

THE ORIGINS OF INFANT CIRCUMCISION IN ISRAEL

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Jewish law requires each healthy boy to be circumcised on his eighth day; as a rule only converts undergo the more traumatic adult circumcision (Mišnāh Gērīm 2:5). Of the many peoples that practice ritual circumcision, however, few besides the Jews and those influenced by them perform the operation upon infants. More typically, males are circumcised in boyhood or early adolescence.¹ It is therefore appropriate to explore the reasons for this unusual Israelite rite. Though the Bible traces the practice to the days of the patriarchs, the relevant passages are

1. See Gray (1913, p. 662) for a still serviceable summary of ages of circumcision in various cultures. Puberty seems to be the most common time. Josephus (*Antiquities* 1.214 [ed. Thackeray, p. 106]) and Eusebius (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 6.11.69 [ed. des Places IV, p. 64]) reported that the Arabs of their day circumcised at thirteen, but these scholars may not have relied on contemporary reports but rather on the circumcision of Ishmael at that age (Gen 17:25). Later Muslims have circumcised at a variety of ages; see Margoliouth (1913) and Wensinck (1927). Other circumcised Near Eastern peoples include the Egyptians, the Edomites, the Ammonites and the Moabites (Jer 9:24), though in Hellenistic time the Ammonites and Edomites may have abandoned the custom; see Judith 14:10 and Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.257–258, 318 (ed. Marcus, pp. 356, 386). Herodotus (2.104 [ed. Godley, I, p. 392]) also said that the Ethiopians and Phoenicians were circumcised; in the case of the latter he is corroborated by Aristophanes (*Birds* 505–507 [ed. Rogers, p. 64]), as is noted by Meyer (1909). Moreover, the Phoenician Sanchuniathon, paraphrased by Philo of Byblos, in turn quoted by Eusebius, described the god Kronos as having sacrificed his son and then circumcising himself and his retainers (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 1.10.33 [ed. des Places I, p. 198]). This legend may well be the Byblian etiology for circumcision. Only for the Egyptians do we have any notion of the age of circumcision—it was performed upon some, but not all, boys at a variety of ages; see de Wit (1973) and note that Philo (*Questions and Answers on Genesis* 3.47 [ed. Marcus, p. 241]) gave the age of Egyptian circumcision as fourteen. The practice is of indeterminate antiquity, but already in the early third millennium three bronze figurines from the 'Amuq Valley in Syria are circumcised (Sasson 1966). For descriptions of circumcision in Africa and Madagascar see Bugeau (1911); Soury-Lavergne, de la Devèze (1912); Maes (1924); Vergiat (1951, pp. 68–90). A recent analysis of circumcision in Madagascar and its changing significance is Bloch (1986).

found in the priestly document, which is the latest (middle first millennium B.C.E.²) of the three extensive tetrateuchal sources. Genesis 17:10–14 describes Yahweh's³ first revelation to Abram in P:

¹⁰This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your descendants:⁴ each of your males shall be circumcised. ¹¹When you circumcise your foreskins it will be a covenantal sign between me and you. ¹²Each of your males shall always be circumcised eight days old, and also the houseborn slave and the purchased slave who is a foreigner not of your progeny. ¹³Every single houseborn slave and purchased slave shall be circumcised, so that my covenant be in your penes⁵ forever. ¹⁴But as for any uncircumcised male that will not circumcise his foreskin,⁶ that individual will be cut off from his people,⁷ for he will have violated my covenant.

Abram, now renamed Abraham (v. 5), "that very day" (v. 26) fulfills the deity's command, circumcising all his slaves, himself and Ishmael, his

2. The precise date of P is still unsettled. To my knowledge, there has been no recent systematic defense of the "consensus" post-exilic or exilic dates (but see the brief comments of Seow, 1984, p. 189, n. 19), while several writers have lately argued for a pre-exilic date; see, *inter alios*, Rendsburg (1980), Haran (1981), Zevit (1982), Hurvitz (1982), Milgrom (1983, pp. x–66) and Friedman (1981, 1987a).

3. This is what the deity is called in Gen 17:1, despite the fact that the context is P. There is no convincing explanation for the anomaly; the conjecture of Fox (1974, p. 586, n. 57) that "P can use the name Yahweh even before Ex., VI when speaking in his own voice (and thereby not violating his theory of the revelation of the name only in the time of Moses)" is as satisfying as any, though one would expect the narrator to use "Yahweh" consistently.

