

## CIRCUMCISION AND SOTERIOLOGY IN CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA'S OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

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**ABSTRACT.** Cyril of Alexandria was a prolific biblical commentator who underscored the meaning and relevance of the Old Testament for Christian theology by employing a typological method of interpretation. His exegetical concern was to demonstrate that everything associated with the old covenant—people, events, commandments, institutions—were types and shadows foretelling the ‘mystery of Christ’. The key to understanding the types of the Old Testament is to recognize their soteriological fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Throughout his exegetical writings, Cyril draws particular attention to the Jewish rite of circumcision, showing how the physical operation signifies the saving work of Christ through the Spirit. Cyril does not interpret circumcision in a monolithic sense, but derives multiple soteriological meanings from it. Insofar as circumcision represents a variety of saving realities for Cyril, it helps us understand his complex, multi-faceted doctrine of salvation.

**KEY WORDS:** Cyril of Alexandria, typology, circumcision, soteriology, Christ

### **Introduction**

Cyril of Alexandria was a bishop, theologian, and biblical exegete immersed in the conceptual world of the Old Testament. To the Old Testament, Kerrigan observes, ‘he consecrated most of his exegetical works’ while ‘in his other writings he repeatedly quotes its precepts, counsels, prayers and examples to illustrate his doctrines’ (1952: 21). Throughout his massive literary corpus, Cyril is concerned to demonstrate the relevance of the Old Testament for Christian doctrine, particularly its relation to God’s plan of salvation. His basic exegetical and theological aim is to show how the old covenant sets the stage for the new, and that ‘everything associated with Judaism has been transformed to a new way of life in Christ’ (Wilken, 2004: 76). He frequently describes people, places, events, or objects in the Old Testament as types and shadows pointing to a future reality fulfilled in Jesus. Types include foundational institutions within Judaism such as temple worship, the sacrificial system, and the Sabbath. These were actual things portending spiritual realities that came to fruition in the person and work of Christ.

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Of the Jewish institutions that Cyril identifies as types, one of the most theologically significant for him is circumcision. Though he interprets it in a variety of ways, he always does so within a soteriological framework. Circumcision of the flesh is a type of circumcision of the heart: the physical operation of cutting foreskin was instituted by God to foreshadow the interior, spiritual operation effected by Christ through the Spirit. In this essay, I will investigate passages where Cyril expounds upon the spiritual significance of this Jewish rite. While this study will showcase elements of Cyril's method of biblical exegesis, my chief aim is to point out the diverse soteriological meanings he derives from circumcision. I believe that his view of circumcision provides a window into his rich, many-sided doctrine of salvation. In other words, understanding the function and meaning of circumcision in Cyril's mind leads to a better grasp of his soteriology. Due to space considerations, I will limit my investigation to his Old Testament commentaries—works that have received the least scholarly attention among his writings. In their pages we find rich accounts of circumcision that convey important insights about his doctrine of salvation.

Cyril's Old Testament writings that have survived largely intact<sup>1</sup> include two works on the Pentateuch (*De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate* and *Glaphyra*)<sup>2</sup> along with commentaries on Isaiah and the Minor prophets.<sup>3</sup> Dating these works is difficult, but it is likely that all were completed by 423, five years before the Nestorian controversy began.<sup>4</sup> Each conveys Cyril's concern with proper interpretation of the Old Testament, its continuing relevance for Christians, and how the old covenant relates typologically to the new covenant that Christ came to establish.

When comparing pertinent circumcision passages in these commentaries, four main themes come to the fore. First, Cyril views circumcision as an important event within the biblical narrative of salvation. Its place in Israel's history typifies a new soteriological reality for the Church. Second, he views circumcision as a sign of justification by faith that signals a new spiritual condition. Third, he understands circumcision as a foreshadowing of redemption through Christ. Fourth, Cyril associates circumcision with Christ's resurrection and subsequent gift of the

1 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* contained in Migne (1864b: 69). There are also catena fragments on the songs in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 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. See Moreschini and Norelli (2005: 542-543).

2 No critical edition exists of either *De adoratione* or *Glaphyra*, or any translations into modern languages. The Greek texts are found in Migne (1864a: 68.133-1125) and Migne (1864b: 69.9-678), respectively.

3 The Greek text of the *Commentary on Isaiah* is in Migne (1864c: 70.9-1450); the *Commentary on the Minor Prophets* is in Pusey (1868.1-2).

