

### Re-evaluating Philippians 3

The most common interpretation of Philippians 3 is that it is a polemic against either 'the circumcision' (Jewish people) or, even more commonly, against 'Judaizers' (a term used to define those Gentiles arguing that gentile 'Christ-followers' need to take on all the markers of Jewishness, that is, that they need to be circumcised, etc).

Given the very common Hellenistic mindset, that most uncritically approach this text with, it is not at all surprisingly how it is then understood in this way. In fact, I suspect it would be very difficult for any Gentile believer attending a typical (Hellenistic) church in today's world to see this text in any other way.

The traditional view is also both anti-Semitic and supportive of Replacement Theology.

In case this is not clear consider two quotes by Gerald F. Hawthorne, in the Word Biblical Commentary (1983) on Philippians 3:2. His comments are typical of Christian commentaries on this passage. He states:

*"The Jews were in the habit of referring contemptuously to Gentiles as dogs—unclean animals with whom they would not associate if such association could be avoided.... Paul now hurls this term of contempt back "on the heads of its authors."*

And

*"to Paul the Jews were the real pariahs that defile the holy community, the Christian church, with their erroneous teaching."<sup>1</sup>*

To try to give pause for some serious reflection and reconsideration then, let us assume for a moment that the Apostle Paul is attacking 'Judaizers' here (remembering that these were people who had accepted Jesus/Yeshua as the Christ/Messiah but were arguing for circumcision, etc). In verses 18-19 Paul goes on to say of these 'Judaizers':

*18 "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.  
19 Their end is destruction ... "*

Is Paul really saying that these 'Christ-followers' are 'enemies of the cross of Christ' and that 'their end is destruction'? Surely not! Surely, there must be something wrong here with this traditional interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

Hopefully, this shocking statement (within this contextual understanding) will give you the impetus to look a little deeper here.

Consider the context again. Philippians was a Roman city with the accompanying strong social structure but with many different cults, where many 'gods' were worshiped.

Into this pagan mix, consider that the Apostle Paul was a Torah observant Jew (as I have argued for in a number of other articles in some depth<sup>3</sup>), had arrived to establish and support groups practicing Judaism with a belief that Yeshua was the Messiah (though the Gentiles within these groups were encouraged by Paul and the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 to remain Gentiles and not become proselytized Jews). Here though Paul is communicating with these groups by letter.

In this context then, Paul is declaring opposition to and revulsion toward the idolatrous cults that abounded here. He is also trying to encourage the Gentile believers to no longer have their worldview and behaviour shaped by the Roman social world in which they have grown up. Having rejected this cults and started to live a Torah obedient lifestyle these Gentile believers in Yeshua would most likely have been marginalized to some degree by the society around them. The Apostle Paul is trying to encourage them to further adopt and employ the worldview and behaviour of those who follow the 'divine instructions' (Torah) of the One God.

With this perspective let us look at a few of the terms used by Paul. For example, consider v2 "*Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.*"

For a start there is no literary evidence from the Second Temple Period or afterwards that in expressing ethnic prejudice, Jews called non-Jews 'dogs'. Thus the common argument that Paul is reversing this expression cannot be valid. Rather, there was in Phillipi a cult or philosophical group, the 'Cynics', which is based on the Greek word for dogs.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Nanos: "Judaizers"? "Pagan" Cults? Cynics?: Reconceptualizing the Concerns of Paul's Audience from the Polemics in Philippians 3:2, 18-19"

<sup>2</sup> This insight and much of the argument here is from the 'Judaizers' article quoted above by Prof. Nanos

<sup>3</sup> See 'The Apostle Paul: Disciple of Fraud' and 'Siblings of the King' for example - @ [www.circumcisedheart.info](http://www.circumcisedheart.info)

As a means to demonstrate what they saw as the errors of the society of their day they tried to outdo all others in crude and 'dog-like' behavior, that is behavior that is typical of dogs, but when exercised by humans is seen as unseemly and immoral.