4. The Septuagint adds "for all their generations" (cf. v 9).

5. Hebrew *bāsār* means both "penis" and "flesh," but the ambiguity cannot be captured in polite English.

6. The Septuagint and Samaritan Torah add "on the eighth day," a reading also attested in Jubilees 15:14, 26 (ed. Charles, p. 36). This is not an inconsequential difference, for, if correct (and there is no way to judge), circumcision after the eighth day is futile, since the child is already subject to *kārēt*. See the fuller comments in Charles (1913, II, p. 36).

7. The punishment of (*hik*)*kārēt* has received a variety of explanations; see Loewenstamm (1962). It is clearly imposed by God, not man, and so the Rabbis (also Tsevat, 1961) interpret it as premature death (e.g., *b. Mō'ed Qāṭan*, 28a). This may be correct (see below), but the punishment of *kārēt* is primarily lack of descendants (cf. the Tosaphists on *b. Šabbāt*, 25a). Thus the executed can still be subject to *kārēt* (Exod 31:14; Lev 20:2–3). The root *krt* means "cut," but it often has a specialized sense of "eliminate a family"; cf. Lev 20:5,17–21; Num 4:18; Josh 9:23; 1 Sam 2:33; 24:22; 2 Sam 3:29; 1 Kgs 2:4; 8:25; 9:5; 14:10,14; 21:21; 2 Kgs 9:8; Isa 14:22; 48:19; Jer 9:20; 33:17–18; 35:19; 44:7; Ps 109:13–15; Ruth 4:10; 2 Chr 6:16; 7:18; 22:7. *Kārēt* is therefore comparable to the threat of no posterity found in many ancient Near Eastern inscriptions. The punishment is especially apt in Genesis 17, where Abraham is promised numerous descendants in reward for obedience.

older son by the concubine Hagar. When Isaac is born, Abraham circumcises him on the eighth day (Gen 21:4), and so the first Hebrew begotten by a circumcised father and circumcised on the eighth day is Isaac. Eighth day circumcision is subsequently presupposed in P (Lev 12:3). Though it is a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:11), the condition of circumcision cannot, in a world in which the operation is common, betoken uniqueness. Rather, the act of circumcising on the eighth day is made unique by the religious value P places upon it. In other words, circumcision is a sign for the individual Israelite, reminding him of his covenantal obligations; it is not a sign identifying Israelites to the outside world (cf. the function of the fringe in Num 15:37–41).

Though Gen 17:10–14 claims that the Hebrew ancestors had practiced infant circumcision as a religious rite long before the establishment of the Israelite nation, older and independent biblical sources imply that the rite originally had little religious significance and was performed at a later age. After surveying this evidence we will return to P and attempt to account for its innovation of infant circumcision.

It is widely noted that, in contrast to P, other legal materials, as well as the prophets, rarely mention circumcision and never command it. That they speak metaphorically of circumcision shows that they presuppose the practice. For example, Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4 (probably all of the same hand; see Friedman, 1987a, especially pp. 125–127, 146–149) speak of the circumcision of the heart, which, in light of Jer 9:24–25, suggests a disparagement of mere circumcision of the flesh. This cannot be said, however, of the same metaphor when it appears in P (Lev 26:41). For the ritualistic priestly writer, as for Ezekiel (44:9), it is likely that “circumcision of the heart” and “circumcision of the penis” amounted to almost the same thing, i.e., piety. Jer 6:10 speak of “uncircumcision of the ear” and Exod 6:12, 30 of “uncircumcision of lips.” In these cases *ʿrl* seems to connote both blockage and defilement.⁸ That circumcision is assumed rather than mandated is reminiscent of the situation in early Islam, which approved of the ancient custom but did not give it divine sanction in the Qurʾān. Similarly in Israel, it is likely that circumcision was a domestic institution of pre-Yahwistic origin that the early legislators and prophets, like Muhammad, felt no need to regulate. Though this is fundamentally an argument from silence, its

8. “Uncircumcised of lips” may denote a speech defect (see Tigay, 1978), but the priestly author replaces the relatively benign “heavy of mouth/tongue” (Exod 4:10 [E?]) with *ʿāral šēpātayim* to stress Moses’ unworthiness (Friedman, 1987b); cf. *ṭēmēʿ-šepātayim* ‘impure of lips’ (Isa 6:4).

conclusion is borne out by examination of the narrative sources, which suggest an early association with the secular rite of marriage.

