has been disclosed, and a heart [of stone has understood the right precepts].

...

Thou hast [caused the perverse heart to enter] into a Covenant with Thee

(1 QH 18:19- as reconstructed by Vermes, 1987, 205)

The uncircumcised ear, which cannot hear, is an ear that is separated from God and thus sinful. It is an amazement to the worshipper that God has made himself known to those who are not part of the covenant. Uncircumcision here is equal to someone who is not in the right relationship with God and not part of the covenant. Uncircumcision is unclean and therefore not Jewish. Circumcision is essential for being in the right relationship with God. Here we have an affirmation of the classic Jewish understanding of circumcision.

In harmony with the understanding of the New Testament (John 3:3) this passage explains that understanding of God’s will is impossible if not given by God himself². God draws people to himself. A relationship with God (and therefore circumcision in the Qumran sense) is not possible if God does not open the door.

3.3.2 Circumcision of the heart

Another Scroll at Qumran contains the rules that probably governed the Community. Here we find a concrete exegesis of Deut 10:16 and related passages:

No man shall walk in the stubbornness of his heart so that he strays after his heart and eyes and evil inclination, but he shall circumcise in the Community the foreskin of evil inclination and of stiffness of neck that they may lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for the Community of the everlasting Covenant (1 QS 5:5).

² I speculate in my paper on the Dead Sea Scrolls about a possible source of Qumran thinking in the New Testament via the Apostle John. John might have been a disciple of John the Baptist before changing camps and his way of expression is very reminiscent of some of the literature found at Qumran.

Circumcision is now understood symbolically and a concrete application of the idea of circumcision of the heart to the life of the sect is given. Circumcision means to abandon the striving after one's own inclinations. Through life in the Community members have a change to work at getting rid of those evil inclinations of the heart. They submit to the discipline of the sect and are rewarded by losing those evil inclinations of their hearts. Thus they become acceptable to God. As a consequence that person will be a witness for the truth of the Covenant that God has made with Israel to the current apostate community of Israel.

There are many parallels here with the New Testament understanding of dying to the old self and Paul's interpretation of the circumcision of the heart (Col 3:1-9). In Christ the old man with the desire for evil is put away and truth about all the evil of the past will come about and bring renewal.

3.3.3 Theological inferences

It is very interesting that we can find an understanding of circumcision as a God imposed limitation so that a person might not sin against God. This might be a parallel to the attempt of the Pharisees to build a fence around the law so that it is not accidentally violated. A part of the *Thanksgiving Hymns* express the notion of God's "hedging in" in order to preserve a person from sinning:

[I will bow down] and implore Thy mercy [on my sins and wicked] deeds and on the perversity of [my heart], for I have walled in uncleanness...

[According to] Thy righteousness, let [Thy servant] be redeemed [and] the wicked be brought to an end.

For I have understood that [it is Thou who dost establish] the path of whomsoever Thou choosest; *Thou dost hedge him in with [true] discernment* that he may not sin against Thee, and that his humility [may be fruit] through Thy chastisement.

(1 QH 11 as translated by G. Vermes, 1987. Italics mine)

The notion of a limitation imposed by God comes up here and I think it is evident that this passage is related to the thinking at Qumran on circumcision. God imposing limitations (such as circumcision or also the rules of the community which limit what one can do) and also the chastisement by God is evidence for the election of Israel. Similarly the New Testament sees trials and persecution to be evidence of God's election. The Apostles rejoice when they are beaten by order of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:41).

3.4 Philo

3.4.1 Who he was

Philo was a Hellenized Jew living from 20 BC to around 50 AD in Alexandria, Egypt. He is so important because he lived contemporary to many persons mentioned in the New Testament. Philo seems to have been a member of the ruling class of the Jews in

Alexandria. He was involved in an embassy to the emperor. His brother Alexander held various positions in the Roman Empire and his nephew Marcus was married to Bernice, the daughter of Herod Agrippa I (Yong, 1993, xi-xii).

Philo as a heavily Hellenized Jew was acquainted well with Greek Philosophy and common Greek thinking although he was committed to the Jewish law. The New Testament developed basically in the same environment. Therefore it is to be expected that the life and thought of Philo can shed much light on the understanding of the New Testament.

3.4.2 An Apologetic against Greek criticism

Greeks and Romans generally thought about circumcision as something unnatural, perverse and sought ways to stop the Jews and others from performing circumcision. There was the notion that circumcision was akin to castration, which was also prohibited. But the Jews never stopped circumcising their children. Jewish Women preferred death to not circumcising their children (Brown, 1986, Vol. 1, 309).

