CUT OFF FROM THE ASSEMBLY

The Logic of Paul's Wish in Galatians 5:12

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NT5150 Greek Exegesis

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December 2, 2026

Longenecker calls Galatians 5:12 “the crudest and rudest of all Paul’s extant statements,” and the question is whether the wish interrupts the argument or completes it.[1] The sentence reads ὄφελον καὶ ἀποκόψονται οἱ ἀναστατοῦντες ὑμᾶς, “would that those who are unsettling you would even be cut off.” The text is 5:12, the climax of the pericope 5:7–12 and Paul’s last word to the agitators before the exhortation of 5:13 begins. Verses 7–11 are read as the cotext that builds to it, and the unit 5:2–12 as the setting where its language of separation begins. The wish belongs to the pericope it closes and to a pattern that runs through the letter, in which those who impose the cut of circumcision are themselves cut off. Paul places them under the anathema of 1:8–9, the unit speaks of separation from Christ in 5:4, the troubler bears judgment in 5:10, and in 5:12 the verb of castration carries the sentence of exclusion that Deuteronomy attaches to it. The word means what it says, and the wish means more than the word.

Structure and Location in the Letter

Galatians 5:2–12 sits between the argument of chapters 3 and 4 and the exhortation that begins at 5:13. Freedom brackets it (5:1; 5:13).[2] Within the unit, 5:2–6 states the consequence of circumcision for the Galatians, and the pericope 5:7–12 states the consequence for those who press it on them.

The pericope also looks back to the opening of the letter. As deSilva observes, 5:7–12 “resonates strongly with 1:6–9, forming something of an inclusio around the main body of the

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[1]Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 234, quoted in James R. Edwards, “Galatians 5:12: Circumcision, the Mother Goddess, and the Scandal of the Cross,” *NovT* 53 (2011): 321 n. 14.

[2]Edwards, “Galatians 5:12,” 333, notes that the earliest chapter divisions in Codex Alexandrinus already mark 5:2–12 as a unit.

letter."[3] "The one calling you" (5:8) answers "the one who called you" (1:6). "The one troubling you" (5:10) answers "some who trouble you" (1:7). And "he will bear the judgment" (5:10) answers "let him be accursed" (1:8–9). Betz, who reads 5:12 as a joke, says of 5:10 that the agitators "fall under the curse of 1:8–9."[4] The judgment of 5:10 is the anathema of 1:8–9 restated, and 5:12 follows directly from it.

Inside 5:7–12 the movement is marked by the text's own joints. Verse 7 opens without a connective, Ἐτρέχετε καλῶς. Verses 10 and 11 both begin with an emphatic ἐγώ, the second with δέ, setting Paul over against the troubler, who is introduced by the adversative ὁ δὲ ταράσσων in 10b. Verse 12 again has no connective, and the wish stands apart. The Galatians were running well and someone hindered them (5:7). The persuasion that hindered them did not come from God (5:8), and it spreads like leaven (5:9). Paul is confident about the Galatians and certain about the troubler's judgment (5:10). His own persecution proves he does not preach circumcision, since circumcision would nullify the offense of the cross (5:11). Two verbal links tie the pericope to the unit and to Paul's wider usage. The verb of 5:11, κατήργηται ("has been nullified"), is the verb of 5:4, κατηργήθητε ("you were severed"), so circumcision nullifies in both places, as in 5:4 the Galatians are severed from Christ and in 5:11 the cross is emptied of its offense. And the proverb of 5:9, μικρὰ ζύμη ὅλον τὸ φύραμα ζυμοῖ, appears word for word in 1

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[3]David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 432, with the parallels listed at n. 76.

[4]Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 267.

Cor 5:6, in a passage that ends with Deuteronomy's formula of expulsion, "Purge the evil person from among you" (1 Cor 5:13).[5]

Textual Criticism

The form of ἀποκόψονται has to be secured first. The sixth edition of the United Bible Societies text and its textual commentary record no variant in 5:7–12, and the apparatus is clean.[6] The commentaries report a few, and one bears on exegesis.[7] In 5:12 P46 reads ἄρα ("then") in place of ὄφελον, and P46 with D F G read the aorist subjunctive ἀποκόψωνται in place of the future indicative ἀποκόψονται. No other witness joins them, and the rest of the tradition reads the indicative.[8] The variant changes the construction of the wish, not the sense of the verb.

Moo notes that ὄφελον "is invariably followed by the indicative rather than the subjunctive in Biblical Greek," which could make the subjunctive the harder reading, but he judges the witnesses too few.[9] Two observations answer him. P46 is the sole witness to ἄρα, and the word stands at the head of the preceding sentence, ἄρα κατήργηται (5:11), so its appearance

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[5]Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 324–25, notes the 1 Cor 5:6 parallel and its church-discipline setting, and adds that Paul does not command expulsion in Galatians, "probably because they are not members of the church but have come from the outside." The point here is only that the proverb's other Pauline use concerns removal from the congregation.