The initial clue concerning the older connection of marriage and circumcision actually comes from outside the Bible. It is often noted that Arabic *khatana* 'circumcise' has derivatives *khātana*, 'become related by marriage', and *khatan*, 'male relation by marriage, son-in-law'.⁹ Many travellers' reports from the modern period describe an Arabic circumcision ordeal carried out before marriage, but there has never been a reliable viewing, and perhaps we should relegate these stories to the category of folklore.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the lexical evidence does suggest that, as in other cultures, circumcision in Arabia was once performed at puberty as a prelude to sex and marriage.

Several biblical texts are suggestive in light of the evidence from Arabic. The first in question is Exod 4:24–26, whose difficulties are notorious.¹¹ On the way back to Egypt from Midian with his wife Zipporah¹² and his son of unknown age and name, either Moses or the son is attacked by Yahweh, and Zipporah grabs a flint and circumcises

9. See, for example, Wellhausen (1897, p. 175). On the Hebrew cognate *hṭn*, which ordinarily refers to marriage, see Kutsch (1982) and Mitchell (1969). It is likely that the original sense of the Proto-Semitic root **khtn* was "to be related by marriage," since this is the usage most widespread in the Semitic family (Ugaritic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Old South Arabic, Akkadian). The extended meaning "to circumcise" would then be a later development in Arabia, with a possible isogloss with early Hebrew (see below), deriving from marriage customs. If, however, **khtn* originally meant "to circumcise," we are obliged to suppose that the Proto-Semites practised antenuptial circumcision, but that only the Arabs and Israelites preserved a memory of the rite. The former alternative is simpler.

10. Henninger (1938, 1940–1) shows how tenuous the evidence is, though he concludes that the ordeal may in fact have been sporadically imposed.

11. Among the noteworthy studies devoted to the elucidation of this passage are Smith (1906), McNeile (1917, pp. 27–30); Richter (1921, pp. 123–128), Hehn (1932), Coppens (1941), de Groot (1943), Junker (1950), Cassuto (1951, pp. 37–40), Talmon (1954), Blau (1956), Noth (1959, pp. 35–36), Kosmala (1962), Rivera (1963), Morgenstern (1963), Fohrer (1964, pp. 44–48), Schmid (1966), Middlekoop (1967), Dumbrell (1972), Childs (1974, pp. 95–101, 103–104), Beltz (1975), Irvin (1977, pp. 193–194) and Kaplan (1981). Most of their interpretations are equally convincing (or unconvincing), and so I have chosen to let the story's ambiguities stand. If I may, without elaboration, add a guess as to the story's origin, it is that it is somehow related to the Passover ritual (see below), since it shares with the Exodus and Gilgal traditions references to killing firstborns (if the object of the attack is Moses' son), encounter with a frightening divine being, circumcision and the apotropaic power of blood.

12. Since Zipporah is Midianite and the Midianites, like the Arabs, are related to Israel through Abraham (Gen 25:2), it is often suggested that circumcision is a Midianite custom borrowed by Israel.

the son. She touches either the flint or more likely the prepuce¹³ to someone's feet or genitals (Moses'? the son's? Yahweh's?) and says *ḥātan dāmîm ʿattāh lî* 'You are *my* bloody son-in-law/bridegroom'.¹⁴ The stressed world *lî* 'my' may refer to the fact that she has in some sense acted in place of the *ḥōtēn* 'father-in-law/circumciser' by circumcising her son and, perhaps symbolically, Moses. Someone, probably Yahweh, desists, and then the narrator repeats Zipporah's words, adding *lammûlōt* 'at/in respect of/because of circumcision'. If we do not fully understand this account, at least we may recognize the presence of circumcision, marriage and the root *ḥtn* in the same context. It is possible that the story is etiological,¹⁵ especially if the source is E, for in that case Exod 4:24–26 would be the Elohist's first allusion to circumcision. The story seems to be most interested in explaining the background of the expression *ḥātan dāmîm*, which is applied either to Moses or to his son. If the term was applied in Israel to infants, it would have been confusing on account of the first member, and, if it referred to bridegrooms, *dāmîm* is anomalous. Despite its attempt at elucidation, the passage in its present context merely generates confusion. At least we may say that it presents an interpretation of circumcision far different from P's. In this story the uncircumcised incurs bloodguilt (*dāmîm*)¹⁶ for which he must shed expiatory blood or lose his life. There is no explicit reference to the covenant, though Yahweh takes an interest in the child's circumcision.