Philo wrote a defense of circumcision against the accusations, which were brought against the custom. His defense is clearly targeted against accusations from the Graeco-Roman culture since he is using Greek thought to argue for circumcision and rarely references Scripture or Jewish concepts at all.

Circumcision seems to have been ridiculed and that ridicule by the Greeks was one of the major concerns of Philo when he wrote his treatise on the special Jewish laws for Philo writes: “The ordinance of circumcision of the parts of generation is ridiculed...” (*Spec. Leg.* I, 2) right at the beginning of his book. Against these accusations Philo brings up the following arguments:

- ❖ Circumcision is practiced by other nations as well like for example the highly educated and well recognized Egyptians (I, 2).
- ❖ A huge quantity of people has been circumcised in history. There must be a reason for doing so (I, 3).
- ❖ Circumcision is preventing painful diseases (I, 4).
- ❖ Circumcision assures cleanness of the body (I,5).
- ❖ Circumcision is evidence of a circumcision of the heart since there is a resemblance between foreskin and the heart. The heart produces thoughts and the “generative organ” is producing living beings (I, 6).
- ❖ Semen proceeds more easily (I, 7).
- ❖ It is a symbol of “the excision of the pleasures which delude the mind”. Circumcision removes excessive pleasures associated with “the association of man with woman” (I, 9).
- ❖ Circumcision is a symbol of man knowing himself. It is a sign of limitation and humbleness before God (I, 10). It is a symbol to “eradicate evil opinions from the mind, and all other ideas which are not devoted to God.” (I, 11)

Apart from the medical reason it is rather surprising to find an early form of asceticism in Philo³. Pleasure in itself is seen to be evil. Moderation in pleasure is necessary and that is what circumcision accomplishes. The New Testament has similar views on the necessity to submit to God rather than to submit to pleasure (James 4:4) but the connection with an interpretation of circumcision as submittal to God has to a large part been lost.

3.4.3 Responses to Questions about Circumcision

In his treatise *Questions and Answers on Genesis* Philo answers many questions regarding circumcision (Philo *Quaest. in Gn.* III,46-52) arguing again for a twofold understanding of circumcision. Circumcision is a limitation on the intellect as well:

I see here a twofold circumcision, one of the male creature, and the other of the flesh; that which is of the flesh takes place in the genitals, but that which is of the male creature takes place, as it seems to be, in respect of his thoughts.

Since that which is, properly speaking, masculine in us is the intellect, the superfluous shoots of which it is necessary to prune away and to cast off, so that it, becoming clean and pure from all wickedness and vile, may worship God as his priest. (Philo *Quaest. in Gn.* III, 46)

Circumcision is a limitation on what one can think (maybe also understood as including the will). Thus the circumcision of the heart is a self-limitation in order to be pure before God. The New Testament understands also the need to control evil thoughts. Instead of arguing for a self-limitation (which makes perfect sense in the Greek culture) the New Testament argues for the submission of all thoughts to Christ (James 4:7-10).

3.4.4 Literal Understanding of Circumcision necessary

There seems to have been some dispute about the necessity of physical circumcision even within Judaism. In his treatise *On the Migration of Abraham* Philo argues for a literal understanding and against just being satisfied with it being a symbol⁴:

Nor does it follow, because the feast is the symbol of the joy of the soul and of its gratitude towards God, that we are to repudiate the assemblies ordained at the periodical seasons of the year; nor because the rite of circumcision is an emblem of the excision of pleasures and of all the passions, and of the destruction of that impious opinion, according to which the mind has imagined itself to be by itself competent to produce offspring, does it follow that we are to annul the law which has been enacted about circumcision (Philo *Mig.*, 92).

The reasoning of Philo here seems to be problematic. He does not really give any reason to keep the literal understanding apart from saying that other rites would also be abolished if that would be done.

³ The first monks of Christianity emerged in Egypt. There may be a connection here.

⁴ The section on circumcision includes Philo, *Mig.* 89-94

Again he emphasizes the notion of the “excision of pleasures and of all the passions”. The New Testament affirms the general goodness of what God created and certainly would not go as far as Philo did in a general condemnation of pleasures and passions.

3.5 Rabbinical Writings

Rabbinical writings are important because they are available covering almost everything related to Judaism. The problem with those writings is the dating and the viewpoint expressed in them. Large strands of Judaism perished during the Jewish war AD 70 and in the revolt of Bar-Kokhba.

The Pharisees were the only group that survived this period in sufficient numbers to maintain their beliefs (Horsley and Hanson, 1985, 44). As a result we have basically the Pharisaic viewpoint of the whole situation in the rabbinical writings. The teachings of the Rabbis were communicated orally at first and only written down very late when Judaism felt the danger of losing the teachings of the Rabbis. Different authors have reworked most passages over long periods of time up to the beginning of the medieval period making it difficult to distinguish authors within the texts that exist.

