

The Circumcision of the Lord: Saving Mystery after Modern Oblivion

ANDREW HOFER, OP

*Tangaza College of The Catholic University of Eastern Africa
Nairobi, Kenya*

“WHAT DO WE HEAR,” asked Karl Rahner, “of Christ’s Circumcision, Baptism, his prayer, the Transfiguration, the Presentation in the Temple, the Mount of Olives, the abandonment by God on the Cross, the descent into the underworld, the Ascension into heaven and so on?” He then answered his question starkly: “Nothing or pretty well nothing.”¹ Since Rahner’s influential essay, theologians have enjoyed lively discussions on such mysteries of Christ’s life as the abandonment on the cross and the descent unto the dead. Yet, no comparable debate in the various schools of theology exists for the first mystery Rahner mentions, the circumcision of Christ.²

¹ Karl Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, Cornelius Ernst, trans. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 149–200, esp. 190.

² Two important attempts that have appeared recently are Graham Ward, “Uncovering the Corona: A Theology of Circumcision,” in *The Birth of Jesus: Biblical and Theological Reflections*, ed. George J. Brooke (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 35–44; and Robert Trent Pomplun, “Israel and the Eucharist: A Scotist Perspective,” *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002): 272–94. Ward seeks to develop a theology of circumcision through an emphasis on cultural politics. Inspired by Duns Scotus, Pomplun argues that Christ’s circumcision is the wellspring of grace for the Jewish sacraments and that the Church is forever bound to Israel in one divine sacramental economy. Also, see the less recent work of Raphael Schulte in *Mysterium Salutis: Dogmatique de l’Histoire du Salut*, vol. 11, *Christologie et Vie du Christ* (Paris: Cerf, 1975), 378–86. The present essay is an argument taken from a book in preparation. I am grateful to Lawrence J. Donohoo, OP, Jody Vaccaro Lewis, Matthew Levering, Bernard Mulcahy, OP, and Austin Murphy, OSB, for comments on various stages of my research.

Rahner himself pointed to St. Thomas Aquinas as one who had a great theological interest in the mysteries of the life of Christ.³ Indeed, Aquinas pioneered the systematic meditation on Christ's mysteries for scholastic theology in his *Summa theologiae* III, qq. 27–59. In this, he features the circumcision among the mysteries of the Incarnate Word that seems quite foreign to modern sensibilities. Jean-Pierre Torrell observes, “The question on the circumcision and the legal observances undoubtedly seems not far from being folkloric to a Christian today.” Yet, as Torrell continues, “This was not at all the opinion of Master Thomas.”⁴

This essay argues that by recovering a Thomistic appreciation for the circumcision of the Lord, theologians can seek a richer understanding of the things that the Lord Jesus did and suffered for our salvation. It begins by sketching the historical treatments of the Lord's circumcision from revelation through ambivalence to modern oblivion.⁵ Next, it “re-searches” the mystery within Aquinas's systematic appreciation for salvation in Christ.⁶ Finally, it offers a new way of exploring the mystery by placing it within the nexus of the mysteries of Christ's life. Given the limits of space, this essay explores the circumcision in relation to only one other mystery of the Savior's life: baptism.

³ Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 190.

⁴ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Christ en Ses Mystères: La vie et l'oeuvre de Jésus selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 179. “La question de la circoncision et des observances légales n'est sans doute pas loin de sembler folklorique à un chrétien d'aujourd'hui. Ce n'était pas du tout l'avis de Maître Thomas.”

⁵ I am indebted to Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). While Steinberg notes approvingly of the importance that Aquinas placed on Jesus' circumcision, he argues that Renaissance artists developed an incarnational theology in the nakedness of Christ—that was painted over, sometimes literally, in the modern era.

⁶ For my use of “re-search,” see David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Novak writes, “It would seem, then, if Jewish-Christian dialogue is to be authentic dialogue, and a true expression of Judaism and Christianity, it must be constituted so as to carefully steer a course clear between the Scylla of triumphalism and the Charybdis of relativism. Thinkers in each community must *re-search* their own respective traditions to constitute the integrity of the other community and not lose the integrity of their own. The task is formidable because this re-search must be quite radical, working its way back to the roots of the tradition and back out into the present and toward the future” (19).

From Revelation through Ambivalence to Modern Oblivion

Christians have long honored this event in the Savior's life—an event from which they deepened their understanding of the dispensations of the Old Law and New Law, of the mystery of the Son of God as “complete in all the parts of a man,”⁷ and of their own new creation in Christ. Beyond its inclusion in the Gospel in Luke 2:21, the entrance of the circumcision into the liturgical calendars of Churches around the world singularly guaranteed that Christians would read, preach, pray, sing, teach, write poems and stories, and argue about this mystery in innumerable times and places.⁸ The Basilica of St. John Lateran even boasted the most holy foreskin of Christ among its relics.⁹

Still, it must be admitted that this mystery has had quite an ambivalent reputation in the Church's history—an ambivalence at times betrayed even when this mystery was closely studied and joyfully celebrated. By its very nature, the circumcision of the Lord can frankly be disturbing to the sensitive and seem irrelevant to those who ignore the Lord's revelation to Abraham: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant” (Gn 17:13).¹⁰ Four curious examples from Christian traditions are here adduced. First, Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* is the first text after Luke's Gospel to mention explicitly the circumcision of Jesus, but it does so as something that had already been discussed by him (yet not present in the extant text).¹¹ Indeed, Justin thinks that circumcision was given to Abraham as a punishment because of God's foreknowledge that the Jews

⁷ Steinberg discusses this euphemism in *The Sexuality of Christ*, 133–35.

⁸ One might be surprised today by the abundance of evidence in the tradition. A detailed study of the feast from one western use is in Wulf Arlt, “The Office for the Feast of the Circumcision from Le Puy,” in *The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages: Methodology and Source Studies, Regional Developments, Hagiography*, Margot E. Fassler and Rebecca A. Baltzer, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 324–43. This feast influenced medieval literature, perhaps most famously the English tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I am thankful to Elise Maglio for introducing me to this medieval story and its circumcision motif.