Another example of the association of marriage and circumcision is Genesis 34. The Hivite (Septuagint "Horite") Shechem, who is uncircumcised, lies with and wants to marry Jacob's daughter Dinah. Her brothers inform him that it is a disgrace (*ḥerpāh*) for them that their sister have an uncircumcised husband. If the Shechemites will circumcise, however, they may intermarry (*ḥiḥtn*) with the Israelites, and the two peoples will become one. The Hivites agree, but Simeon and Levi kill them in their weakness and plunder the city. For this act of violence and deceit the brothers are rebuked by Jacob,¹⁷ but the narrator gives them the last word, "Shall our sister be treated as a prostitute?"

13. On the ritual employment of the foreskin in other cultures see Gray (1913, pp. 660–661).

14. On the deviant reading of the Septuagint see Dumbrell (1972).

15. But as Childs (1974, pp. 100–101) notes, "then she said" is not the usual etiological formula.

16. I owe the distinction between *dām* 'blood' and *dāmîm* 'bloodguilt' to an oral comment by B. Halpern.

17. For present purposes the relation of Genesis 34 to 48:22 and 49:5–7 is immaterial.

Genesis 34 is not a story about circumcision, but rather a story about the relations between Israelites and Canaanites. Nevertheless, it is an invaluable source of information on the meaning of circumcision, for its changing significance is captured at a point of transition. On the one hand, to circumcise means to join Israel; on the other, the rite is given no theological significance, but is simply a prerequisite to marriage. It is often suggested that Genesis 34 is an old conquest tradition, (de Pury, 1969) but we simply cannot determine the story's antiquity. Israel, throughout its history, shared Canaan with other peoples, some circumcised, some not. There was a natural tendency for these peoples to amalgamate with or be absorbed by Israel.¹⁸ This was accomplished both by explicit religious conversion (Ruth 1:16) or intermarriage (Gen 38:2; Deut 21:10–14; Judg 3:5–6), but in either case circumcision was probably a prerequisite (cf. Exod 12:44,48). In societies where the dominant group is circumcised, circumcision is often an important sign of status,¹⁹ and hence the custom can spread quickly.

Nevertheless, the proposed merger in Genesis 34 is abortive. In other words, the story is not a record of assimilation but a reaction to it presenting various attitudes with the voices of the protagonists. According to some Israelites, intermarriage was desirable (the view expressed by Jacob and the Shechemites); according to some, it was acceptable provided the Canaanites circumcise, simultaneously rendering themselves marriageable and entering into the Israelite covenant (the view hypocritically espoused by Jacob's sons); other Israelites, however, were utterly against intermarriage (the attitude of Levi and Simeon)²⁰ and were moreover inclined to exterminate all those who were not part of the Israelite tribal system. The Canaanites themselves could have given the story of Shechem as a pretext for avoiding marriage with the

18. On the early accommodation of the Canaanites and the Israelites see Gottwald (1979, pp. 556–583) and Halpern (1983, pp. 86–93).

19. Where circumcision is not universal, it is very often a mark of superior status, while the uncircumcised are ridiculed (see Gray, 1913, pp. 662–663, Vergiat, 1951, p. 68). Of course, precisely the opposite can be the case when the circumcised are a small minority, as in the Hellenistic world, in which Jews would undergo epispasm to hide their circumcision (1 Macc 1:15; Assumption of Moses 8:3 [ed. Charles, p. 420]; Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.241 [ed. Marcus, p. 122]; etc.); see Goldstein (1976, p. 200).

20. Suspicion of intermarriage (or any sexual relations with foreigners) is often voiced in the Bible in pre-exilic texts (Exod 34:16; Num 25:1–9; Deut 7:3–4; Josh 23:12–13; Judg 3:5–6) on the grounds that it leads to apostasy; cf. the biblical attitude toward the foreign marriages of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:1–10) and Ahab (1 Kgs 16:31). Of course the issue became even more prominent in the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9–10; Neh 13:23–30).