Nevertheless we have a rich tradition here that might shed some light also on the beliefs of a significant group of the Jewish culture in New Testament times. Most of what is discussed here is still normative for Orthodox Judaism.

The following are excerpts from the writings of the Rabbis dealing in one way or another with the issue of circumcision.

3.5.1 Circumcision is beauty

Here is a passage taken from a commentary (Midrash) on the Song of Songs written down probably as late as the 6th century AD:

Thou art beautiful my love (Songs 1,15)

Thou art beautiful through the commandments, both positive and negative, beautiful ... in the law of circumcision, beautiful in prayer, ... beautiful, too in repentance and in good works; beautiful in this world and beautiful in the world to come (*Song Rab.* 1:15 §15,1)⁵

Circumcision is part of the law of God and thus it is loved and it is also seen to be beautiful. Paul in the New Testament sees physical circumcision as something that is mandated only for Israel and otherwise to be rejected as a striving for the righteousness by works, as an attempt to earn the favor of God instead of relying on God’s grace by faith (Gal 5:11-13). Paul even goes so far as to compare circumcision with mutilation or castration in Galatians 5:12. Paul is using the classic accusations of the Greeks against Judaism to make his point to the Galatian church!

⁵ Montefiore and Loewe give this reference on page 118, §311 as “*Cant.R.* I, §15,1, on 1,15; f.12.b”

3.5.2 Repentance equal to obedience through circumcision

Circumcision can have a redemptive effect in Judaism in the following passage:

Rabbi Eliezer said: [Why does God not punish Israel. God replies]:

But Israel rise [sic] from their beds, and sanctify My name twice each day: ... they circumcise their flesh, and they are full of commandments. And moreover, I have created for them repentance, which is equal to the Torah, and yet you say that I respect persons. (M. Friedmann, ed. *Tanna de Be Eliyyahu*, Vienna, 1902, Pseudo-Seder Eliahu Zuta, 37)⁶

The obedience to the law and therefore circumcision is something that makes God unwilling to punish Israel for their sins. Repentance is equal to obedience. Repentance has a redemptive effect but that effect is the same as obeying the law. Thus repentance in Judaism seems to have been more expressed by obedience rather than being in a state of asking for forgiveness for the sins of the past. The New Testament would see repentance slightly differently. Repentance itself brings forgiveness and thus redemption from sin. Obedience is something that is natural for a child of God and nothing that brings redemption from sin. Hearing the words of God and faith in Christ brings obedience and a right relationship with God (John 5:24).

Paul takes the role of the law away: “Christ is the end of the law” (Rom 10:4).

3.5.3 Persecution because of circumcision

The Romans had an easy time persecuting the Jews because it was very simple to do by suppressing their sacred rites. The following passage is an example of reasons why the Jews experienced martyrdom. As noted above, the prohibition against circumcision might have contributed to the start of the second insurrection of the Jews in Palestine under Bar-Kokhba. The passage was certainly written long after the end of the war but Judaism still holds on to circumcision.

It is written in Exod 10:6 “They who love me and keep my commandments.”

R. Nathan said: These are the Israelites who gave their lives for the commandments.

Why were you brought out to be killed? Because I circumcised some Israelites.

And why were you brought forth to be burnt? Because I read the Law.

And why were you brought out to be crucified? Because I ate unleavened bread.

⁶ Montefiore and Loewe, 326, §854

And why were you scourged? Because I carried the lulab on Tabernacles. These wounds have caused me to be loved by my Father who is in heaven (*Melkita* on Exod 10:6)⁷

Christians were persecuted because of their beliefs and their rejection of the emperor cult. It was possible for Christians to live a stealth life in the Roman Society although avoiding certain situations since they did not have a large set of distinctive rites to be observed like the Jews. Redemption for Christians was not as much bound to rites but to fellowship with Christ and fellow Christians. Christians were able to serve secular masters and still maintain their religiosity. That is why the New Testament continuously emphasizes the blessing of God in the social place where one has been called (1 Cor 7:17-). Paul says: “Brethren. Let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called” (1 Cor 5:24). The Jews were not able to live in the same way due to certain rites to be observed and were forced to separate themselves to some extent from the secular society in order to live their lifestyle. Jews tended to live among other Jews in order to observe their customs. Christians could integrate with society to a larger extent. It is amazing that Paul can even write of Christians in the household of Caesar at the end of his life (Phil 4:22).

