

**Timing Is Everything:  
A Note on the Relationship of Circumcision to ἔργων νόμου**

One interpretive challenge in Galatians is the relationship between circumcision and the ἔργων νόμου. Oddly enough this relationship is rarely explicated. Interpreters who approach the text from various angles seem to assume a particular relationship that need not be explained.<sup>1</sup> But the question poses dilemmas for the various hermeneutical approaches to Galatians. For instance, if an interpreter takes as his interpretive grid the fight against works salvation, he encounters the problem that Abraham, the example of non-works righteousness, is the father of the circumcision. If circumcision equals merit, this could pose an insurmountable hermeneutical hump: the prime example of salvation by grace alone through faith alone submits to a “work” which earns favor. I am not aware of anyone who holds this position, but consistency would demand it in Galatians.<sup>2</sup> To rephrase some of Paul’s thoughts, “Was Abraham perfected in the flesh after beginning by faith?”

The merit hermeneutic is not the only one that has the interpretive challenge. Those who take the eschatological or apocalyptic approach may also face a problem. Some will include circumcision as one item on a list of items found in the Law: circumcision, dietary laws, etc. In this circumcision is subsumed under the rubric of ἔργων νόμου.<sup>3</sup> Paul makes it a point to say that the Law (i.e., Torah) came four hundred thirty years after the promise; which means that the Law came approximately 400 years after the institution of circumcision. If circumcision equals ἔργων νόμου, then we have a chronology problem. Some may try to solve this problem by saying that Abraham kept the Law even before it was given and, therefore, circumcision can be equated with ἔργων νόμου. Again this really does not make sense of Paul’s chronological sequence of events. The timeline presented in Galatians 3 is obviously all-important to Paul’s argument.

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Longnecker comments on it in The Triumph of Abraham’s God, 30-33. But even here there is really no explanation as to the inter-connectedness of circumcision with ἔργων νόμου. Longnecker’s concern is more about what the agitators were requiring (e.g., circumcision over against the observance of the Law or circumcision *and* the observance of the Law).

<sup>2</sup>Of course, at this point it could be argued that Paul is dealing with a distortion of circumcision and not the substance as it was given by God Himself. While it may be true that people distorted the meaning of circumcision, Paul’s later argument that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any power but a new creation (Gal 6.15) is telling in terms of the fact that he is not dealing with a distortion but with the institution/practice of circumcision as given by God. Uncircumcision is just as invalid as circumcision. If circumcision *qua* circumcision is the problem, then the values of uncircumcision should be extolled.

<sup>3</sup>Mark Seifrid in Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification relegates this relationship to a footnote in which he says, “We should probably think of ‘circumcision’ as hyponymous to ‘works of the law’, given the connection which Paul assumes between circumcision and ‘works of the law’ in Gal 3:1-14.” Seifrid then subsumes circumcision under the larger category of “Law.” The Law is the genus of which circumcision is a species. As we shall see, these categories should be reversed.

### *The Institution of Circumcision*

In order to answer the question about the relationship of circumcision to ἔργων νόμου<sup>4</sup> the timeline and historical events within that time period need to be unpacked.<sup>5</sup> The institution of circumcision as the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17, therefore, is the place to begin. God begins by affirming the covenant and its promises to Abraham at the beginning of the discourse.<sup>6</sup> Following this God institutes the sign of circumcision as the covenant. Keeping the covenant is inexorably bound to circumcision. All of those who refuse to be circumcised or circumcise their children are cut off from their people.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that circumcision is a sign of the covenant and even said to be the covenant itself, is plain from a *prima facie* reading of the text. In order to understand the meaning of circumcision in relationship to the covenant, the covenant which it signifies must be understood. That is, the nature and purpose of this covenant is of utmost importance to the meaning of circumcision.

Far from being a start-from-scratch relationship with Abraham, the covenant that God makes in Genesis 17 is continuous with the relationships established in creation and continued to this time. Two general lines of textual argumentation may be employed in understanding this connection: (1) the genealogies of Genesis and (2) the use of the phrase וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי (wahēqîmotî ‘et berîti) in Genesis 17.7 (cf. also 17.19, 21).<sup>8</sup> The theological/thematic connections will only add further credence to these two textual indicators of connection.