⁹ Cf. Pope Innocent III, *De Missae Mysteriis*, bk. 4, ch. 30, *Acta Sanctorum* (January), vol. 1, 4.

¹⁰ All scriptural quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the *Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 67. See translation with note on the lacunae of the text in *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho*, Thomas B. Falls, trans., revised by Thomas P. Halton, Michael Slusser, ed. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 103.

would kill Christ.¹² Second, although Renaissance artists depicted the nude Christ child countless times, including the preparatory scene of the knife approaching Jesus on the eighth day, no Renaissance painting depicts the Christ child, when clearly older than eight days, as circumcised.¹³ Third, the birth of “modern theology” in the writings of Kant and Schleiermacher removed Christianity from the Jewish flesh of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁴ Fourth, having entered the liturgical calendar by the sixth century in the West,¹⁵ this feast of the Octave of Christmas/Circumcision of the Lord was renamed “Mary, the Mother of God” after Vatican

¹² *Dialogue with Trypho*, 16. It can also be noted that some second and third-century heretics who claimed to be Christians altogether denied the Jewishness of Christ and his real flesh—two principal characteristics of Jesus at stake in the circumcision. See esp. Tertullian’s response in arguing from the Lord’s circumcision in *Against Marcion*, bk. 4, ch. 7, and *On the Flesh of Christ*, chs. 2 and 5.

¹³ Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 165–67.

¹⁴ See R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, ch. 3: “Christian Divinity without Jewish Flesh: Kant and Schleiermacher” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 57–80. As to my own reading of Kant and Schleiermacher, I have found a few passages particularly frightful. Kant believed that Judaism has “no unity of concepts” with the ecclesiastical faith of Christianity. For him, Judaism “is not a religious faith at all” and was completely forsaken by Christianity, which was grounded upon “a wholly new principle.” See Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 116–18. Schleiermacher claimed that we who have “actual experience” do not need the premonitions of the Old Testament and so the Old Testament should be viewed as an appendix to the New Testament—and that only for historical reasons. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. from the second German edition, H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 611.

¹⁵ The early sixth-century Caesarius of Arles preached that Christ “wanted to fulfill all of the precepts of the Law, and on the eighth day, *which we commemorate today*, He willed to be circumcised in His body.” See his sermon 191, “On the Circumcision of Our Lord,” in *Saint Caesarius of Arles: Sermons*, vol. 3 (187–238), Mary Magdalene Mueller, trans., *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 66 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1973), 25–26. Earlier, Augustine preached a homily on the circumcision of the Lord on a day of *sollemnitatis*. See his Sermon 196A in *Sermons* III/6 (184–229Z) on the Liturgical Seasons, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Edmund Hill, trans., John E. Rotelle, ed. (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 64–67, and 75, no. 1. The feast was established by the early fifth century in Alexandria. Cyril preaches: “*And today too we have seen Him obedient to the laws of Moses, or rather we have seen him Who as God is the Legislator, subject to His own decrees.*” See his Homily 3 on Luke, the Feast of the Circumcision of the Lord, in *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, R. Payne Smith, trans. (Astoria, NY: Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983), 55–58.

II. The liturgical concilium expressly intended that the circumcision observance be “completely eliminated.”¹⁶

Given this uneasiness, it may not be so surprising that little theological work has been done on the circumcision of the Lord in recent years. Many modern writers on the life of Christ quickly passed over it or completely ignored it. Consider this nineteenth-century representative of dismissing Christ’s circumcision. “It was a strange, separate, unaccountable Bloodshedding,” comments F. W. Faber, “standing, as it seems, in a peculiar relation to the other Bloodsheddings, as it was not only no part of the redemption of the world, but was utterly detached from the Passion.”¹⁷ Finally, some critical biblical scholarship has not served the mystery of Christ’s circumcision well. For example, Raymond Brown’s magisterial study of the infancy narratives dismisses the theological importance of the circumcision in Luke 2:21 as foreign to the evangelist and even posits that it has “no legal context” in Luke’s Gospel.¹⁸

¹⁶ Before the Tridentine reforms, Roman sacramentaries and lectionaries have the January 1 heading *In octavas Domini*, while Gallican books have *In circumcissione Domini*. This latter title appeared in the Tridentine Missal until 1960 when it was replaced with the Octave of Christmas. Recovering a Marian emphasis in early Roman antiphonals, Rome changed the feast to “Mary, Mother of God” in 1969. See Pierre Journel’s essay “The Year” in *The Church at Prayer: An Introduction to the Liturgy*, vol. 4, *The Liturgy and Time*, new ed., Aimé Georges Martimort, ed., Matthew J. O’Connell, trans. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 84, no. 18. Annibale Bugnini records in the first concilium report from 1965: “It was agreed that the Gallican theme of the Circumcision should be completely eliminated.” *The Reform of the Liturgy*, Matthew J. O’Connell, trans. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 306–7, no. 5. Given that one finds this revealed event as a feast in various ancient (and doctrinally divided) Churches in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, the classification of the circumcision of the Lord as “the Gallican theme” seems belittling. Also, see the January 1 preface for the early Roman Rite in Jean Deshusses, *Le Sacramentaire Grégorien: Ses Principales Formes d’Après les Plus Anciens Manuscrits*, Spicilegium Friburgense 16, vol. 1 (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg, 1971), 498, no. 1527. It begins, “*Cuius hodie circumcissionis diem et nativitatis octavum celebrantes.*”

¹⁷ Frederick William Faber, *Bethlehem*, new ed. (Philadelphia: The Peter Reilly Co., 1957), 336. This book has on the same page: “He needed not the rite. He required no ceremonial covenant with God, who was God himself. That Flesh needed no consecration, which was already united to a Divine Person. . . . [T]he drops that were shed were not shed to the saving of souls.”