4 On the dating, see Jouassard (1954: 160-163, 170).

Holy Spirit through whom we share in the divine nature. In what follows I will develop each theme in greater detail, showing how Cyril interprets soteriological significance from the rite of circumcision.

### **Circumcision Old and New: The Narrative of Salvation**

The saving effects that Cyril attaches to circumcision of the flesh correlate with the saving effects of the Incarnation of Christ. In the Incarnation, Cyril sees a 'narrative of salvation' where Christ carries out his saving work starting from his birth and culminating in his death, resurrection, and ascension. Each stage of the narrative (such as Christ's baptism, death, or descent) represents an aspect of salvation and, woven together, displays the total saving work of God. Cyril's view of circumcision often relates to one or more stages of the salvation narrative. We see this in his *Commentary on Zechariah 4:7* when Cyril rehearses the events of God's liberation of Israel. He includes circumcision within the *Heilsgeschichte* of Israel and uses the narrative of God's acts on their behalf to typify the *ordo salutis* accomplished through Christ by the Spirit for the new people of God. God's deliverance of his people from slavery and bringing them to the Promised Land points ahead to the spiritual deliverance Christ came to bring the Church.

The text of 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 interpretive method, parses each phrase to arrive at the text's meaning (Cyril, 1868: 4.7). First, he employs allegory to identify the 'mighty mountain' as Satan. The prophet's question to the 'mountain' is meant to belittle and rebuke since Christ triumphed over Satan without difficulty. Second, Cyril moves in a Trinitarian direction by interpreting the 'stone of inheritance' as Christ while switching the referent of the 'mighty mountain' to God the Father. If the Father is the mountain, the Son is the stone cut from the mountain since the Son comes from [γεγεννημένος] the Father. Cyril points to Daniel 2:45 as a supporting text to underscore the Son's relationship to the Father. From the mountain (the Father), the 'cornerstone and chosen stone' (the Son) has been 'cut out', through whom we have been called to sonship [υἰοθεσίαν] (Cyril, 1868: 4.7).

At last, he comes to the final clause of the verse, 'its grace an equality of grace.' According to Cyril, the basic meaning of 'equal grace' is adoption through Christ since he is the 'stone of the inheritance' (Cyril, 1868: 4.7). Then Cyril tries to make sense of the expression, 'its grace an equality of grace'. He posits a parallel relationship between the 'first grace' offered to Israel and the 'equal grace' given by Christ that brings people into familial relationship with God. Concerning the 'first grace',

They [the Israelites] were ransomed from Egypt in a fleshly way, they shook off 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 (Cyril, 1868: 4.7).

Using a type-reality hermeneutic, Cyril juxtaposes the grace of Israel's salvation to the equal, 'second grace' given by Christ. The graces are 'equal', Cyril observes, in that what was done for the Jews in a fleshly [σαρκικῶς] or sensible way [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), we were carried over the Jordan, *we received circumcision in the Spirit*, we inherited the city above, the truly holy land, which Christ himself mentioned saying, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land' (Cyril, 1864: 4.7, emphasis added).

The events in both quotations mirror one another according to type and reality. 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; Christians are ransomed from the tyranny of the devil. The Israelites shook off their slavery; Christians are delivered from worldly passions. The Israelites passed through the sea to escape their captors; Christians pass through the world's turmoil and the anxieties of life, and so on. Cyril's point here is that Christ has fulfilled all the types revealed in the old covenant of salvation and established a new, superior covenant. Moses was the minister and mediator of the former grace; Christ is the source [χορηγός] of the latter grace which transforms us (Cyril, 1868: 4.7).

At first glance it appears that circumcision of the Spirit within the sequence of the new grace has no clear antecedent. However, Cyril likely relates it to the Israelites crossing the Jordan, which symbolizes baptism. The general context and the grammatical proximity between circumcision of the Spirit and the crossing of the Jordan in his remark bring them into close relationship (Cyril, 1868: 4.7). Further, traditional exegetical practices paired the Israelite crossing of the Jordan with Christian baptism (Origen, 2002: 64). Cyril follows this tradition, viewing the crossing of the Jordan as a type of entering baptismal waters in his *Commentary on John* 7.24 where he identifies the 'holy waters' of baptism as the 'mystic Jordan' through which believers must cross (Cyril, 1872: 7.24). The association between circumcision of the Spirit and baptism also makes sense given Cyril's sacramental perspective. Just before he describes crossing the Jordan and receiving circumci-

sion, he equates the manna from heaven that was given to the Israelites with the Eucharist,<sup>5</sup> thus placing the Eucharist alongside baptism. As Daniel Keating (2004) has demonstrated, Cyril insists on the complementary relationship between baptism and the Eucharist, especially as it pertains to a person's reception of the Spirit and ongoing participation in the divine nature.<sup>6</sup> It thus seems reasonable that Cyril, following tradition (Justin Martyr, 1997: 18.2; 43.2; Cyril of Jerusalem, 1960: 142-143; John Chrysostom, 1999: 285) and anticipating his own interpretations elsewhere, associates circumcision of the Spirit to holy baptism in his interpretation of Zechariah 4:7.<sup>7</sup>