3.5.4 Circumcision annuls Sabbath law

The law of circumcision is more important than the law of the Sabbath:

One who is attacked by robbers may break the Sabbath in order to save his life. Danger to life annuls the Sabbath, for man is to live by doing God's commandments and not to die by them. The law of circumcision annuls the Sabbath.... (Buber, S. *Tanhuma*. Wilna, 1885, Masse'e 81a)⁸

The interesting thing is that certain commandments are relativized here. Obedience to the law is limited and there are certain priorities to be observed. The law of circumcision was quite high up in the priority list since it could overturn the Sabbath laws. Children were always to be circumcised on the eighth day as already polemically argued by the Book of Jubilee before. Until later times the commandment about the eighth day was apparently not followed to the letter so that the Rabbis have had to continually make that point again which the Book of Jubilee already made in the 2nd century BC.

3.5.5 Circumcision and Baptism to produce a new Israelite

Here is a passage on how to introduce foreigners to become a Jew. On introduction to Judaism the new convert had to learn obedience to all the laws. Circumcision meant assent to those laws and committing to being subject to those laws. For being a Jew it is essential

⁷ I found this passage in Montefiore and Loewe page 261, §674. They give the following reference: Horovitz, H.S. *Melkita*. Berlin, 1931, Bahodesh, Yitro, §6, p. 227 and also in Lauterbach, J.Z. *Melkita*. Philadelphia, 1933-5. Vol. II, p. 247

⁸ Montefiore and Loewe, 258, §667

to obey the law and to follow a cultural norm of behavior, which is enforced by fellow Jews:

[Introduction of Proselytes into Judaism] ‘You could violate the Sabbath without being liable to the punishment of death by stoning; but from now on you will be liable.’ [Talk about punishments and rewards] ... if he assents to all, they circumcise him at once, and when he is healed, they baptize him, and two scholars stand by, and tell him some of the light and of some of the heavy laws. When he has been baptized, he is regarded in all respects as an Israelite (*b. Yebam. 47a-47b*)⁹.

In contrast the Christianity evident in the New Testament was able to adapt into different cultural situations not carrying with it the cultural baggage of Judaism. The potential for outreach was much greater in Christianity since those limiting laws were not there. The laws of the Churches could vary depending on the local situation. Becoming a Christian was not so much assenting to follow certain rules but more a confession of the need of redemption. The intend of the Church was to help Christians live a pure life. Punishment could be an aid for those purposes but not the automatic consequence.

It is interesting to see that baptism was a rite performed by both groups although the understanding of it is slightly different. Baptism seems to be understood here as a cleaning from a prior sinful life and the willingness to begin a new life under the commandments of God. The New Testament similarly saw Baptism as a beginning of a new life in the grace of God and the cleansing of sin (2 Cor 5:17). The emphasis of the New Testament lies on the fellowship with Christ rather than the obedience to a set of laws like in Judaism.

3.5.6 Attitude towards the forbidden circumcision

Generally the Jews also followed secular (Roman) laws but there were limits when it came to obeying the law:

... From the time that the Roman government has power over us, and imposes hard decrees upon us, an seeks to cause the Law and the Commandments to cease, and to prevent the circumcision of our sons, we ought, perhaps, to ordain that no one should marry and beget children; but then the descendants of Abraham would come to an end; therefore we must allow Israel to marry, for it is better that the Israelite should sin unwittingly than wittingly. (*m. Baba Batra 60b*)¹⁰.

Circumcision is so much a part of the Jewish identity that it cannot be given up. There was no Jewishness anymore if sons could no longer be circumcised. Again we have Judaism insisting on certain forms and rites that the New Testament took as something that had been overcome by the power of Christ.

⁹ Montefiore and Loewe, 579, §1610.

¹⁰ Montefiore and Loewe, 524, §1477. There should be a reference to chapter and verse in the main text but I could only find “60b” which looks like a folio reference.

4 Miracles in the New Testament and the Graeco-Roman Culture

The notion of miracles is central to the New Testament as evidence of God who acts in history, redeems his people in time as well as for eternity and as God's communication to the church. The issue of miracles often seemed to be off topic or offensive to authors writing in the area of theology in the last centuries. Books barely mention miracles although large parts of the Gospels are concerned about the issues arising through miracles. Miracles are explained by natural reasons if possible. A working modern theology of divine intervention is very difficult to get at.

When surveying the Jewish writings we noted a strong influence by Graeco-Roman culture on the writings contemporary with the New Testament. Manuscripts from the Graeco-Roman culture are found in abundance and in most documents there is no visible influence of Jewish thought. We are therefore able to get a good picture of the theology of the Graeco-Roman culture as distinct from the mixture of Jewishness and Hellenism in the Jewish writers of the time.