First, the genealogy that is traced through the first eleven chapters of Genesis at various points is quite telling about what God is doing in the world, and, more pointedly, through whom he will do it. The genealogy of Cain that is traced in Gen 4.17ff. culminates in the epitome of Cain’s sin. Lamech (not the father of Noah) is a violent man with no conscience about his violence whatever. In stark contrast with this is the line of Seth traced in Gen 5.1ff. The structural focal points in chapter 5—Seth, Enoch, Noah—are all exemplary righteous men. Noah, being found righteous before God, is chosen to be the seed through whom God will deliver the world. On the other side of the flood, the genealogies of Noah’s three sons are listed in Gen 10. The sons and grandsons of Japheth, Ham, and Shem are given. Ham’s line parallels, in some sense, the line of Cain. Shem’s lineage, who is declared to be the promise-bearing line after the incident in Gen 9, parallels the line of Seth. Shem’s children are traced in Gen 10 but not completely. Eber, the great-grandson of Shem, has two sons, Peleg and Joktan. Joktan’s lineage

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<sup>4</sup>I am taking this phrase to be referring to the works prescribed by the Torah and not to a principle of meritorious works. Paul’s historical reference to the Law being given 430 years after the promise makes this reference clear.

<sup>5</sup>It is beyond the scope of this excursus to develop a full theology of circumcision. I will be dealing mainly with how Paul is understanding the relationship in his Galatian correspondence.

<sup>6</sup>Gen 17.1-8

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Gen 17.9-14

<sup>8</sup>There are, of course, volumes written on continuity and discontinuity issues in God’s relationships with creation and humans throughout history. The discussion here could go further and deeper, but it must be limited.

is traced in Gen 10 and leads to the incident at the Tower of Babel. Peleg's lineage is not traced until after the Tower incident in Gen 11.10-26. Here Abraham (then Abram) is "connected" with the righteous seed first expressed in Abel, then in Seth, then in Noah, and then in Shem. Abraham is in the long line of the seed through whom the promise will come.

The second connection that makes clear that God's relationship with Abraham is continuous with the line that has come before him (and, thus, the promise connected to that line) is the use of the phrase **וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי** (*wahēqîmotî 'et berîtî*), "And I will establish my covenant...." Though it is argued by some commentators that this phrase does not necessarily carry with it the force of a continuing relationship, it is recognized that it may at least have that connotation. Because of all of the other factors that come into the picture indicating a strong continuity, I believe that this phrase at least connotes (if it does not denote) a continuity of the covenant that was established previously. The phrase is used concerning Noah in Gen 6.18 where God says, "But ***I will establish My covenant*** with you; and you shall go into the ark -- you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." On this phrase in this passage, Kenneth Mathews comments, "In the Noahic covenant, however, the expression is 'establish my covenant' (*hēqîm berîtî*; 6:18; 9:9, 11, 17), and the word 'give' appears once (9:12). 'Establish' usually is taken to mean the 'inauguration of a new covenant,' but *hēqîm* commonly means to 'confirm a preexisting commitment.' If that is the sense here, God is confirming his prior commitment to creation (1:1–2:3)."<sup>9</sup> This phrase is used again with Noah in Gen 9.11 and then with Abraham in Gen 17.7, 19, 21 (the last two references dealing with the continuation of the covenant through Isaac). In short, God is fulfilling his original promises and purposes through this chosen seed.

The promise being fulfilled precedes the fall of man into sin, encompassing the purposes for man as *imago dei*. While many aspects of man's existence and God's covenant with man can be deduced from man being created in God's image, one aspect of the purpose of man's existence that is clear from reading the creation account is that man—as man and woman—is to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth.<sup>10</sup> The images of fruitfulness and seed (to come later but implied by the term "fruitful") are more than merely good illustrations of man's mandate. Rather, these metaphors resonate with theological overtones that will be evident throughout the story of the Scriptures. The life that God creates and promises is the privilege and vocation of man to live and to reproduce. Life is, indeed, God's *blessing*. Blessing from Gen 1 forward always has association with life and, therefore, fruitfulness, which always means a "seed."

As the story unfolds, the life granted and promised by God is forfeited because of disobedience. God promised that the day Adam ate of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he would surely die.<sup>11</sup> Sin entered the world through Adam and death through

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<sup>9</sup>Mathews, New American Commentary: Genesis 1–11:26, vol. 1a (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 367. It should be noted that Mathews does not agree with the interpretation of "confirm a preexisting commitment." As noted, he does recognize that it can have that meaning. Cf. also Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1–15, vol 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 175. Cf. also Gen 17:7, 19, 21; Exod 6:4; Lev 26:9; Deut 8:18; 2Kgs 23:3.