Consider also the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. These prophets were clearly 'evil doers' and also mutilators of the flesh (see 1 Kings 18). Isn't it more likely then that Paul was comparing the local pagans and cults as similar to the prophets of Baal? In fact, Paul does compare himself with Elijah and invoke these very images of 'evil workers' and 'mutilators' in Romans 11:1-5. Remember also that the Torah makes it clear that mutilation of the flesh is not to be practiced by the Jews. See for example Lev 19:28 *"You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD."* and therefore that there is no way that Judaism considered circumcision as a form of 'mutilation' of the flesh.

Let us look at v18-19 again: *"For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, **their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.**"* and in particular the terms 'their god is their belly' and 'they glory in their shame', which are used to identify the people, behaviour and cults that Paul is condemning.

Consider the events described by Luke in Acts 16:12-40:

*"12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. ...  
16 As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling....  
19 But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.  
20 And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city.  
21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.*

The slave girl is said to have a spirit of python (see 'pneuma pyhona' at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unclean\\_spirit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unclean_spirit)) from the cult of Apollo (the special god for Augustus, who won the battle for him at Philippi). This divination was also called 'belly talking', and could thus be described as a 'god in their belly'. The Cynics doggish behaviour involved behaving in the most animal and shameful manner to expose what they saw as the hypocrisy of their society. Thus this group of local pagans could be described as 'glorifying in their shame'.

Now we are ready to look again at verse 3-17. In Phil 3:3 it now appears that Paul is contrasting these local pagan practices and beliefs with the Way (Ps 119) of the Jews (note also in the story from Acts 16 above that he was accused of pushing Jewish customs), which involved 'serving God by spirit' instead of putting their faithfulness in the flesh as these pagan cults do.

It is also important to remember that when Paul speaks favourably of the Abrahamic covenant, that it was a covenant that enshrined male circumcision as an eternal marker of Jewishness.

Now, I think a re-reading of the whole chapter should indicate that in speaking of his historical high standing within the Judaism of his day, Paul is including his addressees, the Gentile 'Christ-followers' of Philippi, into the Jewish community, but then even further elevating his and their status because they have recognized and embraced the Messiah of Israel and are endeavouring to live with the same faithfulness as Yeshua to the One True God.

Let us turn specifically to verse 3-7:

*"3 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit<sup>4</sup>, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh,  
4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so:  
5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;  
6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.  
7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ."*

So now hopefully it should be clear than when Paul states 'we are the circumcision' (note he does not say 'we are the spiritual circumcision' or 'the true circumcision' or the circumcision of the heart'), he is NOT stating that the Church of God is now the circumcision and has replaced the people of Israel as 'the circumcision'.

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<sup>4</sup> or, as some codices have it, 'who serve God the Spirit,' or 'the Spirit of God'.

I believe when he states 'we are the circumcision' he is speaking to his Gentile audience and identifying himself with his fellow Jewish followers of Yeshua, who could all boast in their heritage but no longer do so because they have seen the Messiah, the King of Israel and instead boast in him.

After 'we are the circumcision' in v3, there are 3 parts; 'serving God in/by spirit'; 'glorying in Messiah' and 'not trusting in or persuading by flesh'. These are all terms that other Jewish groups could also claim (both then and now in fact. Note that the term 'Messiah', translated 'Christ' is not a surname and therefore could refer to any 'anointed one').

So I believe that the Apostle Paul in stating '*we are the circumcision*' is stating a claim that the group to which he belongs is a Jewish group, within Jewish society, and not some new religion (Christianity). This group is contrasted with non-Jewish, non-Messiah following based identities and ways of living.

The Apostle Paul applies the 'circumcision' label and rite to his group. Paul's language here echoes the Maccabean slogan, "we are the circumcised" (1 Macc 1:15, 48, 60-61; 2:44-46; 2 Macc 6:10).

As I argued in my '*Circumcision: A Step of Obedience?*' article, Paul, like the Pharisees in Acts 15 uses circumcision here as a metonym for Judaism. What is new though is that Paul (and the Jerusalem Council) argue that Gentile followers of Yeshua are part of this Jewish community, without needing to be physically circumcised.

In the same way that women are included in the 'circumcision' though not literally circumcised, Paul is also including the non-Jewish and non-circumcised followers of Yeshua in this group.