The development of the New Testament coincided with a period of development in the Roman Empire from the Republican period, in which the real power was exercised by the Roman Senate, to the Emperors, who drew all power to themselves and developed more and more to be seen as divine. This culminated in the emperors gaining the status of deities. They were worshipped in later times, which became especially problematic for Christians.

4.1 Greek ways of interacting with the divine

To understand the way the Hellenistic culture approached the divine we need to discuss some of the characteristic methods of communication with supernatural beings. In contrast to Judaism and Christianity the Hellenistic world was characterized by the acceptance of the presence of multiple Gods. There was not just one God but multiple Gods competing with one another. And so one could choose which one to appeal to and was free in one's choice. This included pluralism in the religious understanding. Other and new religions were generally acceptable as long as they did not challenge the old Gods. The special problem with Christianity and Judaism was that they declared those other Gods to be not valid at all. Both demanded an exclusive allegiance to one God instead of leaving the freedom to choose the divinities one associated with.

The Roman view of the Gods was much more formal than even the Greek. Ceremonies had to be followed exactly to the last point to be effective. Any deviation would cause the whole procedure to be ineffective. Roman thought about religion was in terms of relationships especially the common patron/client relationships prevalent in life and politics in Rome. This view was transferred to the gods. To keep the favor of a god a proper relationship had to be cultivated in order to produce certain results. Roman religion was not ethical or demanding something good. Roman religion was performed in order to gain an advantage. Ethical behavior was not a function of religion but a matter of civil behavior and thus outside of the scope of religion (Shelton, 1988, 372).

Prayer was therefore more a matter of what words to say and what actions to perform in order to obtain wanted results. Here is a passage regarding prayer:

It apparently does not good to offer a sacrifice or to consult the gods with due ceremony unless you also speak words of prayer. In addition, some words are appropriate for seeking favorable omens, others for warding off evil, and still others for securing help. There are recorded remarkable cases where either ill-omened noises have interrupted and ruined the ritual or an error has been made in the strict wording of the prayer (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 28.2(3)10,11)¹¹.

Prayer was more often seen as a means to cut a deal with a God. Something was promised to the God in return if certain things would happen. On the occasion of a war the rulers of Rome made the following vow for the people:

If the war which the Roman people have ordered to be undertaken against King Antiochus shall be brought to a conclusion deemed appropriate by the Roman Senate and people, then the Roman people will arrange for you, Jupiter, great games for ten consecutive days, and will offer at the banquet tables of the gods gifts of whatever monetary value the Senate shall decree (Livy. *A history of Rome* 36.2.3-4)¹².

Religion was understood as a cooperation of both the gods and the humans for a common good. Religious commitment was conditional on success. The above promise seems to be at the complete mercy of the Roman Senate. The Roman Senate decides if the outcome of the war was “appropriate” and about what gifts will be offered. There is quite a distinction here to the Jewish and Christian view of God. God needs to be trusted and believed in. His leading needs to be followed. Trust is the requisite expected to gain anything from God. James says: “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:6). Christianity does not tolerate multiple allegiances to different gods as practiced by the Romans. Making a contract with God would almost be seen as mistrust and thus would not work. The Romans here treat Jupiter as an equal with whom a contractual agreement can be made. Christianity never saw itself capable of negotiation with God but as subject to God’s favor who knew better than humans did.

4.2 Rules for obtaining instructions for Healing

Here is an example on how divine instructions for healing could be obtained at the Asklepieion (a temple to Asclepius) in Pergamon through dreams:

And he should offer on the table of sacrifices the right leg and the entrails, and taking up another wreath of olive, first offer up to Zeus Apotropaïos [“who wards off”] a nine-braided striped cake, and to Zeus Meilichios [“the merciful”] a nine-braided striped cake, and to Artemis [...] and to Artemis Prothyraia [“the gate-keeper”] and to Earth, each a nine-braided cake. Having done this let him preliminarily offer up a suckling pig on the altar to Asclepius, and lay on the table of sacrifices the right leg and entrails. Let him then contribute three obols to the treasury. In the evening, let him offer three nine-braided cakes, two of them on the outer hearth to Luck and Remembrance, the third in the sleeping-room to Themis. Let

¹¹ Found in Shelton, 1988, 373

¹² Shelton, p. 376

him be ritually clean in the aforementioned respects and from sexual intercourse, and goat's meat and cheese and [... come in after abstaining] on the third day. Let him who sleeps there take the wreath off and lay it on the bed. If anyone wants to submit inquiries concerning on single matter several times, let him offer up preliminarily a pig. But if he wants to ask about another matter, let him preliminarily offer up another pig according to the regulations.

....