[6]*The Greek New Testament*, ed. H. A. G. Houghton et al., 6th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2025), ad loc.; H. A. G. Houghton, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion to the Sixth Edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2025), has no entry for 5:7–12.

[7]In 5:7 א* A B omit the article before ἀληθείᾳ, and F G with some Latin witnesses add μηδενὶ πείθεσθε ("obey no one") after πείθεσθαι, filling an abrupt ellipsis; the shorter text is original. In 5:9 D* and part of the Latin tradition read δολοῖ ("adulterates") for ζυμοῖ ("leavens"), as D* does at 1 Cor 5:6; ζυμοῖ is the harder reading. *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. Barbara Aland et al., 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 587 (hereafter NA28); F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 233; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 191 n. 19; deSilva, *Galatians*, 431; Betz, *Galatians*, 266 n. 129.

[8]NA28, 587. The NIGTC and Hermeneia notes omit F: Bruce, *Galatians*, 234; Betz, *Galatians*, 270 n. 168.

[9]Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 338.

in 5:12 is best explained as assimilation to the line above. The earliest manuscript had thus already rewritten the opening of the verse, and its subjunctive belongs to that rewritten sentence rather than to Paul's, and without ὄφελον there is no wish in P46 to weigh. D F G keep ὄφελον with the subjunctive, and no other witness does. The two forms differ by one letter, o against ω. The future indicative stands.

Lexical and Syntactical Analysis

Three features of 5:12 carry the argument: the particle, the conjunction, and the verb. The particle ὄφελον is a fixed form that introduces a wish, and BDAG takes it as probably a participle with ἐστίν originally understood rather than an augmentless aorist.[10] Mathewson and Emig observe that the indicative "is used to express a wish or desire far more frequently than the optative or the hortatory subjunctive," usually through the vocabulary of the clause.[11] Galatians 5:12 fits that description. The wish is carried by ὄφελον, and the indicative presents it as a real wish.[12]

The conjunction καί is intensive, "even."[13] It points back to the circumcision language of 5:2–3, so that those who cut should go further and be cut off.[14]

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[10]Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 743 (hereafter BDAG).

[11]David L. Mathewson and Elodie Ballantine Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for Students of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 163.

[12]Whether the wish is attainable is disputed. BDAG, 743, and Moo, *Galatians*, 337 n. 3, call it unattainable; Bruce, *Galatians*, 238; Betz, *Galatians*, 270; and Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 195 n. 27, hold that ὄφελον with the future need not be so in Koine. deSilva, *Galatians*, 440 n. 110, calls the question "not germane," and Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 195, notes that compliance "was not to be expected in any event."

[13]Moo, *Galatians*, 338; Edwards, "Galatians 5:12," 334.

[14]Betz, *Galatians*, 270, grants that the verb may refer "to the similar language in 5:2–3."

The verb ἀποκόψονται is future middle. Mathewson and Emig caution that the reflexive sense "is not the essential or most common meaning of the middle voice" and that translating reflexively "should generally be avoided by the Greek student unless context clearly warrants it." The middle marks the subject as affected by the action.[15] Context here does warrant a reflexive leaning. The circumcision references in 5:2, 3, 6, and 11 make the cutting physical, and the agitators are the ones who hold the knife. But the middle does not decide who performs the act. Bruce translates "have themselves made eunuchs," and deSilva paraphrases the wish as a hope that the rival teachers would turn "to performing their surgeries on themselves."[16] Both the reflexive middle (deSilva) and the causative middle (Bruce) are within the grammar of a form that marks the subject as affected without specifying the agent.[17] Wallace lists 5:12 under the causative middle, "have themselves castrated," and notes that it lies "very close to the permissive middle," where consent "was wrung from the subject."[18] The voice bears only on that question, who wields the knife, and leaves it open. The exclusion sense is a separate matter, and it comes from the cotext and from Deuteronomy, not from the voice.

The sense of the verb is physical in every New Testament occurrence. Mark 9:43 and 45 cut off a hand and a foot, John 18:10 and 26 an ear, Acts 27:32 the ropes of a lifeboat, and only Gal 5:12 leaves the object unstated.[19] An unstated object with this verb, in a paragraph about

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[15]Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 148–50.

[16]Bruce, *Galatians*, 238; deSilva, *Galatians*, 440 n. 110.

[17]Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 148–49.

[18]Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 423–24.