A second passage where Cyril locates circumcision within the narrative of salvation is his comment on Micah 7:14-15 (LXX), where 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's initial interpretation is Christological. The one who shepherds is Christ while those shepherded are all who are 'justified through faith' (Cyril, 1868: 7.14-15). But then he takes 'another path' [ἑτέραν ὁδόν] of interpretation, relying on etymologies to determine the spiritual meanings of 'Carmel', 'Bashan', and 'Gilead'<sup>8</sup>. Carmel means 'knowledge of circumcision' [περιτομῆς ἐπίγνωσις], Bashan means 'shame' [αἰσχύνη], and Gilead means 'change of covenant' [διαθήκης μετάθεσις]. Cyril explains that those whom Christ shepherds are 'in Carmel'—they are familiar to God [θεῷ γνωρίμους] on account of circumcision by the Holy Spirit. Cyril identifies this circumcision with the one described by Paul in Romans 2:28-29 (Cyril, 1868: 7.14-15). Circumcision of the Spirit effects a new, intimate relationship with God.

But, Cyril continues, if we are in 'Carmel' we are no less in 'Bashan'. Friendship with God requires a repentant spirit and shameful awareness of sins. The 'sins' Cyril speaks of do not refer to continual, willful, acts of rebellion but to natural inclinations as well as misdeeds committed in ignorance. Sensitivity to sin is 'the way of salvation'. But the callous who persist in sinning are uncircumcised; they are 'hard and shameless in heart' and far from salvation.

5 See in Cyril's *Com. Zech.* 4:7 (1868: 4.7), where he parallels the statement 'they [Israel] ate the manna in the desert' with 'we ate the bread of heaven, the mystical logos'.

6 This is the basic thesis of Keating (2004). See also Keating (2001).

7 Cyril (1983: 57) 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.'

8 Hill (2008: 274, n. 39) points out that Cyril finds these etymologies in Jerome and uses them for his own purposes. However, this etymological tradition precedes Jerome, appearing in Origen, Eusebius, and Didymus—all writers with whom Cyril had some degree of familiarity. Kerrigan (1952: 435) speaks to the likelihood that these writers were common sources for both Jerome and Cyril. It is likely that Cyril's main source on this occasion is Jerome since he appears to be quoting him directly. At the same time, Cyril is likely aware that these etymologies had previous use, especially in his own Alexandrian tradition.

Finally, the circumcised in spirit 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, we dwell as free citizens under Christ. Thus, believers are in all three ‘places’ at once. We are no longer bound by the precepts of the law, but live according to the Gospel where we ‘exchange the type for the truth’ (Cyril, 1868: 7.14-15). Cyril insists that to be circumcised in spirit implies a change in our relationship with God, a repentant spirit, and freedom under the new covenant of Christ.

The above examples show that, for Cyril, circumcision plays an important role in the divine economy of salvation. Through a typological reading of the story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and journey to the Promised Land, and an allegorical interpretation of Micah’s prophecy, circumcision serves as a type of greater soteriological realities. It is a saving act associated with baptism, and a work of the heart that brings us into close relationship with God while imparting a spiritual sensitivity to sin on account of the new covenant of grace.

### **Circumcision as a New Spiritual Condition**

Throughout his Old Testament commentaries, Cyril often juxtaposes ‘the circumcision’—a term implying Jewish identity and conformity to the law—with those who are circumcised by the Spirit in order to show the difference between type and truth. Those who are spiritually circumcised are Jews on the inside; they share in a new spiritual condition; they are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem; they are the Church, the new Israel. In this way Cyril underscores the character of the Christian faith. Being righteous is not achieved by following the law, but through faith in Christ. Though holy conduct is important to Cyril, he is careful to subordinate dutiful adherence to externals to the internal, spiritual reality Christians experience through faith.