<sup>10</sup>Gen 1.28.

<sup>11</sup>Gen 2.17.

sin.<sup>12</sup> Of all the implications of this death, the inability to fulfill God's purpose of being fruitful and multiplying must be an aspect of the death that took place. The life that defined the man and the woman in the beginning included their privilege and vocation of procreation. If they died in some way on the day they ate of the fruit, then it would be safe to assume that they lost this ability. Further evidence to this line of reasoning is forthcoming in the promises given to the woman after the fall. The vocation given to her in the beginning—the life that God defined for her—was fruitfulness of the womb. The promise of restoration restores the life to some degree that was lost in the fall. This theme, as we shall see, continues throughout Genesis with the deadness of the wombs of those to whom the promise of the seed is given. God must resurrect the dead wombs in order for life to be born through them. Life must be born through them because God promised a “seed of the woman” who would come to defeat the seed of the serpent.<sup>13</sup>

The promise of this seed becomes one major thread in God's tapestry of redemption. This is one major thread that connects God's original purposes and promises for man—God's covenant—with God's relationship to Abraham and, thus, the purpose and promise of circumcision. God's promise is a seed—fruitfulness, life. This promise is given to and will be fulfilled through Abraham. The beginnings of this promise being fulfilled in and through Abraham are found in Gen 12. There the theme of *blessing* and making him a great nation (which must include fruitfulness) are taken up in the life of Abraham. God's promise that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” indicates that life will come to the world through Abraham. Paul quotes this as the gospel that was preached to Abraham.<sup>14</sup> Later in that same passage this blessing is the Spirit that comes as the gift of the ascended Christ.<sup>15</sup> The Spirit is the life-producing Spirit.<sup>16</sup> Blessing, fruitfulness, and seed are all associated with the promised *life*.

God's promise of blessing is not immediately fulfilled in Abraham. Time passes and Abraham questions God about when this promise will come to pass. This is the setting for the covenant ceremony in Gen 15. The fact that Abraham understood that blessing and becoming a great nation involved fruitfulness—i.e., children—is made plain in Gen 15.2-3 when Abraham says, “... Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus? ... Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!” The covenant ceremony that follows this interchange with God is God's assurance to Abraham that he will indeed have a seed.

Again time passes. Not willing to wait for the fulfillment of God's promise, Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham so that she will raise up seed for him. Though promises are given to Ishmael, he will not be the one through whom the promised life will come to the world. This promise, and the person who will be the promise-bearer, is made explicit in Gen 17. The covenant that is *established* with Abraham here and that God promises he will establish with Isaac, is the promise that began in the Garden after the fall. This is the promise of the seed. So much is this promise of the seed woven into this covenant that the one through whom the promise will come, is called

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<sup>12</sup>Rom 5.12.

<sup>13</sup>Gen 3.15.

<sup>14</sup>Gal 3.8.

<sup>15</sup>Gal 3.14.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. e.g., Rom 8.2, 10, 11.

“the father of a multitude,” or Abraham.<sup>17</sup> The nature and purpose of the covenant is life: life they way God intended. Life is concerned with fruitfulness.

### ***Why add circumcision?***

If the nature and purpose of the covenant is blessing/fruitfulness/life, how does the sign of the covenant given to Abraham in Gen 17 signify that? First, circumcision as a sign of the covenant whose purpose and nature is life needs to be established as grounded in Scripture. The themes in the OT could be traced at this point, but I want to approach this topic from the reverse; i.e., begin with what Paul says in the NT and work back to the OT themes from which Paul derives his conclusion. Paul discusses circumcision in Romans 4 when speaking about Abraham and when Abraham was counted righteous or justified. Again, the historical chronology is of utmost importance to Paul as he says that Abraham was reckoned righteous when he was in uncircumcision.<sup>18</sup> He proceeds to say that circumcision was received as a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῆς πίστεως). Whatever else may be the nuances and implications of the δικαιοσύνη of which Paul speaks, we can be certain that he considers it to be the life that was promised in the age to come. At the end of Romans 4 Paul associates the δικαίωσις with the resurrection of Christ; i.e., that which brought in the life of the age to come. Then in Romans 5 Paul speaks about this δικαιοσύνη in relationship to reigning in life.<sup>19</sup> δικαίωσις is then equated with life in Romans 5.18.<sup>20</sup> Paul then speaks about δικαιοσύνη “unto life” in Romans 5.21. Another clear parallel between life and δικαιοσύνη is Galatians 3.21. Paul says that if a law had been given which was able to give life, then δικαιοσύνη would find its source in the Law. The two are clearly paralleled here.<sup>21</sup> This δικαιοσύνη is, at the least, the fulfillment of God’s faithful fulfillment of his promise to provide a seed and, thus, life for the world.<sup>22</sup>

