

can benefit from the unveiling also, for it raises among us the question of the ethics and power undergirding what we make *ourselves and others* believe.

Of course, Wimbush also has chosen a kind of scripturalization. Here the scriptures that make-believe and magic the world are called, by various names, theory. They too are used by powers to undergird particular (admittedly esoteric) semiospheres within the relatively small world of the academy. It will be interesting to see whether, after some time living in this *other* worldly place, Wimbush proceeds to treat it with the same critical historical lens that he uses on the Bible. Like Equiano, he too lives in that “almost” reality: both a highly respected senior scholar and an African-(American)ized problem. And, like Equiano, he takes to himself the power to read people and nations and scripturalization.

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Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference.
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\$75.00.

Andrew Jacobs has written a closely argued, carefully structured, and highly compelling book that considers the circumcision of Jesus as it was imagined and interpreted in the first six centuries of Christianity. In fact, given his methodology and the evidence available, Jacobs has produced the Platonic ideal of a book on this topic. I will suggest in the course of my comments that, while the theoretical perspective Jacobs advances is well suited to the nuanced and meticulous reading strategies he practices, it does run the risk of homogenizing the dynamics of Christian identity formation across Christian subcultures and throughout the full expanse of a period that saw deep structural shifts in Roman imperial ideology and practice as well as the profound transformation of the place of Christianity in Roman society. I will return to this point toward the end of my comments, after I have offered a detailed account of the book’s method, scope, and argument.

Jacobs’ project begins from the proposition that the circumcision of Jesus can serve as a lens through which to view afresh the insistent Christian discourse of unity and singularity alongside the persistence of multiple, diverse Christianities in antiquity. Jacobs astutely observes that, since Walter Bauer, the regnant models for the early formation of Christian identity and community have been predicated on the socio-anthropological idioms of boundaries, conflict, and exclusion—and, in many quarters, still are. He calls into question the basic assumptions underlying this model according to which religious differences are generated by the sharp and definitive delineation between “self” and “other.” Instead, integrating elements drawn from psychoanalytic and

postcolonial theory, Jacobs proposes that the history of Christian difference was driven by processes of abjection and hybridization.

Jacobs zeroes in on the ideological function of Christ's circumcision across an impressive range of Christian apologetic, heresiological, ascetic, homiletical, and exegetical texts. He suggests that this "small sign of Jewish difference" functioned as a fetish that materially embodied the unresolved—and, indeed, unresolvable—paradox of otherness at the heart of the Christian self. The idioms of sameness and difference that are overtly deployed by Christian writers occlude, but also betray, how the "other" is inscribed within the social body of "orthodox" Christianity, thereby constituting an object of distinction as well as identification, of disgust as well as desire.

Jacobs persuasively argues that the concept of hybridity is particularly apt for understanding the development of Christianity within the context of the late Roman Empire. He situates Christ's circumcision within the distinctive Roman "economy of signs" in which otherness was made manageable not by being hidden or abolished, but precisely by being rendered visible to the imperial gaze. At the same time, this visibility always threatened to imbue signs of otherness with the potential to disrupt the workings of Roman power. Thus Roman imperial domination depended on the classification, containment, appropriation, and even display of the stereotyped signs of the dominated or colonized—but never their erasure. By rendering these signs of otherness legible, the Roman imperial administration produced efficacious knowledge of the diverse *oikoumene* it sought to rule.

Despite being practiced among various Near Eastern ethnic groups in a variety of forms, male genital circumcision came to signify "Judaism" within the Roman economy of signs. Yet, ironically, circumcision did not carry a single, fixed meaning within Jewish culture. In precisely the period that saw the consolidation of Roman hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean and especially Palestine, a shift occurred in how Jews themselves envisioned and even practiced circumcision. The second century saw the intensification of attention—especially within the nascent rabbinic movement—to the particulars of the ritual of circumcision as well as to the meanings it could carry. Not only did the practice garner unprecedented levels of praise, but it was given a central role in the newly instituted ritual of conversion, where it came to symbolize the proselyte's embrace of the fate of the Jewish people as "pained, oppressed, harassed, and torn." Jacobs suggests that this affirmation of the importance of circumcision can be read, at least in part, as a Jewish attempt to rest control of this sign from the Roman conquerors who had transformed it into a mark of social subordination and judicial constraint.

Various New Testament texts written between the mid-first and mid-second century likewise endow circumcision with potent symbolic meaning, although they are far from uniform in their view of the practice. Thus, according to Jacobs, Paul did not reject circumcision as such, as is so often assumed. Instead, Paul argued passionately that, while circumcision remained praiseworthy for Jews, his gentile followers were required to internalize this mark,

which, once inscribed in their hearts, would serve as the key to their admission to the eschatological Kingdom. This process of interiorization constituted a form of resistance to the stereotyping power inherent in the Roman economy of signs, which, in fixing each and every ethnic group in its "proper" place, forestalled the arrival of the end times. In contrast, the Letter to the Colossians sweeps circumcision up into its dazzling juxtaposition of literal and figural signs of salvation, thereby opening up a space within which it could become resignified as a Christian mark. Still later, the Gospel of Luke, in which the circumcision of both John the Baptist and Jesus is first recounted, deployed circumcision as strategy both to judaize and romanize Jesus. But, in Jacobs' reading, this sign, when placed on the body of a universal messiah, mimics and thus subtly subverts both Jewish and Roman systems of signification. By the second century, in texts such as the *Epistle of Barnabas*, gentile Christian authors had begun contending with circumcision as a distinctly Christian sign even as they perforce continued to see in it the despised Jewish "other."