Israelites. The Yahwist does a remarkable job of portraying all sides with compassion, but he seems most sympathetic to the accommodatists. This accords with his overall depiction of the patriarchs living harmoniously with the Canaanites.

A third reference to antenuptial circumcision is oblique and has seemingly escaped attention. In 1 Sam 18:17–27, David wins the hand of Michal, the daughter of Saul, by passing a suitor's trial, a favorite theme of folklore, also found in Josh 15:16–17 = Judg 1:12–13.²¹ As often in the Bible, the fantastic (dragons, etc.) is eschewed: David, or rather his troops, has merely to kill 100 Philistines and bring back trophies. These normally would have been armor or heads (cf. 1 Sam 17:54; 31:9), but in this case David is to present his prospective father-in-law with foreskins.²² Thus David becomes Saul's *hātān* (1 Sam 18:18; 22:14). This has always been correctly viewed as a reference to the notorious noncircumcision of the Philistines,²³ but, if antenuptial circumcision had ever been practised in Israel as an ordeal, especially if it had been denoted by the root *hṭn*, it is hard not to see here a burlesque allusion to an old-fashioned custom still remembered in the monarchic period.

Closest to the view of P is Josh 5:2–9, which records that there was a "Hill of Foreskins" by Gilgal, so called because the Israelites born in the desert, who still had foreskins, were circumcised there²⁴ before celebrating the Passover, thus evading the contempt (*herpāh*; cf. Gen 34:14) of the Egyptians. Since P stipulates that only the circumcised may consume the paschal lamb (Exod 12:44,48), while Josh 5:2–12 describes circumcision as prelude to the Passover meal, one might conclude that the Gilgal narrative is based upon, and hence later than, the priestly source. But note that the circumcision of all Israel is at issue in Joshua, whereas P presumes this and deals with the special question of the participation

21. The stories of the heroic deeds of Jacob and Moses at a well (Gen 29:10; Exod 2:17) also reflect the notion that a suitor must prove his valor.

22. While the MT of 1 Sam 18:27 says that David presents Saul with *two hundred* foreskins, Old Greek^{BL} and the MT of 2 Sam 3:14 show that the text originally had "one hundred."

23. Cf. Jud 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chr 10:4. The Egyptians, similarly, would sometimes gather the genitalia of their uncircumcised foes as trophies (Gardiner, 1961, pp. 271, 288).

24. It is often asked why Josh 5:2 says that the Israelites are circumcised *šēnūt* 'anew.' V. 5 states that they had not been previously circumcised in the desert, so "again" must refer to Israel as a whole, not as individuals. In other words, formerly the entire male populace was circumcised, now it is not and needs to be re-circumcised. The passage says that the desert was not a proper place for circumcision, probably because newly circumcised adults are rendered immobile for a time (Gen 34:25; Josh 5:8).

of foreigners. It is likely, then, that both the Passover laws of P and the Gilgal pericope in Joshua derive from a premonarchic cult at Gilgal²⁵ featuring periodic mass circumcision at the Hill of Foreskins²⁶ as a prelude to the Passover. Such an intermittent ceremony would have initiated boys or young men, but obviously not newborns, into the covenant that bound the tribes to each other and to Yahweh and guaranteed them the land. This induction resembles the initiation into the mysteries of adulthood contingent upon circumcision (and other rites) in many other cultures (see van Gennep, 1909, pp. 93–163) But here the boy is introduced, not to sex and marriage, but to the religion of Israel.

So far we have seen that eighth day circumcision is first mentioned in the priestly document (Gen 17:10–14; Lev 12:3), in which it is both a sign and stipulation of the covenant. Josh 5:2–9 implicitly requires universal circumcision, but the preferred age is unspecified, and the tradition seems to arise out of the practice of periodic, mass circumcision. Genesis 34, Exod 4:24–26 and 1 Sam 18:17–27, on the other hand, reflect the practice of antenuptial circumcision. Genesis 34, however, also associates the rite with joining Israel, and Exod 4:24–26 regards non-circumcision as offensive to Yahweh, so in both these texts antenuptial circumcision is already taking on greater significance. Only in the story of David's vicarious circumcision is pure antenuptial circumcision dimly reflected. When the priestly writer mandated infant circumcision, a ceremony of passage into maturity (including marriage) or the covenant was transformed into a rite of passage into the world as well (on such rites see van Gennep, 1909, pp. 77–92). What factors lay behind the shift to infant circumcision?