In the evening, let all those who have made the preliminary sacrifice [...] to the sleeping-room.... . They shall provide the god with good securities for the healing instructions [received by dreams during the nights in the sleeping-rooms] -- whatever he may do to them -- to render their accounts within a year [...] thank-victims for cure, not less than a year old. They shall contribute the thank-offerings for a cure to Asclepius' treasury, a sixth of a Phocaeen stater to Apollo and a sixth of a Phocaeen stater to Asclepius, when they are restored to health, and whatever else the god may require. Claudus Glycon the priest for ritual set this up (Christian Habicht *Die Inschriften des Askelpieions (Altuertuemer von Pergamon 8.3)*. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1969)¹³.

In tune with what was said before: Here is a complicated scheme that has to be followed accurately in order to have success. I have omitted parts of the instructions because they are very lengthy. A complicated ritual just to get instructions how to be healed. The poor patient pays at each move that is made to this and that god. It must have been quite expensive to go through this ritual. The patient has to provide "securities" to the God in order to be healed. Certainly only the higher sections of society could afford to undergo such a ritual both in view of the time spend on it and the money necessary to see things through to the end. It seems that enough money could buy a healing.

The New Testament is in quite a contrast to the scheme presented here. God offers healing through a simple means, the laying on of hands and it is for free (James 5; Mark 16). There is no requirement on the finances or any bribes to be paid but God's healing and God's love is free. No complicated scheme to follow accurately in order to obtain a god's favor. This must have been revolutionary in the Roman Empire!

For an actual example of what kinds of instructions for healing might have been given look at the story of Emperor Vespasian's power of healing below.

4.3 Exorcising a Demon

Philostratus wrote a book called the *Life of Apollonius*. Apollonius is a wonderworker in a very similar way to Jesus but working in the Hellenistic culture. Here is a story of Apollonius exorcising a demon:

Apollonius then was talking about libations [offering of drink to the gods], and was urging them not to drink out of a particular cup, but to reserve it for the gods, without ever touching it or drinking out of it. But when he also urged them to have handles on the cup, and to pour

¹³ MacMullan and Lane, 1992, 32

the libation over the handle, because that is the part of the cup at which men are least likely to drink, the youth burst out into loud and coarse laughter, and quite drowned his voice.

Then Apollonius looked up at him and said: "It is not yourself that perpetrates this insult, but the demon, who drives you on without your knowing it."

And in fact the youth was, without knowing it, possessed by a demon; for he would laugh at things that no one else laughed at, and then he would fall to weeping for no reason at all, and he would talk and sing to himself. Now most people thought that it was the boisterous humor of youth which led him into such excesses; but he was really the mouth-piece of a demon, though it only seemed a drunken frolic in which on that occasion he was indulging.

Now when Apollonius gazed on him, the ghost in him began to utter cries of fear and rage, such as one hears from people who are being branded or racked; and the ghost swore that he would leave the young man alone and never take possession of any man again.

But Apollonius addressed him, with anger, as a master might a shifty, rascally, and shameless slave and so on, and he ordered him to quit the young man.....

(Pilostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 4,20)¹⁴

It is very amazing to find quite a number of parallels in the exorcising of demons by Jesus in the New Testament.

The demon here is ridiculing the sacred and the sacred divine influence triggers behavior in the demon that allows it to be detected. Jesus' presence in Luke 4:34 triggers a demon to manifest itself in an analogous way.

Apollonius is able to discern that what happened here was through the person being possessed by a demon. Jesus is also able to discern the reason for illness through a demon in a person. Demons react by shouting and crying at the presence of Apollonius. Demons cried when they encountered Jesus (Mark 5:7).

The exorcism itself is done by a voice command. Demons are subject to the exorciser. Both Apollonius and Jesus have them under control by their divine power. The demons obey and leave the person on request with shouting: "And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he came out of him" (Mark 1:26).

Evil here is attributed to something foreign that does not belong into a person. The person is basically not responsible for the actions performed by some foreign entity within them. If the foreign part – the demon – is removed then the person changes completely and becomes reasonable again and abstains from doing the weird things done before.

Apollonius does not give a reason why this demon was in that person. The New Testament furnishes a reason: Sin opens up the possibility of demons entering a person or a person being afflicted with some strange illness (John 5:14).

¹⁴ Loeb 1, 389-93. Taken from Martin, 1988, 182 (H 214)

The demonology encountered here is quite distinct from the Old Testament presentation on evil spirits. Demon in the Old Testament is frequently just a derogatory reference to other Gods: “They sacrifice to demons not to God” (Deut 32:17). Evil spirits trouble Saul but it is not clear if this could be seen as a possession. It seems that a large measure of the demonology of the New Testament was taken over from the Graeco-Roman culture of the day and integrated with the Jewish understanding of sin.