¹⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, new updated ed., The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 432. Brown’s opinion seems strange given Luke’s concern for legal observances in the infancy narrative, and Lk 2:21 alludes to the circumcision law given in Gn 17:12 and Lv 12:3.

The modern oblivion toward the Lord's circumcision requires that a renewed attention itself be a soteriological work. Accordingly, the subtitle of this essay, "Saving Mystery," connotes two aspects of the essay's purpose. By "Saving Mystery," it explores the soteriological implications of this mystery of Christ receiving in his flesh the sign of "the everlasting covenant" given to Abraham (Gn 17:7, 13, 19). Moreover, in pondering the circumcision of the Lord, we "save" its mystery from oblivion and perform the Marian task in theology of keeping these things in our heart (cf. Lk 2:19, 52). In both aspects, we can take St. Thomas Aquinas as our guide.

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Lord's Circumcision

St. Thomas quotes a favorite Aristotelian dictum when discussing the ceremonial precepts in the Old Law: "It belongs to the wise to order."¹⁹ In doing any study of the *Summa theologiae*, one would do well to step back first and see how the topic to be studied fits within Aquinas's ordered plan, a sapiential theology reflecting the Blessed Trinity's own work. Such a survey not only gives us something of Thomas's methodology, but can also inform us as to the theological significance that Thomas accorded a subject.²⁰

In the *tertia pars*, where Thomas treats our way back to God, he innovatively arranged his material on the Savior himself (1–59) into two categories: the mystery of the incarnation, according to which God became man for our salvation (1–26), and the things that our Savior, God incarnate, did and suffered (27–59).²¹ Distinguished by their formalities, these categories should not be seen as a sharp dichotomy between doctrinal Christology and soteriological scriptural narrative.²² Rather, knowing who the Lord Jesus is, one can see more clearly the significance of what the Savior did or underwent.²³

¹⁹ ST I–II, q. 102, a. 1: *cum sapientis sit ordinare*, taken from *Metaphysics* I, 2. Cf. St. Thomas's use of it to begin his *Summa contra Gentiles*.

²⁰ For an accessible overview of the *Summa theologiae*, see Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais, *Knowing the Love of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

²¹ See the prologue to the *tertia pars*. Vital to my interpretation is St. Thomas's phrase: *de his quae per ipsum Salvatorem nostrum, idest Deum incarnatum, sunt acta et passa*. We can see this pairing of action and passion in key moments of the *Summa's* soteriology.

²² See John F. Boyle, "The Twofold Division of St. Thomas's Christology in the *Tertia Pars*," *Thomist* 60 (1996): 439–47.

²³ In expounding the mystery of the incarnation in questions 1–26, Thomas did of course borrow from other sources besides the conciliar teachings. Of special note, Thomas gives the *sed contra* of ST III, q. 2, a. 5 from the office of the Feast

The emphasis on Christ's deeds and sufferings underscores the special meaning that the traditional axiom *Omnis Christi actio nostra est instructio* in St. Thomas's soteriology.²⁴ In St. Thomas's understanding of the Incarnate Word, "all Christ's actions and passions work instrumentally by the power of his divinity for human salvation."²⁵ The context for Aquinas's encompassing statement is *Summa theologiae* III, q. 48, a. 6's "whether the passion of Christ worked our salvation through the mode of efficiency?" Reflecting the *tertia pars*'s plan to treat the things that the Savior did and suffered, Thomas expands the horizon in the article, moving from the passion to all of Christ's life. Thus, in considering the passion of Christ, Thomas steps back to redescribe in terms of instrumental efficient causality all of Christ's acts and sufferings. This of course would include his circumcision. He repeats this expansion of looking back to all of Christ's life from the perspective of the cross when asking, "Whether we are liberated from sin through the passion of Christ?" In *Summa theologiae* III, q. 49, a. 1, Thomas writes that the passion of Christ liberated us from sin through efficient causality because his flesh was the instrument of divinity, "from which his passions and actions worked by divine power to expel sin."²⁶ This is another reason why *all* of the life of Christ, as recorded in the Gospel, has such importance in St. Thomas's soteriology.²⁷ As Aquinas knows, "the least suffering of Christ

of the Circumcision. Here Thomas writes that the Church sings, "*Animatum corpus assumens, de Virgine nasci dignatus est.*" I am grateful to Michael Dosch, OP, for this reference.

²⁴ Thomas quotes this phrase at least seventeen times. See Richard Schenk, "*Omnis Christi Actio Nostra est Instructio*," in *La Doctrine de la Révélation Divine de Saint Thomas d'Aquin, Studi Tomistici*, no. 37, Leo Elders, ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), 104–31, esp. 111. Most pertinent to this study, Thomas quotes it in treating objections to the circumcision of the Lord in *In IV Sent.* 1, 2, 5, 3 and *ST* III, q. 37, a. 1.

²⁵ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 6. Quia vero humanitas Christi est divinitatis instrumentum, ut supra dictum est, ideo ex consequenti omnes actiones et passiones Christi instrumentaliter operantur in virtute divinitatis ad salutem humanam. For understanding this, see Schenk, "Omnis Christi Actio," esp. 127–28.

²⁶ Tertio, per modum efficientiae, in quantum caro secundum quam Christus passionem sustinuit est instrumentum divinitatis, ex quo ejus passiones et actiones operantur in virtute divina ad epellendum peccatum.