There are several obvious answers, and a few less obvious. For one, through experience the Israelites probably discovered the operation is less painful for babies. Infant circumcision also relieved the individual of the painful choice of undergoing the trauma, for in his adulthood he might have been reluctant.²⁷ By transferring the rite of passage from boyhood to infancy, the Israelites guaranteed that each man was born

25. The ritual background of Joshua 3–5 is suggested by the role of the priests and the ark, the erection of monuments, circumcision, the Passover festival and the vision of the angel. See Soggin (1966) and Cross (1973, pp. 103–105).

26. On Arabic mass circumcision as a parallel see Morgenstern (1929) and Gaster (1961, pp. 42–43). For a description of an Egyptian mass circumcision see Pritchard (1969, p. 326).

27. Maimonides (*Môrēh Hannēbūkim* 3.49 [ed. Kafah, III, p. 664]) gives both these reasons and adds two more, the first more plausible than the second: 1) at birth a parent's

into the covenant of Israel and Yahweh. Yet, even so, the extreme youth of the babies is surprising. So many infants must have died in childhood that the ritual was often at best futile and could even have been harmful in primitive sanitary conditions. We must seek further to explain the circumcision of newborns.

Two additional reasons suggest themselves in light of the high infant mortality rate of the period. Both have parallels in later Jewish lore about circumcision and in Christian theology of baptism. The first is that circumcision may have been considered salutary. Either God protects the Israelite child, or demons avoid it,²⁸ or, at the mundane level, it is simply hygienic.²⁹ On this the Bible is silent, though it is a reasonable conjecture.

The second reason is grounded on more than conjecture. Babies were circumcised as soon as it was safe *because* they were liable to die, for, as Lods (1943) shows, circumcision was believed to improve one's fate in the world of the dead.³⁰ This interpretation might strike the reader as anachronistically influenced by Christian theology, but in fact Ezekiel, whose work so closely resembles the priestly document, speaks repeatedly

emotional attachment to a child is at its lowest level, for affection increases with years of nurture; 2) a circumcised male populace lowers the level of general fornication, since *Genesis Rabbāh* 80:11 (ed. Theodor-Albeck II, p. 966) assures us that women find intercourse with circumcised men less satisfying. Curiously, the women of the Ubangi basin, where circumcision is also practised, report the opposite (Vergiat, 1951, p. 68). One suspects that there is in fact no difference, though the opinion of these women is to be taken more seriously than that of Maimonides.

28. Some view circumcision as a substitute for child sacrifice, or as an attempt to placate evil forces comparable to the Arabic practice of *ʿaqīqa* (see Juynboll, 1913), the surrender of a lock of hair on the seventh day. Van Gennep (1909, pp. 102-106), on the other hand, insists that circumcision, like other initiatory mutilations and excisions, is primarily a sign of social union. It is best to decide the meaning of circumcision case-by-case rather than by imposing any generalizations.

29. Note that in Exod 4:24-26 the act of circumcision averts death and that, according to Sanchuniathon (see above, n. 1), Kronos circumcises himself and his allies after a plague. For the later Jewish superstition that circumcision enhances the prospects for survival see Morgenstern (1929) and "Circumcision: Folklore" (1972). Of course, many have claimed that the procedure is primarily hygienic; see in antiquity Herodotus (2.37 [ed. Godley, I, p. 318]) and Philo (*De Circumcisione* 11:210 [ed. Colson, VII, p. 102]), or in modern times Snowman (1972, pp. 572-575).