Circumcision is, as Paul says, a sign and seal of this δικαιοσύνη. It would seem initially that this sign would not fit with the covenant with which it is associated. Circumcision is a bloody rite, a sign of death. Paul even alludes to the fact in Colossians 2.11-12 that Christians have been circumcised by being buried with Christ in baptism. This cutting off that happens in circumcision is, no doubt, associated with death of some sort. Though the same word is not used in Genesis 17 as is used in Genesis 6 concerning the “cutting off,” there is, most certainly, a conceptual link between the death that occurs in the flood and the cutting off that happens in

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. Gen 17.5-6.

<sup>18</sup>Rom 4.10.

<sup>19</sup>Rom 5.17.

<sup>20</sup>I take the phrase ζώης in the phrase δικαίωσις ζώης as an appositional genitive.

<sup>21</sup>See my paper *The Apocalypse of Faith: An Exegetical Study of Galatians 3.19-29, ad loc.*

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Gal 3.1ff.

circumcision.<sup>23</sup> Both involve death. Both have a promised life on the other side of the death. As the theological themes are traced from the beginning, we can see that this makes perfect sense especially considering the fact that the sin introduced to the world through Adam has the consequence of death. Sin must be judged. But this judgment is not unto final destruction. Rather, the judgment that comes on sin is ultimately unto the resurrection of the dead. In other words, God will make a new, fruitful creation. But in order for this new creation to be realized, the death that sin deserves must be exacted.

This truth of God's promise is encapsulated in the "seed" theme that is found throughout Scripture. In order for a grain of wheat to bear fruit, it must first fall into the earth and die. When it does so, it will bear much fruit.<sup>24</sup> Paul picks up this imagery when discussing our resurrection bodies in 1 Corinthians 15.35-49. He says that in order for us to have a new body we must first die like the seed that is planted. Considering the theme of seed throughout the Scriptures, we should not take this as a mere illustration but as a deeper analogy by which we understand our relationship to death and life. The seed must die in order that it may produce fruit; and that fruit is new life in one form or another.

Circumcision as a sign of this covenant which promises life marks out the one who must die in order for the promise of life to be realized. Life is the promise of the covenant. But life cannot be realized when the wages of sin have not been paid. God promises that there will be a seed who will deal with the problem of sin, but he will deal with the problem of sin the only way that it can be dealt with: through death. This seed, as has been the case since the time of the fall, will be the "promise-bearer." That is, this seed will be the one through whom God's promise will be realized in the world. Since the time of Abraham, circumcision and the particular promise that goes with it, marks out those who must endure the death so that life may come to the world. This, then, becomes the way that the relationship between circumcision and the Law must be understood.

### ***From Abraham to Moses: Circumcision and the Promise-bearer***

As mentioned above, Abraham and Sarah do not wait for God to fulfill his promise in his time concerning the seed. Instead, Sarah gives Hagar, the Egyptian bondservant, to Abraham so that Sarah might be "built up" (i.e., through the bearing of children) through Hagar. Hagar is not *the woman* through whom the seed will come. The text lays special emphasis on the fact that Hagar is both an Egyptian and a servant. As Abraham's life is prototypical of Israel, the theme of bondage associated with Egypt stands out at this point. Paul makes it a point to note that the child that is born of Hagar is a child of bondage.<sup>25</sup> Seeking life in Egypt later becomes a prevailing problem among the people of God. Life is not to be sought in the bondage of Egypt, but in the

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. Gen 9.11. It must also be noted that the flood and circumcision are linked theologically throughout Scripture, the common bond being that of baptism. Peter equates the flood to baptism in 1 Pet 3.20-21 and Paul links baptism to circumcision in Col 2.11-12. All involve a cutting off, a death, which leads to a resurrection, life.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. John 12.24.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Gal 4.22-31.

freedom that can only come through the cutting off from Egypt.<sup>26</sup> Abraham has not been “cut off” yet.