²⁷ Aquinas also speaks of this in terms of merit. *ST* III, q. 8, a. 1, ad 1: Et ita actiones ipsius ex virtute divinitatis fuerunt nobis salutiferae, utpote gratiam in nobis causantes et per meritum et per efficientiam quondam. St. Thomas believes that Christ merited our salvation from the moment of his conception. Having dealt with this in *ST* III, q. 34, a. 3, Thomas repeats this important point in the context of how the merit of the passion removes obstacles from us. See *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2, ad 2.

would have sufficed for redeeming the human race from all sins.”²⁸ Yet, as Aquinas makes clear elsewhere, only with the Spirit’s work in our hearts can we be made capable to receive the doctrine of the Incarnate Word.²⁹

When beginning his treatment of the things that Christ did or suffered, St. Thomas distinguishes four considerations: things pertaining to Christ’s coming into the world, things pertaining to the course of his life in this world, things pertaining to his departing from this world, and things pertaining to his exaltation after this life.³⁰ Thomas then subdivides the first consideration into four areas: the conception of Christ, his nativity, his circumcision, and his baptism.³¹ Significantly, he ranks the circumcision alongside the three other mysteries of the greatest prominence in Christ’s life before his public ministry. In his article on the circumcision, he lists seven reasons—which astounds various commentators.³² These reasons that he systematized from his patristic research in the *Catena aurea* offer a fascinating beginning in re-searching the bodily reality of salvation in Israel’s Messiah. Moreover, Thomas’s attention to this bodily reality should not be overlooked from his rather complex development on circumcision in the Old Law.³³

²⁸ ST III, q. 46, a. 6, ad. 3. [*U*]na minima passio Christi suffecisset ad redimendum genus humanum ab omnibus peccatis. Yet, Thomas never mentions the blood that was drawn from the circumcision, a reason popular in the thirteenth century. Cf. the *Pie Pellicane* verse from the *Adoro te: cuius una stilla saluum facere/totum mundum quit ab omni scelere*.

²⁹ See Aquinas’s insight on the Spirit in his *In Ioannem* 14, lect. 6, and his Athanasian reading of Christ’s circumcision for our circumcision in the Spirit in ST III, q. 37, a. 3, ad. 2. Cf. his *In Romanos* 2, lect. 4.

³⁰ Prologue to ST III, q. 27.

³¹ Ibid. Note how Torrell, *Le Christ en Ses Mystères*, 41, recognizes Thomas’s positioning of circumcision—but Torrell does not follow that fourfold structure. Instead, his outline has the title for the first part’s fourth section: “*La manifestation du Christ à la naissance et au baptême*.”

³² For example, see Gilbert Narcisse, “Les enjeux épistémologiques de l’argument convenance selon saint Thomas d’Aquin,” in *Ordo Sapientiae et Amoris: Image et Message de Saint Thomas d’Aquin*, Carlos-Josaphat Pinto de Oliveira, ed. (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1993), 143–67, esp. 148–49. Narcisse suggests that Aquinas gathered all the possible interpretations for these seven reasons. However, besides consulting Aquinas’s *Catena aurea* on Lk 2:21, see the exposition of Lk 2:21 by the team of Hugh of St. Cher in the *Postilla* and the January 1 entry of the *Golden Legend* by Bl. James of Voragine.

³³ In *In IV Sent.* 1, 2, 4, 2, Aquinas believes that the sacrament of circumcision worked *ex opere operato* by the power of Christ’s passion. He later denies this unique status of circumcision in the Old Law, but also changes his mind as to the power of circumcision before Christ. In his mature position of ST III, q. 70, a. 4, Aquinas subscribes to the sacrament of circumcision the grace that removes all

From this basis in Aquinas, the next section relates the circumcision to Jesus' baptism. To be sure, the circumcision can be related to other mysteries in the Messiah's life, especially to the nativity through nuptial aspects of divine love, to the passion through aspects of sacrificial blood, and to the resurrection through aspects of renewal of the body on the eighth day.³⁴ Of course, the crucifixion and rising from the dead indisputably have prominence in the New Testament witness and in Aquinas's soteriological account.³⁵ Nevertheless, only the baptism will be discussed here so as to demonstrate one part of a broader appreciation for Jesus' body in his saving deeds and sufferings as Israel's Messiah. Moreover, the circumcision and the baptism are here studied only under the aspect of obedience.³⁶ This approach is inspired by St. Thomas's understanding of Jesus' perfect obedience for our salvation. Aquinas takes St. Paul's statement and applies it to Jesus: "I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law" (Gal 5:3).³⁷ Jesus is the Son of God sent by the Father to be born under the Law, that is, to be circumcised and bound to the whole Law, in order to give the freedom of adoption in the Spirit (cf. Gal 4:4). By his circumcision, therefore, Jesus wanted to be perfectly obedient to the Father through the whole Law—an obedience that indeed would fulfill all righteousness promised to Israel and given in mercy to the nations. As St. Paul says, "For I tell you that Christ became a minister of circumcision to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm

sin and enables one to resist all sin. See Richard Schenk, "Covenant Initiation: Thomas Aquinas and Robert Kilwardby on the Sacrament of Circumcision," in *Ordo Sapientiae et Amoris*, 555–93. See Aquinas's pivotal treatment from his commentary on Romans with analysis in Steven Boguslawski, *Aquinas's Commentary on Romans* 9–11 (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999), esp. 142–50. Also, in contrast to many scholastics, including Duns Scotus, Aquinas does not label Judaism a heresy. Aquinas furthermore accords the Jews of his time the right to practice the Mosaic Law (*ST* II–II, q. 10, a. 11). For the supersessionism of Duns Scotus not taken into account by Pomplun, "Israel and the Eucharist," see Scotus, *In IV Sent.* 3, 4, "Whether the Institution of Baptism Annuls (*evacuet*) Circumcision?"

³⁴ The five mysteries of the nativity, the circumcision, the baptism, the crucifixion, and the resurrection can be meditated as the mysteries of the New Adam's nakedness, as suggested to me by Lawrence J. Donohoo, OP, in his discussion of connecting Pope John Paul II's catechesis on Genesis with the life of Christ.

³⁵ Matthew Levering gives a lucid explanation of Aquinas's account of Christ's passion as fulfilling Israel's Torah. See his ch. 3, "The Cross of Jesus Christ," in *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation According to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 51–79.