30. For Jewish parallels, see *b. Sanhedrīn*, 110b; *Genesis Rabbāh*, 48 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, II, p. 483); *Exodus Rabbāh*, 19:4 (ed. Halley, V, p. 247); *Siprē Bēmidbar* 15:31 (ed. Horovitz, I, p. 121); *Midraš Tanḥûmāʿ*, *Lek-lēkā* 27 (ed. Buber). The *Šulḥān ʿĀrûk (Yôreh Dēʿāh* 353.6 [ed. Denburg, I, p. 122]) takes this line of thought to its inevitable conclusion by mandating the circumcision of infant corpses.

of the wretched fate of the uncircumcised³¹ in the next world (28:8–10; 31:18; 32:19,21,25–26,28–31),³² which they share with those slain by the sword.³³

To understand Ezekiel's concept of the netherworld we must determine the identity of the uncircumcised. Are they uncircumcised nations or individuals? The answer, it turns out, is both. Lods (1943, pp. 77–78) argues that if the prophet were thinking of uncircumcised nations, he would mention the Philistines, and that therefore Ezekiel has in mind uncircumcised Israelites, i.e., dead infants. This is a large leap, but I think Lods's intuition that the Israelites consigned uncircumcised individuals to a less happy existence hereafter is nevertheless correct. The problem is that Ezekiel clearly identifies the uncircumcised, not as Israelite babies, but as warriors (32:21), the Assyrians (32:22), Elam (32:24), Meshech and Tubal (32:26) and the Phoenicians (32:30; cf. 28:10).³⁴ Pharaoh (32:28) and the lords of Edom (32:29) lie with the uncircumcised, though they are not themselves uncircumcised (Eissfeldt, 1950, p. 79), for such company would be especially degrading to the circumcised (Lods, 1943, p. 276). In short, the *ʿārēlīm* of Ezekiel 32 are nations, or at least their military leadership, and not Israelite babies. The Philistines are not mentioned because they are not a serious threat to Judah in this period.

It is important to realize, however, that Ezekiel is not presenting an Israelite view of the afterlife for its own sake. Rather, he is presupposing a system and modifying it for polemical purposes. By threatening the circumcised Pharaoh and Edomites with sharing the fate of the uncircumcised, he shows there was a widespread assumption in Israel of a sorting out after death on the basis of circumcision. This in theory could have applied both to uncircumcised nations and to individuals, including Israelites. But is it likely that the criterion of circumcision was chosen primarily to separate peoples such as the Egyptians and the Assyrians in Sheol? Both were equally the enemies of Israel. It is far more likely that Israelite theologians used the threat of eternal suffering as inducement to

31. Some interpreters have tried to avoid the plain sense of *ʿārēlīm*, but see Boadt (1980, p. 122–123).

32. Ezekiel is cited in this connection by *Exodus Rabbāh*, 19:4 (ed. Hallel, p. 247) and Lods (1943). On the text of these passages see Zimmerli (1969) and Boadt (1980).

33. Eissfeldt (1950) shows that *ḥalēlê ḥereb* need not be military casualties, but also might be murder victims and executed criminals, i.e., any cut down violently. Usually, however, they are those slain in battle, and that makes the most sense here (Boadt, 1980, p. 121).

34. This despite the evidence, cited above, that the Phoenicians were circumcised.

the Israelites not to neglect circumcision. The threat of an unpeaceful repose naturally justified the adoption of infant circumcision, just as it did later infant baptism (on the history of baptism, see Didier, 1959). We must still ask, however, why the uncircumcised suffer and why they join those who die violent deaths in Sheol.

That any sort of premature death was regarded as a misfortune whose consequences would be carried over into the next life would be understandable. The ideal was to die, like Jacob, at an advanced age in the midst of one's many sons and grandsons. Those who died in infancy of natural causes and those who fell in adulthood by the sword all failed to attain their full length of days. It is likely that Ezekiel had a more specific connection in mind, however. *Ḥālālīm* are often described as unburied (Num 19:16; Deut 21:1; Isa 34:3; Jer 14:18; Ezek 9:7; 11:6–7), and though they were doubtless interred when possible (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:15), often they must have been left to rot or be eaten. As Lods notes (1943, p. 276), nonburial precluded full funerary rites (cf. Jer 16:4; 22:18–19)—hence the inferior lot of *ḥālālīm* in the underworld (cf. Ps 88:6). Based on ethnographic data, Lods accordingly (pp. 278–280) hypothesizes that uncircumcised Israelites were not accorded full funerary rites, although he finds no concrete biblical evidence.³⁵