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, God visits Abraham and affirms his promise to him, specifically concerning multiplying him greatly, making him the father of a multitude of nations. God promises that he will raise up seed through Sarah. Abraham laughs and questions this promise to himself. He appeals to God that Ishmael be the one to live before him (i.e., like Abraham). At this point of the narrative God reiterates his promise that Sarah will have a son whose name will be Isaac. Isaac will be the one with whom God will *establish* his covenant. Isaac will be the promise-bearer, the one through whom life will come to the world. He is the promised seed. In order for the promised seed to be born, Abraham must die. Not only is Abraham’s body dead,<sup>27</sup> Sarah’s womb is also dead. Nevertheless, God makes the promise that through Sarah and Abraham the promised seed would be born. It is here that God institutes circumcision as the sign of this covenant. It is only after this death that Isaac is born; that Abraham is fruitful according to the promise.

It is important at this point to understand that even at the institution of circumcision that circumcision *qua* circumcision was not the only factor that marked off the true seed. In Gen 17 Ishmael as well as all of the males of Abraham’s household receive the sign. God’s elective, promise-bearing purposes will not be worked out through each and every one of them. According to the text God *establishes his covenant with Isaac*. This does not mean that all of the people in Abraham’s household are unsaved. It means that God’s purposes to bring life to the world will be accomplished through Isaac. Therefore, circumcision must be joined to the promise to designate the seed who will fulfill the vocation of the promised seed. The promise, then, is primary. Circumcision designates the promised seed, but not all the circumcised are the promised seed.

The theme of death associated with the promised seed does not end at this point. The promised seed that is born to Abraham, once he is a young man, must also face death. This is essential to what it means to be the promised seed. In order to see the promise of God come to fruition, the seed must die. Isaac dies when Abraham takes him to the mountains of Moriah to offer him up as a sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> As God promised, on the other side of this death was life. The writer of Hebrews says that Abraham received Isaac back from the dead in a parable.<sup>29</sup> The mission of the seed is to die.

This seed vocation continues with Isaac’s son, Jacob. Isaac, of course, has two sons; twins. Before they are born, God declares his choice of the true seed when he tells Rebekah, “Two nations *are* in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; *One* people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.”<sup>30</sup> Jacob becomes the child of promise. Again, both Esau and Jacob are circumcised, but that which distinguishes Jacob from Esau is God’s election, which is declared plainly to Rebekah.

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<sup>26</sup>None of this means that Ishmael, the son born to Hagar, is evil. God makes promises concerning him being fruitful and multiplying, becoming a great nation. Cf. Gen 17.20. The point is that he is not the child of *the* promise.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Rom 4.19; Heb 11.12.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Gen 22.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Heb 11.17-19.

<sup>30</sup>Gen 25.23.

Jacob, being the seed, must go through death in some sense like his father Isaac. While there are several incidents in Jacob's life that can be understood as his "cutting off," the primary cutting off that will lead to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in Gen 15 is that of experiencing famine in the land of Canaan and having to move to Egypt. The descent into Egypt was, in the beginning, a positive journey. Joseph had preceded his family and had been exalted to the right hand of Pharaoh. Egypt will be a protection for the seed until it is time to return to the promised land. The fact that the patriarchs understood their position in Egypt was not the ultimate intention of God and only a temporary provision is proven in the fact of their insistence of being buried in the land of Canaan.<sup>31</sup> The people of God are cut off from the land of the living, their inheritance.

The narrowing of the seed that has occurred with Abraham and with Isaac has ceased in one sense with Jacob. God's covenant is established with Jacob or Israel. As is seen at the beginning of Exodus, this is the same covenant that is established with Abraham and Isaac.<sup>32</sup> The purpose of Israel, the son of God,<sup>33</sup> is to die in order that life might come to the world.

### *Passover People*

The sojourn in Egypt culminates with a deliverance from the bondage that had come to characterize the life of the people of God there. God had promised Abraham that after 400 years he would deliver the people from this land in which they were strangers. Now, he is bringing that promise to fulfillment. Ultimately what will happen is the death of the firstborn in Egypt of those who do not have the shed blood on their doorposts. A sign of death must be over the household in order to be protected from the angel of death. This sign of death will keep the children of Israel cut off from the death that will come upon the firstborn of the land of Egypt. In other words, the death which characterizes them is unto life. They will emerge from their houses (which are likened unto tombs because of the blood) alive, resurrected.