Having treated in detail the formative intersection of the Jewish, Roman, and Christian discourses of circumcision, Jacobs turns to patristic literature to consider how Christians throughout late antiquity simultaneously generated and blurred the boundaries between Christianity and Judaism. Why, he asks, did Christians need to elaborate the image of the Jew as their troubling interlocutor? He begins with a series of literary dialogues between Jews and Christians as well as a group of "internalized" dialogues of the question-and-answer type. These texts vividly reveal how Christianity both rejected and reinscribed its own originary Jewishness. This ambivalent process resulted in an incomplete separation of "self" and "other" that persisted beneath the veneer of the totalizing discourse of early Christianity.

The figure of the Jew as an embodiment of the threatening, yet desired, other was likewise a fixture of Christian heresiological writings. Having constructed an elaborate and omnivorous taxonomy of deviance, Christian heresiologists absorbed all manner of belief into their totalizing discourse of orthodoxy, including those teachings that they rejected. Binary models of self-definition are insufficient for capturing the operation of this powerful sleight-of-hand. In contrast, the notion of abjection offers Jacobs an analytical vocabulary for interpreting the discursive expressions of this violent, yet always incomplete, expulsion of theological strangeness. Drawn in particular from the psychoanalytic writings of Julia Kristeva, abjection describes the dynamic through which the subject disavows part of the self in order to achieve a stable—or, really, quasi-stable—self.

As Jacobs shows, this process of abjection is especially apparent in two broad themes that were prevalent in late ancient Christian literature: the relation of "old" and "new" covenants, and metaphysical and ascetic conceptions of the person of Christ. Representations of Jesus' circumcision as the abject sign of the Law enabled orthodox writers to articulate a supersessionist view of the Jewish past while steering clear of the "extremism" of figures like Marcion or Mani. Similarly, for orthodox writers, the materialization of the divine in

the human body of Christ could not be resolved through a straightforward hierarchy of matter and spirit. Instead, the apparent limitations of gender, ethnicity, and even human existence itself, which both Christ and his followers experienced, are only to be overcome through the perfection of the body. And it is this perfected body that points the way toward the transformation of what had been the paradigmatic site of compulsion and necessity into a medium for achieving radical alterity. From the standpoint of the heresiologists, this paradoxical logic always threatened to drag the orthodox Christian to the extremes of heresy. But a properly cultivated power of theological discernment and apt performance of ascetic practice ensure that the orthodox, like Christ, will triumph over heresy and, with it, over materiality itself.

This approach to the paradox that is exemplified by Christ's circumcision also informs the treatment of the "Jewish Christian" sect of the Ebionites by that arch-heresiologist Epiphanius of Cyprus. In his *Panarion*, Epiphanius demands of his reader a proper understanding of Christ's circumcision, one that both affirms its historicity as the quintessential mark of Judaism and rejects it as a model for actual Christian practice. Like the Jews, to whom they bear a troublingly incomplete likeness, the Ebionites fail to understand that to follow the Jewish Law correctly is to appreciate its built-in self-abrogating machinery. As proper interpretation of the life of Christ makes clear, circumcision, like other aspects of Jewish practice, would one day be abolished. Orthodox Christians who do not practice circumcision are not only faithful disciples of Christ, but also faithful followers of the Jewish Law as well. This text demonstrates how boundary-creating discourse provided early Christians a fitting vehicle for the retention and internalization of difference. As Jacobs persuasively explains, the signifier of Christ's circumcision erodes the partition of Judaism and Christianity at the very site of its formation. Orthodox Christianity swallows whole the dangerous hybridity of Jewish-Christian heresy by successively constructing, appropriating, and internalizing the (now disciplined and corrected) religious truths of the Jewish "other."

Jacobs next moves to consider the Christian Bible, which is so often accorded pride of place as the primary engine of Christian unity. He demonstrates how the very project of constructing a unified scriptural text and hermeneutic could in fact reproduce the fractures that characterize Christian cultural expression and social life. In both literary and ritual contexts, God's multivalent Word is perhaps nowhere more divided than at Christ's most Jewish moment, his circumcision. Yet, faced with this obstinate scriptural "fact" and the panoply of previous interpretations of it, Christian exegetes or preachers, like Origen, Ephrem, Ambrose, Cyril of Alexandria, Proclus of Constantinople, and Philoxenus of Mabbug, integrated these multiple and often contradictory voices within a coherent and correct interpretative system. In fact, it was precisely through this display of exegetical or rhetoric virtuosity that the exegete established his knowledge of the Christian tradition and thus his authority over his Christian audience. Again, as Jacobs notes, the affinities between this process of definition and containment and Roman imperial

strategies of domination are in no way coincidental, but reflect the Christian replication of imperial rule.