³⁶ Obedience proceeds from the use of the will, and Aquinas holds that Jesus willed in his human nature from his conception. See *ST* III, q. 34, a. 2.

³⁷ See the use of Gal 5:3 in the preface to *ST* III, q. 37, and in *ST* III, q. 40, a. 4.

the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom 15:8–9).³⁸

The Circumcision and the Baptism: The Obedience for Fulfillment

When John the Baptist protests Christ's request for baptism, Christ replies, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15). Both in his circumcision and in his baptism, Christ demonstrates the perfection of obedience.³⁹ This was the perfect obedience of the New Adam who did not grasp at his equality with God, but emptied himself by the Father's will in the incarnation and remained faithful to that will even to death on the cross.⁴⁰ This obedience in both the circumcision and the baptism can be considered under four common characteristics: It initiates a new kind of kenotic life for the God-made-man that lasts until his death; it makes Christ's immediate subjection to his Father "mediated"; it makes him appear as a sinner in need of ablation; and it is undertaken not only in solidarity with sinners, but also in redemption for sinners. After discussing these four characteristics, this section will conclude by showing the relevance of the Thomistic account of Christ's circumcision as obedience to the Law for the contemporary debate on Jesus' faithfulness to the Law.

Kenotic Obedience of the Son of God until the Cross

Both the circumcision and the baptism of our Lord are kenotic acts of obedience, each inaugurating Christ into a new way of life that culminates in his death. In the circumcision, Christ was made obedient under the Law. He who as Lord spoke to Abraham, according to his divinity, and who was the promised descendant of Abraham, according to his humanity, received Abraham's circumcision in following and fulfilling Abraham's life-long obedience.⁴¹ He who spoke to Moses from the burning bush

³⁸ I have altered the RSV in order to give a more literal reading of the Greek for "minister of circumcision."

³⁹ Ambrose writes that Christ "had received circumcision to fulfill the Law, and had come to baptism to fulfill justice." See his letter to Justus 20/7 (written before 381) in *Saint Ambrose: Letters*, Boniface Ramsey, trans., Carol Harrison, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 105–14.

⁴⁰ Cf. Phil 2:8.

⁴¹ The Venerable Bede preaches, "For the one who now cries out in a terrible but saving way through the evangelist, 'Unless a man shall be reborn of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God,' is the one who previously cried out through his law, 'A male, the flesh of whose foreskin is uncircumcised, that soul

and was himself the end of the Law began to observe the Law.⁴² He, the Circumciser of all, who commanded his namesake Joshua to circumcise, was himself circumcised in the flesh.⁴³ A revelation in the Gospel especially serves to emphasize this divine kenosis in obedience. At the circumcision, “he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (Lk 2:21). As St. Bernard preaches, his divinity was proclaimed in this name of Jesus, the name of salvation revealed by heaven before his incarnation.⁴⁴ Thus his entire life of human obedience would give us the divine name of our salvation.

This account of the circumcision prepares for a theological understanding of the baptism. In the baptism, Christ was obedient in undertaking his public ministry. The four Gospel accounts agree that Christ’s encounter with John the Baptist at the Jordan marked the public beginning of a mission that culminated in his death. Looking back from the faith of the Church, it is indeed an astounding act of kenosis. He who was the Lord of sea and sky submitted himself to be washed in the Jordan. The Fathers loved to speak of this baptism as an epiphany of God’s Triune power.⁴⁵ Like heaven giving the name of Jesus in the infancy narrative,

shall vanish from his people because he has made my pact null and void.’” *Homilies on the Gospels*, bk. 1: *Advent to Lent*, Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, trans. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 105.

⁴² Catherine of Siena prays, “You who framed our law submit yourself as one obedient to the law to give us an example of humility. Let us who are your creation, then, be ashamed for being hard of heart, for not being obedient to this law while you, our God, obey it.” See Prayer 25 in *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, 2nd ed., Suzanne Noffke, trans. and ed. (San Jose: Authors Choice Press, 1983), 225–26.

⁴³ St. Ephrem sings,

“Let the eighth day that circumcised the Hebrews
confess Him Who commanded His namesake Joshua
to circumcise with flint the people whose body [was] circumcised
but whose heart was unbelieving from within.
Behold on the eighth day as a babe
the Circumciser of all came to circumcision.
Although the sign of Abraham was on His flesh,
the blind daughter of Sion has disfigured it.”

See his Hymn on the Nativity, 26 in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Kathleen E. McVey, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 208–9.

⁴⁴ Especially see his “First Sermon for the Circumcision,” *Sermons for the Seasons & Principal Festivals of the Year*, vol. 1, priest of Mount Melleray, trans. (Wesminster, MD: The Carroll Press, 1950), 423–29.

⁴⁵ See Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), esp. 45–49, 118–19.

the heavens open at the baptism, sending forth a dove to rest upon him as Christ's Sonship is heard in proclamation. Thus his entire public ministry of human obedience would reveal the Trinity for our salvation.

*The Immediate Subjection of Christ
to His Father is "Mediated"*

Jesus' circumcision and his baptism, as it is recorded in the synoptics, reveal that his obedience to the Father is "mediated."⁴⁶ That is, the Son's perfect obedience in his human will to the Father is expressed in obeying persons other than the Father. In the circumcision, we see Christ obedient to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph—just as he would be when he returns from the Temple at the age of twelve.⁴⁷ Moreover, Christ's circumcision professed his obedience to the Father through his observance of the Law. He who was always in union with the Father chose to have the relationship "mediated" by the Law, even in ceremonial laws. Accordingly, Christ was first circumcised, and then was presented in the Temple, observed the true meaning of the Law's Sabbath, went up to Jerusalem for the feasts, paid the Temple tax, etc. A homily from the Venerable John Henry Newman on the feast of the Circumcision of the Lord supports this interpretation. Evoking the words of Christ at this baptism, Newman offers a paraphrase from the perspective of Jesus: "It is becoming in Me, the expected Christ, to conform in all respects to all the rites and ceremonies of Judaism, to everything hitherto accounted sacred and binding."⁴⁸

The conforming of Christ's human will to another's appears again at the baptism when Christ submits himself to John the Baptist. The radical nature of this act appears in some critical scholarship that does not hesitate to speak of a "master-disciple relationship of John the Baptist and Jesus."⁴⁹ Moreover, the baptism ushers in the public ministry, the time of service to all. Christ shows himself to be the obedient Son of the Father by being the servant of all—in preaching, healing, and even dying as a slave. He expresses his obedience to the Father most fully by obediently becoming the victim of the unrighteous in order "to fulfill all righteousness."