Cyril contrasts the ethnic Jew with the ‘inward’ Jew and physical circumcision with spiritual circumcision in order to stress the doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>9</sup> In his *Glaphya in Genesim* he explains how Abraham and Isaac typify the ‘mystery of faith’ using the commandment to circumcise as a pattern:

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

9 The concept of justification by faith is a common and multivalent concept in Cyril’s writings. The range of meanings includes a change in one’s relationship with God, escape from judgment, knowledge of the Father, adoption, regeneration, and communion. Also, Cyril does not mark off justification and sanctification as distinct ‘stages’, but as part of one work of redemption. See Keating (2004: 141, 192).

Abraham, let us discuss, taking from the blessed Scriptures themselves, and go through each belief subtly and accurately (Cyril, 1864b: 112).

Cyril's interpretation of circumcision within the Abraham-Isaac narrative depends upon Romans 4:1-17, where Paul recounts how Abraham was declared righteous on account of his faith—the faith he 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 foreshadow justification by faith (Cyril, 1864b: 112-113).

Cyril makes use of Romans 4:1-17 because Paul describes 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. 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 (Cyril, 1864b: 113). Since this is the case, he has become 'the father of those in faith'. But Cyril warns that not all who come from Abraham's biological seed are really his children. Not all who are 'of Israel' are really 'of Israel'. Rather, Abraham's true heirs include people from every tongue and nation 'who have faith and have believed while uncircumcised' (Cyril, 1864b: 113). These, Cyril says, 'have become of the same body of Christ and called into spiritual fellowship' (Cyril, 1864b: 113). This is what it means 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, which receives grace through the sacraments. 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. It has become the new identity marker for members of the true Israel.

Cyril describes several characteristics of those who are circumcised in heart and part of the true Israel. First, the circumcised are Christ's inheritance. This suggests the intimate sharing in the divine life that believers enjoy. In Zechariah 2:12, the prophet proclaims that the Lord will inherit Judah as his own possession and choose Jerusalem. Cyril describes '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, but only those who have been circumcised in heart. Cyril explains that we who have been 'enriched [πεπλουτήκαμεν] with circumcision of the Spirit' become Christ's portion [κλῆρος], and comprise the spiritual Jerusalem, that is, the Church (Cyril, 1868: 2.10-12).

Second, the circumcised have transformed minds and are able to 'see God'. The etymological connection between circumcision and seeing God was part of the exegetical tradition by Cyril's time (Mueller, 2012: 303). Cyril employs it in his interpretation of Zechariah 10:5-6 where God promises to save the 'house of Judah' and the 'house of Joseph' from their enemies because of his love for them. He reads this passage as a reference to the defeat of paganism at the hands of



God's people (Judah). According to the spiritual sense, he believes that the houses of Judah and Joseph refer to the multitude of saints who have been justified in Christ—those who are 'Jewish' in heart, and 'share in circumcision of the spirit' (Cyril, 1868: 10.5-6).<sup>10</sup> These saints possess illumined minds that 'see God' (Cyril, 1868: 10.5-6).<sup>11</sup>

Third, the circumcised in spirit are victorious *in* the world even as they are not *of* the world. When Cyril unpacks Zechariah 14:13-14, a passage predicting the total defeat of Judah's enemies, he 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' (Cyril, 1868: 14.13-14). The military conquest described in the passage suggests that true Jews—the justified and spiritually circumcised—attack their foes and prevail over their enemies. In the spiritual sense, 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. Those who are circumcised by the Spirit are equipped to overcome the enemies of Christ, plunder the 'strong man' (the pagan nations), and reap heavenly rewards (Cyril, 1868: 14.13-14).

Overall, Cyril identifies circumcision of the Spirit with a new spiritual condition. With Romans 2:28-29 providing an interpretive backdrop, he stresses that circumcision was established to signify justification by faith and incorporation into the new people of God. Those who are justified and members of the new Israel through circumcision of the Spirit enjoy intimacy with Christ, a purified mind able to comprehend God, and power over the forces of darkness.

### **Circumcision as Redemption through Christ**

Another theme Cyril associates with circumcision in his Old Testament commentaries is redemption through Christ's death. Earlier writers like Origen (1996: 56) argued that the blood-letting of physical circumcision was a type of the redemptive blood of Christ. Cyril follows this general line of reasoning, observing the typological relationship between circumcision and Christ's death most vividly in Exodus 4:24-26. These verses record the puzzling events where Moses, traveling with his family to Egypt, is nearly killed by the angel of the Lord. The angel intended to punish Moses because his son was not circumcised, but withdrew when Zipporah, Moses's wife, took up a stone and circumcised their son. While this story gave rise to a variety of patristic interpretations (Origen, 1969: 138-140; Gregory of Nyssa, 1968: 126-130), Cyril describes Zipporah's life-saving act as a symbolic

10 See also Cyril (1868: 14.21), a text where he identifies 'Judah' as those who 'share (*λαχοῦσι*) in circumcision of the spirit'.