The book's final chapter traces the formal ritualization and institutionalization of Christ's circumcision, the commemoration of the Feast of Christ's Circumcision, which emerged across the Mediterranean and the Near East in the pre-Islamic period. By the sixth century, the Feast of the Circumcision was one of the several festivals that had been introduced to commemorate and allow participation in the lives of Jesus and Mary. Here, the call to Christians "to become circumcised like Christ" enshrines the paradox of difference and identity squarely within Christian ritual time and space.

In a thought-provoking conclusion, Jacobs argues that ancient Christians did not so much conceive of Jesus (male and circumcised) as a Jew, but viewed him as "passing" as Jewish. To "pass" from one category to another calls the link between exterior surface and interior essence into question. Christ's performative act of "passing" was thus instrumental in reconfiguring notions of ethnic and religious identity altogether. On this reading, Christ's circumcision re-enforced the fantasy of discrete identities, even as it discloses for the historian the fiction of clear-cut boundaries in the formation of Christianity.

Jacobs' *Christ Circumcised* offers a highly original and far-reaching interpretation of early Christian discourse. Particularly suggestive is the productive "fit" Jacobs discovers between method and material, although it is precisely the effortlessness of this "fit" that gave me some pause. Could not a sensitive reader, armed with the tools of Lacanian and postcolonial theory, find similar rhetorical dynamics at work in other political and cultural contexts? Thus, despite the sharp divide between Greek and barbarian, would we not expect, in theory, the re-inscription of the barbarian within the Greek self? And, if so, would the successful application of this approach to materials produced in this very different political and ideological environment demonstrate its validity or would it instead raise questions about its transhistorical scope?

Similarly, the final page of the book traces, in only a few sentences, the trajectory from the early centuries of Christianity to the "foreclosing of horizons that we will call the Middle Ages." This sweeping gesture seems to point forward to a time when the dynamics of identity formation will work quite differently. But had not Christian life been powerfully transformed over the course of late antiquity, as minority status gave way to imperial sponsorship, with various attendant shifts in Christian attitudes and practices? Although always sensitive to the particular context of a given author, text, or practice, the book does not offer systematic reflections on how this historical shift may have inflected the imperial logic that underlay the formation of the Christian self. I, therefore, wonder whether the utility of Jacob's model would be undermined precisely by its successful application to high medieval Christian texts about Jews and Judaism, including Christ's circumcision.

Somewhat differently put, are there long-standing elements of the Christian tradition that reflect quite different psycho-social dynamics in different times and places? Must the paradoxical logic that pervades Christian

theological reflection on the nature of Christ encode the workings of abjection? It seems to me that the Christian discourse of paradox need not always index that “remainder” which is produced by the always provisional and incomplete resolution of the contradictions at the heart of the self. Still, Jacobs’s powerful analytical framework has allowed this reader to see the early Christian discourses of self and other from a fresh vantage-point, one that should serve scholars of early Jewish–Christian relations and of religious identity formation more generally as a replicable model for analyzing the production and management of difference.

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Revisiting Rituals in a Changing Tibetan World. Edited by Katia Buffetrille. Brill, 2012. 386 pages. \$182.00.

This collection of essays, the proceedings of a conference held in Paris in 2007, is an important contribution to the literature on how religion transforms in the face of social change—in this case, the immense social changes taking place in the greater-Tibetan world. The ten essays cover not only Tibet, but also Nepal and Mongolia. The introduction by Katia Buffetrille provides the context by presenting the outlines of the overall project as well as a useful synopsis of Tibetan history. Buffetrille writes that ritual is self-avowedly conservative, something that resists change, but that in actual fact, like all religious phenomena, rituals adapt to changing historical and cultural situations. The various chapters of this book do track some of these changes, but this reader was left with a much stronger sense of the *stability* of ritual—of its ability to persist relatively unchanged in the face of modernizing and globalizing forces. Is it that ritual is generally more resistant to change than other religious forms; or is this a distinctive feature of ritual in Tibetan culture? Perhaps both the form and the culture play a role here.

All of the essays in this volume deal with ritual in one form or another, but not all of them do so to the same extent. Some, in fact, are chiefly concerned with other themes. And one essay, by Thierry Dodin, argues that some activities that, on the surface, appear to be “transformed rituals” are, in fact, not—either because they are not rituals or because they have not really changed. Another chapter, by Fernanda Pirie, is chiefly concerned with the way that disputes are settled among nomadic pastoralists in Amdo (northeastern Tibet); she concludes that the process of mediation is, by comparison to the government’s legal interventions, “significantly *unritualistic*.” Hildegard Diemberger’s essay is an overview of Tibetan manuscript and print culture from ancient times to the modern, digital present. Diemberger does mention, in passing, some scripture-related rituals—the reading of the canon, its