⁴⁶ The fourth evangelist so stresses the direct relationship between the Son and the Father that this account has the Baptist's witness of the Spirit's descent without any mention of the baptism of Jesus.

⁴⁷ Lk 2:51.

⁴⁸ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 2, sermon 7, "Ceremonies of the Church," on the Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 69–78.

⁴⁹ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "John the Baptist and Jesus: History and Hypotheses," *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 359–74, esp. 371.

Looking Like a Sinner in Need of Ablution

Christ's obedience at the circumcision and baptism made him look like something that he was not: a sinner. Coming in the "likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3), Jesus appeared to need an ablution from something imperfect about him in his birth. From a Jewish point of view, all newborn males are imperfect until their foreskins are removed and are marked with the sign of the covenant.⁵⁰ From a Christian stance, all children inherit Adam's original sin, but Jewish boys had that original sin removed by circumcision.⁵¹ By being submitted to circumcision, Jesus looked like any other Jewish boy—his foreskin being a sign that he needed physical and spiritual healing.

His appearance as a sinner recurs on the banks of the Jordan River where John offers a baptism for repentance. Sinners came to John, confessing their sinfulness, but Jesus comes as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). He submits as if the river would cleanse his soul from various sins that he had committed. The sinless one thus receives not only the remedy for original sin at the circumcision, but also the baptism for actual sins at the Jordan. On both occasions, he commits himself totally to solidarity with sinners "yet without sinning" (Heb 4:15).

Redemption for the Children of Adam

Christ not only came to be with sinners, he came to redeem the children of Adam from their sins.⁵² As Paul says, "For our sake he made him to be

⁵⁰ Rabbinic Judaism bases this lack of completion in part on Gn 17:1: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless." By obeying God in the covenant of circumcision, Abraham can then be blameless. See *Genesis Rabbah* 46, 1. Also, the rabbis noted how God made creation in a way that needed further preparation from the part of human beings. As wheat needs grinding, so likewise does man need to be finished off. See *Genesis Rabbah* 11, 6. So serious is the covenant of circumcision that Gn 17:14 gives the punishment of being "cut off from his people" for a boy not to be circumcised.

⁵¹ See the excerpt of Pope Innocent III's letter "*Maiores Ecclesiae causas*," in DS 410. This follows the Venerable Bede: "For you of the brotherhood ought to be aware that, under the law, circumcision offered the same help of a health-giving treatment against the wound of original sin that now, in the time of revealed grace, baptism is wont to do, except that they [who were under the law] could not yet enter the gate of the heavenly kingdom, until by his coming he who gave the law could give his blessing." Homily 1.11 on the Gospels, 104–5.

⁵² In his Homily 3 on Luke, St. Cyril of Alexandria says, "in order that He might expiate the guilt of Adam's transgression, He showed Himself obedient and submissive in every respect to God the Father in our stead, for it is written, *That as through the disobedience . . .* (Rom 5:19)." *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, 55–58.

sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Both the circumcision and the baptism show Christ’s redemptive obedience at work. In his circumcision, Christ gave an example of obedience for sinners to imitate. This can be explained both in terms of obeying precepts at the proper time and in terms of obeying the precept to be circumcised in one’s heart.⁵³ Yet the Lord’s circumcision is not only an example for our spiritual circumcision. It also exercises efficient instrumental causality. That is, the divinity works through the obedience exercised in Christ’s humanity when he submitted to circumcision and it thereby causes within us the interior seal of the new covenant, the Holy Spirit within our hearts. Therefore, the one who was born under the Law redeems those under the Law, and indeed all people, by his perfect fulfillment of the Law.⁵⁴

Likewise, his baptism is an example of obedience for us to imitate by being baptized. But, as St. Ignatius of Antioch writes, Christ was baptized so that by his suffering the waters would be cleansed.⁵⁵ More than simply giving an example, Christ at his baptism instituted the sacrament of Christian baptism to forgive all sins and punishment due to sin. This sacrament works by the power of the Blessed Trinity so that others can receive the Spirit of adoption, have the heavens opened, and know God as their Father. St. Thomas explains that this causality instituted at Christ’s own baptism was operative immediately, but it became necessary for salvation only after the passion and resurrection of Christ.⁵⁶

Christ’s Obedience to the Law:

Aquinas and Historical Jesus Scholarship

The obedience of Jesus has always been of great concern in Christian thinking about salvation. Nevertheless, Christians have had varying atti-

⁵³ For St. Thomas’s teaching on obedience to precepts at the proper time, see *ST* III, q. 37, a. 1, ad. 2. Illustrating the link between circumcision of the foreskin and circumcision of the heart, Blessed Fra Angelico paired the command from Jer 4:4 with Lk 2:21 in his depiction of this mystery. See panel 4, “The Circumcision,” from Fra Angelico’s “The Scenes from the Life of Christ,” in Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud, *Fra Angelico: The Light of the Soul* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1986), fig. 166.

⁵⁴ Cf. St. Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*, in *The Works of Bonaventure, Mystical Opuscula*, José de Vinck, trans. (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1960), 107. “For this reason, also, He received the mark of circumcision: that, coming in the likeness of sinful flesh, he might condemn sin in the flesh, and become our Salvation, and our eternal Justification, by beginning his life with an act of humility, the root and guardian of all virtues.” Also, cf. Gal 3:10–18; 4:1–7.