11 On Cyril's etymology of 'Israel', see Hill (2008: 204, n. 11). Cyril (1864c: 46.12-13) utilizes the same etymology in his *Commentary on Isaiah*.



event pointing to greater soteriological fulfillment. The story underscores the theological and exegetical relationship between ritual circumcision and the Christian doctrines of the Trinity, sin, salvation, and judgment.

Cyril recalls the story of Zipporah circumcising her son on a number of occasions throughout his writings. However, his most theologically rich accounts are in his *De adoratione* Book 2 and *Glaphyra in Ex.* Book 2.<sup>12</sup> In each case, 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-reality relationship in nearly every detail of the story in order to show that Christ has reversed our condition through his death. Cyril pays particular attention to what the angel, Zipporah, her son, and the stone [ψήφος], contribute to the spiritual sense of the passage.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, the characters and objects portray Cyril's comprehensive soteriology.

The doctrine of the Fall is the backdrop that guides his interpretation of the events of Exodus 4:24-26. Cyril believes that as a result of the Fall, 'man has suffered irreparable harm in his nature' (Schurig, 2005: 79). Death and corruption came upon the entire human race through Adam. Cyril highlights the Adamic curse in order to put into relief the restorative work of Christ, the second Adam. In his *De adoratione*, Cyril rhetorically inquires of his friend Palladius, 'Is it not the truth... that the nature of man is gripped by death, having been cursed from the ancient time?' He reminds Palladius of the divine pronouncement of judgment leveled against Adam: 'You are earth, and to earth you will return' (Cyril, 1864a: 257). Cyril explains that the curse has come upon all because Adam is the 'first fruit' and 'root' of the human race. In a plant, anything running through the stem, leaves, and flowers—whether nutrients or toxins—is distributed by the root. In a similar way, the curse of death leveled against Adam was passed on in a hereditary manner to every succeeding generation, becoming a sickness running throughout the whole of mankind (Cyril, 1864a: 257). The Law of Moses was unable to expunge death. Instead, it was a symbol of death's future demise in Christ.

The Fall comes into view when Cyril investigates the significance of Moses' encounter with the angel. He admits that even though the 'holy letter' does not make clear why the angel was seeking to kill Moses (Cyril, 1864b: 484), the intention of this part of the story is to magnify the tragic reality of the human condition (Cyril, 1864a: 257). The angel's attempt to kill Moses represents death, which was seeking to devour the human race. In the same way that the angel recognized Mo-

12 See also Cyril (1872: 7.24).

13 Cyril (1864a: 257) investigates the details of the text through the prompting 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 [δεδωσθηται] so that when the child had been circumcised Moses escaped what was threatening him and the death which he ought to have suffered?'

ses' vulnerability (in that his son was uncircumcised), death has laid claim to us because of our vulnerability in Adam (Cyril, 1864b: 484). Adam was afflicted with death, and we his heirs share in that affliction.

If the destroying angel represents the Adamic curse, Cyril stresses that the stone used for circumcision indicates the blood of Christ that overcomes the curse. After Zipporah circumcised her son, the angel turned away without harming anyone. Cyril explains that the angel was repelled not on account of a severed foreskin, but on account of Christ. By witnessing the circumcision, the angel recognized something of greater significance and 'honored the mystery of circumcision in Christ' (Cyril, 1864a: 260).

Cyril connects the stone—the instrument of circumcision—with Christ the true stone, and the blood resulting in the operation with the blood of Christ. Further, he stresses that the angel's departure from Moses and his family represents the flight of death not just from one family or generation, but from all peoples and generations. According to Cyril, Christ's death does not only affect those coming after him, but works retroactively to save those who lived before the Incarnation. Christ, the true stone of circumcision, is imparted to the ancient 'fathers' [πατέρας] and the new people of God alike. By 'fathers' he is most likely referring to the patriarchs and all those who were obedient to God before the time of the law. Cyril declares:

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 (Cyril, 1864a: 260).

Cyril also stresses the relationship between the circumcision of Moses' son and the generational range of Christ's victory over death:

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' (Cyril, 1864b: 484).

The fact that the angel was not permitted to kill Moses after circumcision took place suggests to Cyril that the human race is no longer vulnerable to death because true circumcision—the 'mystery of Christ'—has been applied to us. This mystery is no less than Christ shedding his blood to destroy death and free humanity from its grasp.