[19]Edwards, "Galatians 5:12," 334–35: Mark 9:43, 45; John 18:10, 26; Acts 27:32; Gal 5:12.

circumcision, points to the excision the lexicons record. BDAG lists ἀποκόπτω under "to cut so as to make a separation" and, with private parts implied, "make a eunuch of, castrate."[20] Louw and Nida reach the same place, noting that in 5:12 it "probably refers to severe mutilation of the penis or possibly to castration."[21] Paul makes the same move in Phil 3:2–3, κατατομή ("mutilation") for περιτομή ("circumcision").[22] Stählin draws the consequence that there is "no reason to weaken the sense to 'separation,'" by which he rejects replacing the literal sense, not adding to it.[23] The word means castration.

Yet the unit has been speaking of separation before it speaks of cutting. Neither verb in 5:4 is a cutting word, but both denote severance. κατηργήθητε ἀπὸ Χριστοῦ ("you were severed from Christ") uses καταργέω with ἀπό, which Ridderbos glosses "to be cut off from relations with someone or something,"[24] and ἐξεπέσατε ("you have fallen away") takes a genitive of separation. The verse addresses the Galatians, and its δικαιοῦσθε is conative, "you who are trying to be justified," so the separation language of the unit begins with them before it reaches the agitators.[25] What 5:4 supplies is the category of separation, and what 5:12 supplies is the

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[20]BDAG, 113.

[21]Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1:§19.18 n. 4.

[22]BDAG, 528.

[23]Gustav Stählin, "κοπετός, κόπτω, ἀποκόπτω, ἐγκοπή, ἐγκόπτω, ἐκκόπτω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 457.

[24]Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 189 n. 11.

[25]Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 189 n. 9.

physical image of it.[26] περιτέμνω/περιτομή (5:2, 3, 6, 11) runs through the unit, and ἀποκόπτω is where the category and the image meet. Paul does not draw the inference, but the unit invites it, for if receiving circumcision severs the Galatians from Christ, those who impose it can expect no less.

The phrase οἱ ἀναστατοῦντες ("those who are unsettling") is an articular present participle used as a noun, and its imperfective aspect pictures the agitators in the thick of their work.[27] The verb is political. In Acts 17:6 and 21:38 it describes people who stir up riots and revolts.[28] It is stronger than ταράσσω ("trouble") in 5:10 and 1:7,[29] and it names the agitators by what they do to the assembly, which is what the wish would remove them from.

Historical Context

The castration sense had a referent in Paul's world. The Mother of the Gods had her chief Anatolian sanctuary at Pessinus, a temple state of sacred slaves. Her devotees included the galli, young men who in the frenzy of her rites castrated themselves and afterward wore women's dress.[30] Elliott notes that "it would be difficult, in fact, to find any location that could be referred

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[26]A further link has been proposed in 5:7, where ἐνέκοψεν ("cut in, hindered") is built on κόπτω ("cut"). Hays and Schreiner hear a pun on circumcision; Bruce calls it "far-fetched," and Moo says the verb "does not naturally suggest such a connotation." Schreiner, *Galatians*, 324, quoting Hays; Bruce, *Galatians*, 233; Moo, *Galatians*, 333 n. 1. The argument here does not depend on it.

[27]deSilva, *Galatians*, 441 n. 116; on the substantival participle, Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 208.

[28]BDAG, 72.

[29]Bruce, *Galatians*, 238.

[30]Susan M. Elliott, "Choose Your Mother, Choose Your Master: Galatians 4:21–5:1 in the Shadow of the Anatolian Mother of the Gods," *JBL* 118 (1999): 674–75.

to as Galatia where devotion to the overseeing Mother of the Gods in some local form was not well known in Paul's era."[31] The allusion works on either view of the letter's destination.

Betz reads 5:12 as a diatribe joke. The joke does not imply that the Galatians were under the influence of the galli, since Paul uses the public disgust with the rite to discredit his opponents.[32] Ridderbos sees the force of it when he writes that Paul "puts the circumcision of the Gentiles on the same level as the most abysmally sunken pagan superstition."[33] The setting sharpens the wish without carrying the argument.

Deuteronomy 23 and Galatians 1:8–9

The category of separation has a source, and the letter has already pointed to it. Paul quotes Deuteronomy's curse texts twice in Galatians 3, Deut 27:26 at 3:10 and Deut 21:23 at 3:13, so a Deuteronomic frame for the curse is already established in the letter, and he has already turned the law on its advocates: "you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" (4:21). Deuteronomy 23 against the agitators follows the same pattern. Deuteronomy 23:1 reads, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD" (ESV). The Septuagint, where the verse is 23:2, has ἀποκεκομμένος, the perfect passive participle of Paul's verb, and ἐκκλησία κυρίου, "assembly of the Lord."[34] McConville identifies the excluded as "people who have been ritually mutilated in the context of

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[31]Elliott, "Choose Your Mother," 674.

[32]Betz, *Galatians*, 270.

[33]Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 195.