⁵⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians* 18.

⁵⁶ *ST* III, q. 66, a. 2.

tudes toward Jesus' obedience to the Law, symbolized by the circumcision. For much of historical scholarship on Jesus in the nineteenth century, the abandonment of Christian dogmatic readings did not yield portraits of a Jewish Jesus obedient to the Law—but a man who sought to overturn Judaism. The Jewish scholar David Novak summarizes:

[T]he new, more secular emphasis on Jesus's ethical teaching often led to a new denigration of Judaism as "legalism," as opposed to the Christian ethics of love. . . . In this move, the influence of Kant's subordination of religious doctrine to practical (ethical) reason is apparent and was often explicitly acknowledged. In following this line, liberal Protestant thinkers had a double-pointed prong with which to put down Judaism and Roman Catholicism on the grounds that they were both essentially legalistic ("heteronomous" in the pejorative Kantian sense).⁵⁷

Countering this modern rejection of Jewish particularity, a recent trend in historical Jesus scholarship places him more firmly as a Jew within the complexity of Israel's movements and peoples of two millennia ago. Exegetes such as Geza Vermes, Paula Fredriksen, and E. P. Sanders are some of the most influential writers in English to focus on Jesus as an obedient Jew—albeit with different emphases and understandings.⁵⁸ Here, the exegetical work of Sanders can be fruitfully compared with the theological perspective of Aquinas on Jesus' obedience to the Law.

In the influential study *Jesus and Judaism*, Sanders devotes a chapter to the Law.⁵⁹ Sanders notes that "many New Testament scholars . . . have concluded that Jesus explicitly and consciously opposed the law."⁶⁰ Having reviewed the evidence concerning the temple, burial of father, relations with sinners, divorce, Sabbath, handwashing, and food, Sanders concludes, "We have found one instance in which Jesus, in effect, demanded transgression of the law: the demand to the man whose father had died. Otherwise the material in the Gospels reveals no transgression by Jesus."⁶¹ Sanders thinks that Jesus accepted obedience to the Law as the norm, and

⁵⁷ Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, 75.

⁵⁸ Geza Vermes has done considerable work in many books to show Jesus' Jewishness. Fredriksen pokes fun at the various exegetes that show Jesus as disobedient to Jewish Law for their concerns of feminism, radical egalitarianism, politics of compassion, or antinationalism. See her *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 197–214. For E. P. Sanders, see esp. his *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁵⁹ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, ch. 9, 245–69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 246. Sanders discusses the positions of G. Bornkamm and W. G. Kümmel, in *ibid.*, 30f and 36f.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

he posits the fact that Jesus' followers did not know Jesus to have directly opposed the law.⁶² In fact, within Sanders's various categories of historical probability, he places the statement that Jesus "did not explicitly oppose the law" to be in the highest category, certain or virtually certain.⁶³ However, Sanders situates Jesus within Jewish restoration eschatology so that Jesus did not see the Law as the definitive and final act of God. Jesus' own prophecy concerning the destruction and rebuilding of the temple especially shows that.⁶⁴ Therefore, Sanders is sympathetic to those who say that Jesus exercised a sovereign freedom over the law.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, this freedom over the Law did not mean that Jesus advocated a disobedience to the Law.

What is striking is the affinity between Sanders's historical research and Aquinas's theology about Jesus' observance of the Law. Aquinas holds that Christ was conformed to all the precepts of the Law, for he was circumcised to express the intent of keeping the whole Law.⁶⁶ According to Thomas, precisely *by observing the Law* Jesus showed that its consummation and end come in himself.⁶⁷ Some frequently cite Jesus' controversial acts on the Sabbath to show that he revolted from the Law. Aquinas sees it otherwise. In relation to the Sabbath, Thomas gives three reasons to support how Jesus did not disobey the Law: The prohibition to work does not forbid divine work, but human work; the prohibition does not exclude works necessary for health; and the prohibition does not pertain to the worship of God. For Aquinas, Jesus is completely obedient—as the Savior who ushers in the new covenant of grace to fulfill the Law. While Sanders and Aquinas certainly approach the question differently, they come to a substantial agreement—in opposition to the nineteenth-century historical Jesus scholarship mentioned above by Novak.

In the one case that Sanders finds Jesus transgressing the Law, that of not letting the disciple bury his father, Aquinas has another perspective. In a sense, Aquinas uses the methods of the rabbis known by Sanders.⁶⁸ Like them, he interprets the different levels and meanings of scriptural passages without saying that the Law is wrong or that it was disobeyed.

⁶² Ibid., 325 and 336.

⁶³ Ibid., 326.

⁶⁴ Sanders thinks that the saying of Mt 26:61 and Mk 14:58 is probably authentic; see Sanders, *ibid.*, 251 and 61–76.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 249 and 267. Sanders mentions James D. G. Dunn.

⁶⁶ ST III, q. 40, a. 4. Aquinas developed his understanding of this after writing *In IV Sent.* 1, 2, 2, 1. In his earlier position, Aquinas thought that Jesus showed himself *supra legem* in such things as the observance of the Sabbath and touching the leper.

⁶⁷ This is the second reason in the corpus of ST III, q. 40, a. 4.

⁶⁸ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 248.