Next, Cyril considers Zipporah, giving careful attention to her character beyond the literal sense of the text. Like Gregory of Nyssa (1968: 126-130), he points out that Zipporah is a foreigner, not native to the family of Israel (Cyril, 1864a: 257). Her father, Jethro, was a priest of Midian and descended from a bloodline outside the patriarchs. Thus, she is from 'the nations'. At the same time, she is united with Moses in wedlock. Placing these two realities—her nationality and union with Moses—side by side, Cyril suggests that Zipporah is a type of the Church (Cyril, 1864b: 484).<sup>14</sup> 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 (Cyril, 1864a: 257-260).

The identification of Zipporah as the Church is important to Cyril because of what it implies about her offspring. If Zipporah represents those who are called out from the nations and from the law, her son is a type of a new people whom God has created by means of faith in Christ through the Spirit. Cyril describes the new people—Zipporah's spiritual offspring—as childlike, regenerate, and victorious over death on account of their faith and their circumcision (Cyril, 1864a: 260). Zipporah's son escaped death when he was circumcised; the offspring of the spiritual Zipporah overcome death through spiritual circumcision and faith. On the typological relationship between physical and spiritual circumcision, Cyril is clear:

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 (Cyril, 1864b: 484).

This circumcision carries such power over death because it was performed with 'the pebble of unbreakable nature', that is, Christ who saves us from corruption and death (Cyril, 1864a: 260).

Cyril also attributes the work of the Spirit to the stone of circumcision. His reason for reading the Spirit into the text is twofold. First, he recognizes attributes of the Spirit that are analogous to a rock. For example, the Spirit is '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' (Cyril, 1864b: 484). 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 and Christ are ontologically one. Thus, spiritual circumcision is accomplished 'in Christ through the Spirit' [ἐν Χριστῷ διὰ πνεύματος] (Cyril, 1864a: 260). Cyril does not

14 Cyril describes the Church as 'the spiritual (νοητή) Zipporah'.

develop the Son-Spirit relationship here because his goal is not to provide a detailed synopsis of Trinitarian theology, important as that is for him.<sup>15</sup> Rather, his purpose is to show that the circumcising stone serves as a type of Christ *and* the Spirit, and the saving activity of both in the new circumcision.

Cyril expands the meaning of the stone further by bringing Joshua 5:3-9 to bear on Exodus 4:24-26. What Cyril has in mind is the significance of Joshua—whom a number of patristic thinkers viewed as a type of Christ (Justin Martyr, 1997: 75.1-2, 111.1, 112.2, 113.1-2; Origen, 2002: 23-36)—and the stone knives with which he circumcised the new generation of Israelites after crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. Like Zipporah, Cyril claims that Joshua's act of circumcision prefigures 'the circumcision in Christ through the Spirit' (Cyril, 1864a: 260). Both circumcision stories signify Christ's victory over death, and both identify the stone instruments as types of Christ himself who gives us the new, spiritual circumcision. The Joshua story buttresses the soteriological effects of circumcision advanced by Cyril's interpretation of the Zipporah story in Exodus 4. In the main, spiritual circumcision is life-giving. It involves Christ's victory over death and our appropriation of new life in Christ. Toward the end of the passage in the *Glaphyra*, Cyril also adds a negative function, stressing that Christian circumcision is the 'circumcision of wickedness [κακίας], the removal of evil [φαιλότητος] and pleasures [ἡδονῶν]' (Cyril, 1864b: 484). Thus, true circumcision includes eschatological and ethical dimensions. It not only involves the overcoming of death through Christ and the Spirit, but the removal of sinful desires.

For Cyril, the story of Moses, Zipporah, and their son encountering the angel contains multiple types that point to Christological, pneumatological, and soteriological realities. After giving full consideration to the details, the story is about the mystery of Christ who, on account of his own death, has circumcised us through the Spirit. This circumcision gives victory over death and removes sinfulness from human hearts.

### **Circumcision as 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 *De adoratione* and *Glaphyra*. On four occasions, Cyril identifies circumcision as the gift of the Holy Spirit who was given by Christ after the resurrection. In each case, Cyril makes use of the 'eighth day' motif common among patristic thinkers who saw it as type of the resurrection of Jesus. In three of the four occasions, 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, coupled with John 7:39, demonstrates 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

15 For Cyril's Trinitarian theology, see Boulnois (2003) and Boulnois (1994).

his resurrection is tantamount to circumcision of the Spirit, the gift now conferred upon all who are justified by faith. Cyril asserts that true circumcision is participation in the Spirit; those who 'receive' the Spirit participate in him and thus share in the divine nature (Fraigneau-Julien, 1956: 143). After Christ overcame sin and death through his own death and resurrection, he opened the way for participation in the Spirit.