[34]Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, eds., *Septuaginta*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), Deut 23:2. Bruce, *Galatians*, 238, notes the law: "A eunuch is called ἀποκεκομμένος in Dt. 23:1 (LXX), where he is debarred from the ἐκκλησία κυρίου."

the worship of other gods."[35] The law Paul's verb recalls bars from the assembly men who cut themselves for another god. Isaiah 56:3–5 welcomes the eunuch and Acts 8:27–39 baptizes one, but McConville observes that the Isaiah eunuch is probably not marked by a foreign cult, a different case from Deut 23:1.[36] Paul uses ἐκκλησία of the Galatian churches and of the church of God (1:2, 13, 22), and just before the unit he has quoted Scripture's own exclusion text, "Cast out the slave woman and her son" (4:30; Gen 21:10). An ἐκκλησία from which the ἀποκεκομμένος is barred is already in view when 5:12 is reached, and since that ἐκκλησία is "the church of God" (1:13), the wish reaches the agitators whether or not they were ever members of a Galatian congregation.

The opening of the letter is tied to the pericope by the inclusio already noted, and its curse carries the same sense of separation. In 1:8–9 Paul twice says ἀνάθεμα ἔστω, "let him be accursed." BDAG glosses Paul's use of the word in Rom 9:3 as "accursed (and therefore separated) from Christ,"[37] and Calvin reads 1:9 as instruction to regard such preachers as outside the fellowship of the church.[38]

The agitators are placed under the curse in 1:8–9. The unit speaks of separation from Christ in 5:4, and though that verse addresses the Galatians, it supplies the category in which the agitators' fate will be stated. The troubler will bear the judgment in 5:10, which Betz and deSilva identify with the curse of chapter 1. In 5:12 Paul names the end of it in the agitators' own

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[35]J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC 5 (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 348.

[36]McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 348, 353.

[37]BDAG, 63.

[38]John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854; repr., Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 34.

vocabulary. Those who demand the cut as the entrance to God's people should go the whole way and receive the cut that Torah itself makes the mark of exclusion. The wish carries a verdict that 1:8–9 and 5:10 have already pronounced, that the cut they impose as the way in is, for them, the way out. Stählin reaches the same result, finding that Paul "is suggesting a radical surpassing of circumcision that would bring exclusion from the community instead of entrance into it, an exclusion which is already the true situation."[39]

Two objections remain. Ridderbos grants that 5:12 is a malediction but denies that Deuteronomy is in view. "The apostle does not have in mind the self-mutilation which occurred in ancient Israel and which brought the threat of banishment from the church of the Old Testament (Deut. 23:1), but rather sacral castration which was practised in some pagan religions and cults."[40] The either/or fails. McConville identifies Deut 23:1 as aimed at pagan cultic mutilation, the very practice Ridderbos invokes. Ridderbos's own conclusion, that Paul sets Gentile circumcision on the level of pagan superstition, is the premise from which exclusion follows.

Betz objects from the opposite side. Stählin's reading, he says, is a "theologizing of a joke" and "is itself amusing."[41] But Betz has already written that the troubler of 5:10 falls under the curse of 1:8–9. The theologizing is Paul's, one verse earlier. The question is what the caricature says about the ritual, and the pericope answers that the cut they impose cuts them off.

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[39]Stählin, "κόπτω," 457.

[40]Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 194–95.

[41]Betz, *Galatians*, 270 n. 171.

Both senses have a long history.[42] Edwards, surveying this history, concludes that the image "includes both physical and metaphorical senses," though the metaphorical sense he names is being cut off "from the scandal of the cross," not from the assembly.[43] Calvin names the assembly when he writes, "They tear the church for the sake of circumcision: I wish they were entirely cut off."[44] The letter's own pattern is what makes the sense of exclusion the culmination rather than an added nuance.

Conclusion

Galatians 5:12 is not an interruption. The particle ὄφελον introduces a wish that the indicative presents as real. The conjunction καί points back to the cutting of 5:2–3. The middle voice of ἀποκόψονται leaves open whether the agitators wield the knife or have it wielded on them. The unit has been speaking of separation since 5:4, the letter has been speaking of the curse since 1:8, and Deuteronomy supplies the law in which castration and exclusion are one event. Read in light of 1:8–9, 5:10, and LXX Deut 23:2, ἀποκόψονται carries both senses at once: the agitators who cut should be cut, and being cut, they are cut off.

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[42]Erasmus and the Reformers read the verse as a counterpart to Deut 23:1: Edwards, "Galatians 5:12," 321. Luther's 1545 Bible renders the verb "ausgerottet," rooted out, though his 1519 commentary followed Jerome in taking it of castration: Betz, *Galatians*, 270 n. 164.

[43]Edwards, "Galatians 5:12," 335–36.

[44]Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 157.

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