In fact, he shows the true meaning of the fullness of the Law through a citation of Old Testament texts. Commenting upon Matthew 8:21–22, Thomas knows that the burial of one's father is a precept regarding the honor owed to a father.⁶⁹ Yet, he cites 1 Kings 19:20 about Elijah's call of Elisha. Elisha stipulates, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Elijah replies, "Go back again," only to find that then Elisha slaughters his oxen and follows Elijah. The Law thus gives an example of the obedience of discipleship being a higher order than familial obedience. Moreover, Aquinas quotes again from the Old Testament, this time from Psalm 45:10, "Forget your people and your father's house." Not only is Jesus therefore obedient to the Law, but also he calls his disciples to the fullness of that obedience, which places God above obligations to family. By offering Psalm 45 as his support Aquinas further alludes to divine marital love as the call for obedience. Psalm 45 is a royal marriage psalm that Aquinas understands as the marriage of Christ and the Church, begun when the Son of God united to himself a human nature.⁷⁰ In the human obedience that has Jesus as the saving exemplar, Christian disciples can entrust themselves completely to the divine Bridegroom whose love is made present in that same Christ our Lord, circumcised and obedient for our salvation.⁷¹

Accordingly, Aquinas is able to give a well-argued scriptural account for the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaching:

Jesus, Israel's Messiah and therefore the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, was to fulfill the Law by keeping it in its all-embracing detail—according to his own words, down to "the least of these commandments." . . . The

⁶⁹ In *Matt.* 8, lect. 3. Although the comments on Mt 5:11–6:8 and 6:14–19 do not come from Aquinas, the rest of the commentary is a *reportatio* of Thomas's teaching. See Gilles Emery's analysis in Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1: *The Person and His Work*, Robert Royal, trans. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 339.

⁷⁰ In his commentary on Ps 45(44), Thomas writes, "Est ergo materia hujus Psalmi de quibusdam sponsalibus Christi et Ecclesiae, quae quidem primo initiata fuerunt quando Filius Dei univit sibi naturam humanam in utero virginali: Psal. XVIII: *Et ipse tanquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo*. Unde eadem est materia hujus Psalmi et libri qui dicitur Cantica canticorum." For a beautiful translation of this commentary, see *Thomas Aquinas: The Gifts of the Spirit*, Benedict M. Ashley, ed., Matthew Rzeckowski, trans. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 101–33.

⁷¹ Jews and Christians made many connections between circumcision and marriage through the Lord's covenant, as the rite does have an anthropological basis in preparation for marriage. For a *locus classicus* in Jewish and Christian meditations, see Ex 4:24–26.

perfect fulfillment of the Law could be the work of none but the divine legislator, born subject to the Law in the Person of the Son.⁷²

The Law's fulfillment culminates in the saving passion, where Jesus offers himself as the supreme sacrifice in obedient love.⁷³ However, the fulfillment of the passion should not be seen outside of the context of Jesus' life-long observance of the Law, which he undertook in the circumcision. Without this perfect bodily fulfillment by Jesus of the Law, the Christian claim to salvation *in the body of Christ* seems disconnected from the everlasting covenant of circumcision.⁷⁴

Concluding with the Questions and Beauty of Saving Mystery

Recalling part of Rahner's question cited at the beginning of this essay, "What do we hear of Christ's Circumcision?," we might answer: Not much, but surely a lot can be said. A study of the Lord's circumcision can reach beyond the limitations of certain modern preconceptions that have dismissed this mystery. Such a study can recover a profound awareness of this mystery's contributions to our salvation, an awareness exhibited in St. Thomas's theology.

Yet ours is an agenda for the needs of beginning the third Christian millennium. Applications from this mystery can be drawn through asking the right questions. Can the circumcision of Jesus, the enfleshed Son of God, help us better to understand the everlasting covenant of Genesis 17 in a fulfilled, rather than superseded, sense? After a long custom of decrying Jewish circumcision after Christ as deadly to the soul,⁷⁵ can a renewed appreciation for Jesus' circumcision now give us a more refined outlook on circumcision today? Can the circumcision of Jesus aid us in developing a theology of Christ's body that sees him as the New Adam, naked and without shame for our salvation? Can this mystery enable us to re-examine our bodily appropriation of salvation, especially in the "circumcision of Christ"

⁷² See the treatment of Jesus and the Law in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 577–582; cf. Mt 5:17–19.

⁷³ Cf. Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 51–79.

⁷⁴ Note Levering's astute observation in *ibid.*, 88: "Aquinas's view that one can continue to fulfill the laws, but now according to the new meaning and fullness that Christ gives them, might seem to be relativizing the laws by 'spiritualizing' them. Yet far from 'spiritualizing' the laws, Christ's passion—and human beings' participation in Christ's passion through the sacraments and through the life of charity—gives a radically *embodied* fullness to the laws." [original emphasis].

⁷⁵ Cf. Augustine, Epist. 82, to Jerome.

received in baptism (Col 2:11)? Can Jesus' circumcision contribute to feminist questions about the salvation of women?

For a final meditation that can advance our re-searching, this essay offers John Milton's poem on the circumcision of the Lord.⁷⁶ Perhaps this poet of Puritan England can rescue us from a lingering puritanism that in part caused the obliteration of the circumcision's theological remembrance. It demonstrates that by beauty we can better behold the circumcision within the mysteries of Christ.

Ye flaming Powers, and winged Warriours bright,
That erst with Musick, and triumphant song
First heard by happy watchful Shepherds ear,
So sweetly sung your Joy the Clouds along
Through the soft silence of the list'ning night;
Now mourn, and if sad share with us to bear
Your fiery essence can distill no tear,
Burn in your sighs, and borrow
Seas wept from our deep sorrow,
He who with all Heav'ns heraldry whileare
Enter'd the world, now bleeds to give us ease;
Alas, how soon our sin
Sore doth begin
His Infancy to sease!
O more exceeding love or law more just?
Just law indeed, but more exceeding love!
For we by rightfull doom remediles
Were lost in death, till he that dwelt above
High thron'd in secret bliss, for us frail dust
Emptied his glory, ev'n to nakednes;
And that great Cov'nant which we still transgress
Intirely satisfi'd,
And the full wrath beside
Of vengeful Justice bore for our excess,
And seals obedience first with wounding smart
This day, but O ere long
Huge pangs and strong
Will pierce more neer his heart.

N&V

⁷⁶ John Milton, "Upon the Circumcision," *The Student's Milton*, rev. ed., Frank Allen Patterson, ed. (New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1946), 18–19.