Participation in the divine nature is central to Cyril's theology (Janssens, 1938: 233-278; Meunier, 1997: 163-169; Burghardt, 2009: 66-80; Keating, 2004: 146-162; Fairbairn, 2003: 63-132; Russell, 2004: 191-203; Blackwell, 2011: 71-98). The concept appears throughout his corpus and describes the character and scope of salvation. For Cyril, salvation is not simply a matter of forgiveness of sins or escape from judgment, but sharing in the life of the Trinity (Cyril, 1872: 1.13; 10.15; 20.22). This is made possible when we receive the Spirit through Christ. Indeed, Cyril teaches that the *telos* of the Incarnation is the restoration of the Holy Spirit to humanity. Through participation in the Spirit we are transformed and brought into fellowship with the Triune God. Cyril does not make liberal use of *theosis* language [θεοποιεῶ θεοποίησις] to express the participatory dimension of salvation, but relies on Scriptural language instead.<sup>16</sup> He alludes to Psalm 82:6 ('I said you are gods...') on a number of occasions, but his most frequently cited text in this vein is 2 Peter 1:4; 'that you might become partakers of the divine nature [γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως].'<sup>17</sup> He employs other biblical terms for our participation [for example, μετέχω, μέθεξις, μεταλαμβάνω] to underscore the 'sharing in' motif, whether in Christ, the Spirit, the sacraments, or other spiritual goods. He also describes salvation in terms of intimate relationship [οἰκειότης] between God and man (Cyril, 1872: 10.15, 10.26). 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. Through participation, the believer receives new life [ἀνα γέννησις] (Cyril, 1864c: 40.11), purification [κάθαρσις] (Cyril, 1864c: 35.8-10.), adoption [θετός] (Cyril, 1872: 5.18), and sanctification [ἀγιασμός] (Cyril, 1872: 17.18-19).

In the passages we now turn to investigate, Cyril describes what circumcision is and how it relates to Christ and our participation in the Spirit. In each case, Cyril expresses himself in various ways, often adding layers to his view of circumcision from one passage to the next. 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 In-

16 Keating (2004: 10-11) locates only twenty instances in Cyril's corpus of writings 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.

17 Russell (2004: 192) claims that Cyril cites this text on more occasions than any other patristic writer. Meunier (1997: 163-164) provides a list (which he admits is not exhaustive) cataloging at least 40 occasions where Cyril refers to 2 Peter 1:4.

carnation of Christ came about during the fifth era [πέμπτος καιρός]. The fifth era becomes 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. 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 since Christ was handed over to death 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 (Cyril, 1864a: 465).

But Cyril rarely discusses Christ’s death apart from the resurrection. The close proximity between Christ’s death and resurrection lead him to change numeric idioms and explore 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.<sup>18</sup> But the ‘eighth day’ is also significant because, under the law, male infants were circumcised eight days after their birth. Cyril claims that this was given as a pattern [ὑποτύπωσις] for the circumcision according to the spirit and truth that was to come. This ‘more excellent’ circumcision is ‘participation [μέθεξις] in the Holy Spirit’ (Cyril, 1864a: 465).<sup>19</sup> Christ is the agent of this participation insofar as he has risen from the dead, renewed us, and given us a share in the Spirit. After Christ came back to life, he appeared to his disciples, breathed on them, and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’. Cyril claims that the very Spirit given to the disciples was also meant for us (Cyril, 1864a: 465). 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 finished his saving work on the ‘eighth day’, the human race was ready to receive the Spirit again—the very Spirit lost by Adam in the Fall. This new reception of the Spirit is the new circumcision.

The second passage where Cyril relates circumcision with participation in the Spirit is in *De adoratione*, Book 7. At this stage of the dialogue, Cyril and Palladius are discussing the Sabbath in light of a warning from the prophet Jeremiah about keeping the Sabbath holy, as one can see in Jeremiah 17:19-23 (Cyril, 1864a: 497). 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 Sab-

18 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 Cyril (1868: 5.5-6).