The Passover feast was established to memorialize this event before YHWH.<sup>34</sup> What is unique about this feast in the life of Israel is that it will only be able to be celebrated by those who are circumcised.<sup>35</sup> This is the special privilege (and vocation) of the "seed" people. God does indeed deliver them out of Egypt and cuts them off from the Egyptians through their baptism in the Red Sea. This Passover people become the "Law people" when they arrive at Sinai. Here the meaning of their existence as a nation (a new status for the children of Israel) is explained. This Law that comes 430 years after the promise does not nullify the promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rather, the Law explains how and becomes the means through which the promise will be realized. The Law is a detailed explanation of the meaning of circumcision of the promised seed. The Law, in one sense, is about cutting Israel off from the nations. The Law

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<sup>31</sup>Gen 49.29-32; 50.25; cf. also Heb 11.22.

<sup>32</sup>Exod 2.24.

<sup>33</sup>Exod 4.22-23.

<sup>34</sup>Exod 12.14.

<sup>35</sup>Exod 12.43ff.

creates partitions between the children of Israel and the Gentiles. These partitions are evident in the food laws, the laws of mixing seeds and fabrics, etc.<sup>36</sup> These laws were temporary and would come to an end when the vocation of the seed was fully and finally fulfilled.<sup>37</sup> That vocation, in accordance with the circumcision that marked out the promised seed, was a ministry of death. This ministry most certainly had glory, but it was a temporary and fading glory.<sup>38</sup> The Law's intention was to bring death, of which circumcision had always been a sign. The circumcision of the promised seed which eventually came to be marked out by the Torah, marked that seed as the priestly nation whose vocation it was to suffer death for the life of the world. Only in this way would the blessing of Abraham—fruitfulness, life for the world—be realized.

### **Conclusion**

So then, what is the relationship between circumcision and ἔργων νόμου? Can circumcision be counted merely as one of the “works of the Law,” or is it distinct yet related? I believe the latter to be the case.

First, circumcision relates to ἔργων νόμου because of the common promise. It must be remembered that circumcision *qua* circumcision is not what marks out the people of God. Circumcision joined to *the promise* marks out the people of God. The promised seed is also the promise-bearer. This promise does not end when Torah is introduced. Torah provides the means by which the promise will be realized. Paul makes it clear in Gal 3 that the Law that comes 430 years after the promise does not render the promise null and void. The Law, Paul says, is not against the promise of God.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the promise is what actually pulls the two together being temporary provisions of the promise so that the *telos* of the promise might be *apocalypsed* in Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Second, circumcision of the promised seed identifies who the seed is who must die in order for the promise to come to fruition. By circumcision that joins a person to the priestly nation—the promised seed—a person becomes subject to the Law. The relationship between the two is like the relationship between a certificate of citizenship and the legal code of the nation. These two can be distinguished, but they cannot be separated. If a person is circumcised in this manner, he becomes subject to the Law because he become a member of the commonwealth of

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<sup>36</sup>It should be noted at this time that this cutting off from the nations did not mean that Israel was to live in complete isolation from the nations. In fact, Gentiles (strangers) were able to worship at the Tabernacle according to Num 15.11ff. Non-Israelites were also able to participate in the Feast of Weeks (Deut 16.9ff.) as well as the Feast of Booths (Deut 16.13ff.).

<sup>37</sup>When I say here that the Law was temporary and would come to an end, I am not saying that the Law no longer has any relevance for our lives. It is obvious from Paul's quotes from and applications of particular laws in the Torah that the Law still has relevance for us. But the Law as that which distinguished Israel as a nation and told her her vocation has now found its *telos* in Christ Jesus (cf. Rom 10.4). The Law must now be view as taken up in Christ's death and resurrection and understood in a transformed sense because of the dawning of the new age.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Paul's discussion of this in 2 Cor 3.

<sup>39</sup>Gal 3.15-18, 21.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Gal 3.23.

Israel. Paul makes this relationship rather clear in Gal 5.2-3: “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that ***he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.***”

The importance of this relationship goes back to Paul’s discussion in Gal 2.15-21. If righteousness–eschatological life–comes by the Law, then Christ died in vain. To accept circumcision in this context (i.e., after Christ has died and been raised), submitting oneself to the whole Law, is to say that the cutting off, the death of the seed, has not yet taken place. Christ, therefore has died in vain. The promised blessing/life is not found in Christ because it has not yet been realized or *apocalypted*. Submit yourself to circumcision in this context and you must come under the curse of the death of the Law.