4.4 Three accounts of Emperor Vespasian’s Healing Powers

Emperors grew to be more and more divine as time progressed in the first century AD. Here is a collection of 3 stories regarding the healing powers that Emperor Vespasian discovered after becoming Emperor. Here is an example of sick people getting instructions perhaps from a temple on how to get healed. They successfully act on the instructions given and are healed:

Vespasian as yet lacked prestige and a certain divinity, so to speak, since he was an unexpected and still new-made emperor; but these were also given to him. A man of the people who was blind, and another who was lame, came to him together as he sat on the tribunal, begging for the help for their disorders which Serapis had promised in a dream; for the god declared that Vespasian would restore the eyes, if he would spit upon them, and give strength to the leg, if he would deign to touch it with his heel.

Though he had hardly any faith that this could possibly succeed, and therefore shrank even from making the attempt, he was at last prevailed upon by his friends and tried both things in public before a large crowd; and with success (Suetonius, *Vespasian* 8,7)¹⁵.

Here we have a healing by faith although the healer – Emperor Vespasian -- is doubting that a healing could happen through him. But the divine ordination to be Emperor also gives the Emperor healing power.

The procedure in which the healing is effected is very reminiscent of procedures used by Jesus: “So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything” (Mark 8:23). Jesus healed through spittle in the same way Vespasian heals.

Touching of sick parts is probably what the laying on of hands mentioned in the New Testament entails. Again we have a tremendous similarity in procedure between the New Testament and Graeco-Roman divine healing.

There seems to be a common association in the Graeco-Roman world of strength in the political sphere and healing powers. Emperor Vespasian was expected to have divine healing powers because of his divine position. Jesus disciples’ expected him to govern a kingdom here on earth because of the evident healing powers he possessed (Mark 10:35-40).

¹⁵ Martin, 1988, 165. Loeb 2, 299

Noteworthy is the difference between Jesus and Vespasian: Jesus requires faith and has faith for others to be healed. Vespasian is skeptical and despite his skepticism can perform a healing because of a divine decree.

Here is another version of the same story presented by someone else:

Following Vespasian's entry into Alexandria, the Nile overflowed, having in one day risen a palm higher than usual; such an occurrence, it was said, had taken place only once before.

Vespasian himself healed two persons, one having a withered hand, the other being blind, who had come to him because of a vision seen in dreams; he cured the one by stepping on his hand and the other by spitting upon his eyes.

Yet, though heaven was thus magnifying him, the Alexandrians, far from delighting in his presence, detested him so heartily that they were forever mocking and reviling him, not only private but also in public. For they had expected to receive from him some great reward because they had been the first to make him emperor, but instead of securing anything, they had additional contributions levied upon them (Dio Cassius, *Roman Hist.* 65,8)¹⁶.

The problem of the lame man has changed. Now he has a withered hand, which was straightened out by Emperor Vespasian. Vespasian's presence here is also linked with natural events. The Nile is rising because of his presence. The story is related as just a matter of fact. There was seemingly no question in the mind of Dio Cassius when he related this story to us.

Here is yet another version of the story of someone questioning the whole story. This one is the demythologized version for the educated by Tacitus explaining that everything happened basically by natural means. Tacitus emphasizes the wise nature of Vespasian:

During the months while Vespasian was waiting at Alexandria for the regular season of the summer winds, and a settled sea, many marvels occurred to mark the favor of heaven and a certain partiality of the gods toward him. One of the common people of Alexandria, well known for his loss of sight, threw himself before Vespasian's knees, praying him with groans to cure his blindness, being so directed by the god Serapis, whom this most superstitious of nations worships before all others; and he besought the Emperor to deign to moisten his cheeks and eyes with his spittle.

Another, whose hand was useless, prompted by the same god, begged Caesar to step and trample on it. Vespasian at first ridiculed these appeals and treated them with scorn; then when the men persisted, he began at one moment to fear the discredit of failure, at another to be inspired with hopes of success by the appeals of the suppliants and the flattery of his courtiers; finally, he directed the physicians to give their opinion as to whether such blindness and infirmity could be overcome by human aid. Their reply treated the two cases differently: they said that in the first, the power of sight had not been completely eaten away and it would return if the obstacles were removed; in the other, the joints had slipped and become displaced, but they could be restored if a healing pressure were applied to them.