In verse 4-14, Paul indicates that he is still a Jew, that he still most faithfully practices Judaism, but that he does not see the social advantage that this would normally give him as of any great value compared with the equal standing that all followers of Yeshua as the Messiah, both 'circumcised' Jews and 'non-circumcised' Gentiles now share.

He is thus encouraging his Gentile audience that they now may also have great confidence that through the Messiah, the Christ, they have now been grafted into the 'circumcision', the chosen people of God.

With this understanding of this chapter, it is no longer seen as seriously anti-Semitic.

Also, it can no longer be used as an argument for Replacement Theology, which is exactly what is normally promoted through the traditional understanding and perspective.

This is only a very short introduction and overview to a more consistent and less contradictory view of this whole chapter.

For a more in-depth presentation I recommend "*Judaizers"? "Pagan" Cults? Cynics?: Reconceptualizing the Concerns of Paul's Audience from the Polemics in Philippians 3:2, 18-19*" by Prof Mark Nanos – see <http://www.marknanos.com/Cynics-In-Phil3-May11.pdf> as well as "*Paul's Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles 'Dogs' (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog*" – see <http://www.marknanos.com/Phil3Dogs-Reverse-1-17-08.pdf> from which I am indebted to for much of the argument here.

It seems a large part of the problems that Paul's writings engender stems from a faulty understanding, from a triumphalistic 'church' based worldview, that sees 'WE are the circumcision ..' (Phil 3:3) as referring to the church.

This worldview leads to a great many problems in Christian practice as well as much more significantly, anti-Semitism and all the great evil that has arisen from this baseless hostility.

**As an alternative perspective Prof Mark Nanos argues that the solution lies in seeing Paul's work as the writings of a Torah observant Jew from an inter/intra Jewish position.**

This is brilliantly summed up in this quote from one of his articles below:

*"Scholars should consider approaching the historical and rhetorical situations for interpreting Paul's texts on thoroughly inter/intra-Jewish instead of inter/intra-Christian models, and they should be careful not to mix them, which can undermine the effort. There is good historical reason to explore these approaches, since Paul and the other early believers in Jesus were Jewish and understood what they were doing to be Jewish.*

***I think it likely that they thought of themselves in terms of a coalition, a Jewish subgroup or subgroups engaged in a temporary task on behalf of Israel, and not founding a new religion or sect that was in some way less Jewish.***

*These approaches (and they) have a better chance of yielding the desired ideological benefit, to the degree that they consistently recognize **the issues at dispute in Paul's letters did not revolve around the question of whether or to what extent Jewish norms such as Torah applied, but to how they applied to the new reality he claimed his groups represented; namely, the dawning of the age to come within the present age, so that Israelites and members of the nations worshipped the Creator God of all humankind as one, however, remaining both Israelites and representatives of the nations when doing so.***

***When the shared term is Jewishness, as it is in intra-Jewish terms, the contrast shifts from discussing whether there is something problematic with Jewishness, to whether or not a person or group believes in Jesus Christ, and the associated claims for what difference that makes. In other words, unlike when the shared term is Christ, the difference between two groups does not fall along a line differentiating levels of respect for Jewish identity and Torah, since Jewishness is likely upheld to be essential by Jewish groups.***

*Imagining the dispute between and within Jewish group boundaries keeps the focus on the meaning of faith in Jesus for themselves, and others, as Jewish groups.*

*Another benefit of this conceptualization is that difference is respected. The intra-Jewish construction allows the historical participants as well as the interpreter to respect that having a different opinion about the meaning of Jesus Christ or of appeals to him to legitimate social change within Jewish groups need not represent value judgments that one decision or the other is better, just different.*

***As I understand Paul, he upheld the Jewish notion that, although social (and biological) differences remain in the present age, that is, there remains Jews and non-Jews in Christ, the discrimination usually associated with such differences should not prevail, just as is expected to be the case in the age to come, when even the wolf and the lamb will dwell together.***

*This seems to me to be a sensible and noble ideal for how to approach each other today in Jewish/Christian relations' terms, whether sharing his belief that this age has dawned in Jesus Christ, or not."*

- from <http://www.marknanos.com/SBL-03-Inter-Christian-Prob.pdf>
- see also <http://www.marknanos.com/Phil3Dogs-Reverse-6-27-07.pdf>

I highly recommend these articles as well.

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