

**Abraham as Ritual Model: Circumcision in Genesis, Jubilees, and Pauline Epistles**  
**Thomas R. Blanton IV**

**Junior Fellowship Research Proposal:**  
**Dynamics of Jewish Ritual Practices in Pluralistic Contexts from Antiquity to the Present**

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions remember Abraham as a model of various types of ritual action: circumcision, sacrifice, and the rejection of polytheism and idolatry, for example. The project that I propose to engage as a junior fellow at Universität Erfurt in the “Dynamics of Jewish Ritual Practices in Pluralistic Contexts from Antiquity to the Present” Research Centre fulfills the Centre’s mandate to investigate ritual practices while “focusing on the developments and dynamic changes of Jewish rituals, especially during the times when they interact with Christian rituals.” The project will fulfill this mandate by examining a significant Jewish ritual—circumcision—during periods when the meaning and mechanics of the practice were being revised and contested. During the six-month fellowship period, I expect to complete two chapters of a monograph tentatively entitled *Imitation and Exemplification in the Letters of Paul of Tarsus*. The monograph interacts with the fields of classical studies, Judaic Studies, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and ritual studies in order to complicate what Matthew Roller has identified as a “loop of social reproduction” entailed in the use of models and *exempla* in Greco-Roman cultures. The monograph will show that much more than social reproduction is involved in the use of ancient examples, understood as guides to subsequent behavior; even in cases in which ancient exemplary figures such as Abraham are invoked to legitimize subsequent practices, significant aspects of cultural innovation may be present, as the significance of the model is reinterpreted under changing cultural circumstances. During the fellowship period, I expect to work on two chapters within this larger monograph; both chapters examine the use of the figure of Abraham as a model of ritual action in situations of contestation, innovation, and cultural interaction.

During the period of the fellowship, the first chapter of the monograph that I will expect to complete examines the ways in which Abraham was understood as a ritual model in the book of Jubilees (composed 160–150 BCE), in an effort to bolster the practice of circumcision when its performance was threatened due to its perceived conflict with Greek cultural ideals. Conversely, the second chapter will examine the ways in which the figure of Abraham was utilized as a model to justify the *non*performance of the same ritual in Paul’s epistles to the early Christian assemblies in Rome and Galatia. In both Jubilees and Paul’s epistles, the significance of Abraham as a ritual model is contested and reinterpreted in interaction with Greco-Roman cultural ideals. The practice of circumcision was contested during the Hellenistic era when, seeking to conform to Greek aesthetic preferences concerning the ideal male form (which included a lengthy, tapering prepuce, portrayed in art and literature as a physical indicator of moderation and self-control), some Jews apparently modified or abandoned the practice. The practice was again contested in the first century CE, as members of early Christian assemblies debated which rituals were appropriate for gentile converts to perform.

Responding to what it construed as laxity in adhering to the model that Abraham had first provided for undergoing the ritual of circumcision as a “sign of the covenant” between God and his people (Gen 17:1–14), the book of Jubilees augmented the ritual pattern provided in Genesis

by adding material not present in the biblical text: those who did not possess the “sign of the covenant” were to be understood as people of Belial rather than of God, and were destined for destruction rather than inheriting the land of Israel (Jub. 15:1–14). Jubilees thus brought aspects both of dualism and of an apocalyptic worldview to bear in its condemnation of Judeans who either did not practice circumcision or who practiced it only partially, or who attempted to hide their circumcision through infibulation or to reverse it through epispasm. During the first half of my fellowship period, I will draw on material from Greco-Roman art and statuary, medical texts, poetry, and satire to illustrate the Greco-Roman ideals and practices that compelled some Jews to modify the traditional ritual practice of circumcision, and that elicited Jubilees’s attempt to promote the traditional practice in the face of its eroding support among some groups.

Whereas Jubilees appealed to Abraham as a model to bolster the practice of circumcision, Paul appealed to the patriarch as a model of the *non*performance of the ritual. During the middle of the first century CE, the ritual requirements for non-Jews to become members of early Christian assemblies were vigorously debated. Some Judean members of the early Christian movement advocated circumcision for non-Jewish converts to the movement (Acts 15:1–5; Gal 5:2–6), whereas Paul and others advocated the nonperformance of that ritual for gentile converts. Within this polemical context, Paul’s appeals to Abraham as a model of salvation on the basis of *pistis* (i.e., credence) significantly modified Abrahamic traditions in two ways: by deemphasizing Abraham’s traditional association with circumcision, and by reinterpreting the basis of Abraham’s “faithfulness” (Gal 1:15). Whereas in Judaic tradition, Abraham’s faithfulness (*ne’eman*) or loyalty (*tsedakah*) was closely tied to his performance of ritual actions—specifically, his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac—Paul reinterprets Abraham as a model of salvation on the basis of *pistis*; that is, credence with reference to Paul’s preaching about Jesus’s death, resurrection, and imminent return from heaven prior to the expected apocalyptic judgment (Rom 10:5–17; Gal 3:1–9). On the basis of this reinterpretation of the ritual model of Abraham, Paul was able to argue strongly *against* the need for gentiles to undergo circumcision in order to be welcomed as full members of early Christian assemblies (Gal 3:1–4; 6:11–16). That said, Paul nevertheless agreed with Jubilees on another significant point: circumcised, Jewish members of the assemblies ought not seek to remove or reverse the Abrahamic rite that marked them as the people of God prior to their entry into an early Christian assembly (1 Cor 7:18–20). Paul’s letters point to the importance of being able to ground ritual practice in ancient models, even when those models may be taken to justify innovative practices.

The proposed project outlined here fulfills the mandate of the Research Centre to investigate “the developments and dynamic changes of Jewish rituals, especially during the times when they interact with Christian rituals.” Moreover, the project investigates the dynamics of Jewish rituals as they interacted with Greco-Roman aesthetic ideals regarding the male body. Ritual practice—and the exemplary models on which such practices are based—is shown to be malleable and subject to both contestation and significant innovation. As the letters of Paul indicate, however, when connections, however tenuous, to ancient ritual models can be established, even innovative practices may be made to appear both ancient and sacrosanct. Paul portrays even gentile converts to the early Jesus movement—the full inclusion of whom certainly involves significant innovation within the history of Judaism—as “following in the footsteps of Abraham” (Rom 4:12).

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