¹⁶ Martin 1988, 166. Loeb 8, 271

Such perhaps was the wish of the gods, and it might be that the Emperor had been chosen for this divine service; in any case, if a cure were obtained, the glory would be Caesar's, but in the event of failure, ridicule would fall only on the poor suppliants. So Vespasian, believing that his good fortune was capable of anything and that nothing was any longer incredible, with a smiling countenance, and amid intense excitement on the part of the bystanders, did as he was asked to do. The hand was instantly restored to use, and the day again shone for the blind man.

Both facts are told by eye-witnesses even now when falsehood brings no reward (Tacitus *History 4, 81*)¹⁷.

Vespasian here is made to be more cautious than before. He first consults his specialists to see if what he is setting out to do is possible at all. Vespasian is not superstitious and ridicules the ones requesting a healing at first. After he gets the advice that he has nothing to lose independent of the outcome, he is finally willing to do it. The success is still taken by Tacitus as evidence of the gods being favorable to Vespasian. Tacitus speaks also of the "good fortune" of Vespasian, which may be an attempt to suggest other possibilities than divine influences. Vespasian is made an exemplary Emperor in his reasoning and his actions.

We have here something similar to the synoptic accounts in the New Testament. Three different stories by different authors about the same event. They are basically saying the same: Two persons were healed by Emperor Vespasian in Alexandria but their viewpoint on the situation is very distinct and the details are partially in conflict with one another. We do not have any way today to make certain what exactly happened and we are left with these three accounts. Suetonius is trying to emphasize the divine intervention for the new emperor. Vespasian is skeptical regarding the demands placed on him but ultimately experiences his divine powers. Dio Cassius has the same agenda and tries to link Vespasian's presence in Alexandria with even other events like the rising of the Nile. The lame man has become a man with a withered hand now. Tacitus finally tries to provide an accurate rational account avoiding all superstition which he sees prevalent in Egypt: "whom this most superstitious of nations worships before all others..." Tacitus tries to show the Emperor as a wise and intelligent man who does not fall for superstition but investigates the situation using his advisors and then uses it to his advantage.

These stories show ambivalence towards miracles in the Roman world. There were those like Tacitus who were skeptical regarding divine intervention and were seeking to explain things by natural means. On the other hand there was the possibility of people exaggerating events and making connections between events that might not be warranted (like the rising of the Nile just by the presence of Vespasian).

Another element that comes out through the comparison of these stories is that the writers of those accounts did not have the motive to write a neutral account of history as we think it to be mandatory today. Rather they had certain things in mind that they wanted the story to express and the way the story is told (or the facts are presented) is depending on their

¹⁷ Martin, 1988, 166. Loeb 2, 159-61

viewpoints. Although they are not free to completely revise the story they certainly felt that they had much more freedom than we today grant us, when telling about events. The accuracy of the New Testament must be validated against the background of the contemporary Graeco-Roman standard for historical reporting and not according to our modern standards.

5 Conclusion

The New Testament is deeply rooted in the surrounding cultural environment. It is especially surprising to me how well the miracle stories of the New Testament integrate with the contemporary Graeco-Roman culture. One of the reasons for the success of the Gospel in the Roman Empire is certainly the compatibility and harmony with a common understanding of the nature of divine intervention while at the same time bringing something new into the situation. The Christian message keeps the basic Hellenistic understanding of how divine authority manifests itself outwardly while bringing in basically Jewish monotheistic core content without the rites associated with it in Judaism.

The advantage here is that the abuses of the old system of deities, the payments and the bribes for the intervention of the deities, are rejected by the New Testament. Everyone becomes able to access God in prayer. Divine beings can no longer be used to gain an advantage over others but the core message is also now linking ethical behavior to religious belief, which was something new in the Graeco-Roman world.

The linking of ethical behavior as a religious mandate was seen by many to strengthen society and families in a situation where the public saw society largely as going downhill to more and more immorality. The Emperors were leading the Roman Empire in excesses and wild behavior. The civil code that held people in check in the past did not work for them since they were no longer responsible to that code but above the code. The institution of the family was threatened by a high divorce rate. So in many ways the message of the New Testament made perfect sense in the Hellenistic world and found widespread acceptance.

In some sense the New Testament is a continuation of the beliefs of Judaism. Judaism got stuck in clinging to certain rites and behaviors that on the one hand preserved the ancient traditions accurately but on the other hand necessitated a separation from society so that Judaism never could become a major player in the Roman society.

Jesus and his followers in contrast were able to disassociate the core beliefs of Judaism from the husk of rites that were hindering the contextualization of the message. By rearticulating the basically Jewish beliefs within the Graeco-Roman culture, by successfully contextualizing the message, the New Testament had a wide influence on the Roman Empire and ultimately took it over since the old Roman Religion was not able to survive any longer against a dynamic and easily contextualized Christianity with a readily accessible God who did not need any bribes to become active.

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