19 See also Schurig (2005: 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, wesentlich 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.’

bath, namely, healing a crippled man. Why, Jesus asks, is it unlawful to heal on the Sabbath but acceptable to circumcise a baby if the eighth day after its birth falls on the Sabbath? Cyril brings Christ's words to bear on the true nature of both the Sabbath and circumcision. Sabbath observance according to the law is a type [τύπος] of the spiritual Sabbath observed in Christ. True Sabbath rest means ceasing from sin rather than labor. Those who observe it spiritually are made holy through faith and put an end to wicked behavior (Cyril, 1864a: 500; 1864c: 58.13-14; 1872: 7.23-24).

In the same way, circumcision according to the law is a type of the circumcision of the Spirit according to the 'eighth day', that is, resurrection day. Cyril recollects 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 upon them. Cyril observes that Christ's breath and verbal bestowal 'sealed' [κατεσφράγισεν] the disciples with the Holy Spirit. The act of sealing is the circumcision of the Spirit. Here he drawn on Romans 2:28-29, reminding Palladius of Paul's command that circumcision is to be done 'without hands', but rather by the Spirit. Spiritual circumcision involves the Holy Spirit sealing—putting his mark of confident approval—upon those who put their faith in Christ (Cyril, 1864a: 500). Here Cyril intertwines the Sabbath and circumcision. Those who have 'believed in Christ' are true Sabbath keepers who have received true circumcision by the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

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, and differentiates two epochs; the time leading up to the Incarnation and the time following the Incarnation. He designates the first epoch as the time of the law and the Sabbath when sin and death ruled. Cyril names the second epoch the 'eighth day' which is the time of the circumcision of the Spirit.

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 [μεμορθώμεθα] 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 (Cyril, 1864a: 1008-1009).

Here Cyril ties together the death of Christ and the circumcision through the Spirit (the resurrection is implied due to the eighth day motif). In this case he is more descriptive about the effects of the Spirit's circumcising activity. Circumcision transforms, purifies, and configures for a new life. It changes man to the depths of his being. The work 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 disobedience of the first Adam (Meunier, 1997: 14-15). 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 slave girl, Hagar, according to Genesis 16. Hagar ran away from Sarah after being mistreated. Cyril points out that an angel appeared to Hagar and commanded her to return to Sarah and 'be humbled under her hands' (Cyril, 1864b: 132). With Paul (Galatians 4:21-31) Cyril concludes that Hagar represents worship according to the law.<sup>20</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 (Genesis 17:10) and the circumcision of the Spirit. Cyril rehearses God's commandment that males be circumcised on the eighth day. Failure to obey would result in judgment. The commandment to circumcise on the eighth day of the child's life was in accordance with God's providential design. God knew that Christ would rise on the eighth day of the week. In this way too, 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 (Cyril, 1864b: 133).

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. Everything changed when Christ rose from the dead and was glorified 'according to the eighth day' (Cyril, 1864b: 133). Cyril describes the divine plan to redeem and transform us through circumcision of the Spirit after the resurrection:

And the time was already at hand to participate [μεταλαχεῖν] 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 a sort of first fruit of the Holy Spirit to the holy disciples. For it says he breathed on them saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (Cyril, 1864b: 133).

20 Cyril also sees in Hagar a representation of the earthly Jerusalem.

From this passage we can make some important observations. First, true circumcision is participation in the Spirit whereby we are cleansed and delivered from sin. Second, Christ's resurrection and gift of the Spirit have relevance for the present. What the disciples received as first fruits is appropriated by all the faithful. Now the Spirit is borne [ἠνέχθη] in us. Now we receive circumcision not by hands, but in the heart by the Spirit (Cyril, 1864b: 133).

These four passages I have outlined 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 also 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 time of the Incarnation, his common practice is to link the eighth day of circumcision with the day of Christ's resurrection. On the true eighth day, the Spirit was given and true circumcision became a reality for people of the new covenant.

### Conclusion

The passages on circumcision that I have considered in Cyril's commentaries on the Old Testament reveal important aspects of his biblical exegesis and, most importantly, his soteriology. Cyril is interested in the rite of circumcision because it is a fundamental institution within Judaism that has been transformed by the advent and work of Jesus Christ. Insofar as his soteriology is multi-dimensional, he interprets circumcision in a variety of ways that underscore aspects of salvation that are important to him. As I have shown, Cyril outlines the role of circumcision in the divine economy of salvation as a type that functions in multiple ways. Circumcision of the flesh symbolizes circumcision of the Spirit. It is a sign of justification by faith and a mark of a new identity, it points to redemption and new life through the death of Christ, and it foreshadows the gift of the Spirit by whom we participate in the divine nature.

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