Fortunately, there is more direct confirmation that the uncircumcised suffer after death than Ezekiel 32. Recall that P punishes them with *kārēt*. As we saw, this refers possibly to premature death and certainly to lack of descendants (see note 7). It is possible that the reason the *ʿārēlīm* and *ḥalēlê-ḥereb* are associated is that both die young. But the primary sense of *kārēt* is to have no posterity. Lack of descendants, like death in battle, removes the possibility of proper care of the grave.³⁶ Note that Gilgamesh XII:151–154 (Pritchard, 1969, p. 99) says of the unburied dead, “his spirit finds no rest in the nether world,” and of the untended, “lees of the pot, crumbs of bread, offals of the street he eats.” The Ugaritic legend of Aqhat (*Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes*

35. He (pp. 281–282) cites Isa 14:19 as evidence that the still-born were cast from the grave and were associated with those killed by the sword. The problem is that *nēšer* ‘sprout’ does not elsewhere refer to a dead child. Therefore, Eissfeldt (1950, p. 80, n. 21) simply emends to **nēpel* ‘stillborn,’ noting that Job 3:13–19 clearly describes the stillborn as lying among the mighty. Even if we reject this emendation, it may well be that *nēšer* here has the sense of “scion” or “young, growing but unfinished organism (hence ‘sprout’).” Nevertheless, that the verse refers to a fetus remains unsure.

36. It is striking that Isaiah 14 threatens the Mesopotamian king with a fate in the nether world like that of a trampled victim of the sword (v. 19), with non-burial (v. 20) and with lack of posterity (vv. 21–22); note the appearance of the root *krt* in v. 22. Moreover, as we have seen, v. 19 may refer to the fate of a discarded fetus.

alphabétiques 17–19) in 17.1.27–34, 2.1–8, 16–23 describes the duties of a son caring for his father's grave and feeding his spirit, though much of the text is of uncertain translation. The Phoenicians also associated progeny with a peaceful repose, for the sixth century "Tabnit" Inscription from Sidon curses the violator of the grave with "no offspring among those living under the sun and no bed with the Rephaim" (Donner-Röllig, 1979, I p. 3). We also have a Talmudic opinion (*b. Sanhedrîn* 90b, 99a) that one suffers *kārēt* in both this world and the next, though relevance to the Bible is doubtful in such a late source.

If the uncircumcised dead were believed to suffer, why were babies not circumcised immediately upon birth? For this there is a simple medical answer: the blood clotting mechanism does not function fully until the age of six months and is particularly deficient in the first two to four days after birth.³⁷ A few bad experiences would have shown the advisability of waiting a while. But why was the eighth day, i.e., a week plus a day, singled out as the proper time for circumcision? The number eight elsewhere signifies the end of a period of taboo. A sacrificial animal is taken from its mother on the eighth day (Exod 22:29; Lev 22:27); the priests are consecrated for a week at the door of the Tabernacle and then sacrifice on the eighth day (Lev 8:33–9:24); the healed leper spends a week outside the camp and returns on the eighth day (Lev 14:8–10); in a similar fashion are the polluted purified (Lev 15:13–14; Num 6:9–10); Sukkot is a week plus a day (Lev 23:36,39; Neh 8:18; 2 Chr 7:9), as are the initial phase of the inauguration ceremony of the First Temple (1 Kgs 8:65–66) and the expected inauguration of the altar of the Second (Ezek 43:26–27). The parallelism of seven and eight is also common in Hebrew and Canaanite poetry.³⁸ It seems that the infant is taboo until its eighth day, when circumcision introduces it to the world. Hence Lev 19:23 (P) uses *ʿr* to describe a young tree whose fruit may not be eaten.

Finally, one wonders whether P's legislation requiring eighth day circumcision was utopian or whether it merely legitimated a popular trend. Certainly the rule would have been difficult to enforce. It is quite possible that popular observance had moved the time of circumcision to the eighth day long before the priestly author canonized the practice in Yahweh's covenant with Abraham.

37. See Clark and Affonso (1976, p. 230). I owe this reference to C. S. Rosenberg, R. N.

38. Mic 5:4; Ecc 11:2; *Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques* 3.5.19,34; 4.7.10–11; 5.5.8–9,20–21; 12.2.45–46,49–50; 15.2.23–24,4.6–7; 19.1.42–43; 23.66–67; 27.2–3; *Ugaritica* V 3.1.3–4.

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