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## THE ENIGMA OF CIRCUMCISION

**I**N OUR TIME, ritual observance of all kinds has become problematical not only for non-believers, but for the thinking adherents of the various faiths as well. In most other respects, religions have not fared badly in the modern world, but ceremonial practices have proven vulnerable. As the historical roots of rituals have been uncovered, the constant temptation has been to abandon them on the ground that while they made sense in their time and place, they are now anachronisms. The decline in the observance of *kashruth* among Jews is a case in point.

The theological defense against this trend has been weak; the attempts to justify ritual usually confine themselves to stressing its value for religious survival, its aesthetic quality, and above all its social and psychological usefulness. Thus, one finds that ritual among primitives is tolerated, or even admired, because of its "functional" aspects, so crucial for the currently dominant anthropological perspective.

But what is the anthropologist—or anyone else—to make of the mysterious rite of circumcision? Its widespread practice among primitive people is hard to explain by any reference to function or utility, and the only attempt I know of in this direction is singularly inept: it has been held that circumcision helps savages to distinguish male from female. Most anthropologists have avoided such absurdities at the cost of avoiding explanations altogether; they have been content with a mere description of circumcision as a primitive rite of passage or initiation.

The mystery deepens when one looks into the practice of circumcision among the Jews. Not only did this ritual flourish in ancient Israel—hardly a primitive people—but it continues, in marked contrast to *kashruth*, to be practiced almost uniformly by Jews today. Moreover, it has, until recently at least, been taken so much for granted that it never provoked nearly as much discussion or elicited as much interpretation as did ritual food prescriptions. Hence the Catholic scholar Roland de Vaux could rightly note in 1961 that "nothing

useful . . . apart from dictionary articles" had lately been written about circumcision in ancient Israel. Circumcision has continued to be practiced by Jews in the absence of either a fruitful articulation of its roots in the past or a theological interpretation of its meaning for the present.

In their absence, the commonly accepted "explanation" has been that circumcision confers great medical benefits. It is an idea at least as old as Philo of Alexandria (1st century C.E.), who maintained that it prevented disease and promoted fertility. The modern Jew has been comforted by the knowledge that medical value has been attributed to the ritual, even as he has been reassured by its practice among a great part of the non-Jewish population, at least in America and England. Recently, however, the practice of circumcision as a hygienic measure has been subject to a two-pronged attack. Its presumed medical and physiological advantages are said to be at best unproven and at worst illusory, and the manner of its performance is said to be frequently incompetent or cruel. The latter charge has been directed almost as much against physicians as against ritual circumcisers, or *mohalim*, who in this country do not have to meet any legal certification requirements. A few of them, by botching the operation, bring on complications which are sometimes serious and irreversible.

It is symptomatic of the newly critical attitude that a sensationalized attack on circumcision appeared in the July-August 1966 issue of *Fact*, a magazine which describes itself as "An antidote to the timidity and corruption of the American Press." *Fact* had apparently been brooding about the subject for some time; a full year before the attack appeared, I had declined an invitation from its editors to write just such an article. Presumably it took something of a hunt to find Dr. Foley, a West Virginia physician, who finally accepted the assignment. While the author begins by raising pertinent questions about the meaning of circumcision, he focuses primarily on the motivation of those who perform the act and the alleged consequences of the practice. He finds the explanation for the widespread acceptance of circumcision in the "perverted component of the circumciser's libido" and "the sadism of the crypto-pervert." The reason American mothers have gone along with the operation is that they

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are hostile to their male children: "It is one way an intensely matriarchal society can permanently influence the physical characteristics of its males." According to Dr. Foley, homosexuals and anti-Semitic Jews are especially warm advocates of circumcision, as indeed are all men who have already been circumcised and therefore suffer from "foreskin envy."

There have, however, been more serious challenges to the routine practice of circumcision. For example, Dr. Charles Weiss, formerly head of the division of microbiology at the Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, has collected evidence that renders doubtful the widespread assumption that circumcision helps to prevent genital cancers in both sexes. He points out that earlier studies supposedly proving this have been refuted by now, so that at the present time there is no conclusive evidence of any kind that circumcision has any prophylactic value whatsoever.

This challenge from within the medical profession has played into the hands of that segment of the Orthodox Jewish community which is intent on affirming the strictly religious character of circumcision, and thus on eliminating the medical aura surrounding the practice. Some Orthodox Jews, including some doctors, go to the extreme of arguing that no physician should perform religious circumcision, even if he meets all the requirements of personal orthodoxy and piety. Thus, Dr. Joseph Miller, writing in the organ of the union of Hasidic rabbis of the United States and Canada states that he

has refused to accept the role of *mohel* for . . . Jewish newborn males in order to uphold [its] religious character. . . . If a physician were to be a . . . *mohel*, this may impress on the mind of the public the idea that only a physician could be trusted with *milah*. This misunderstanding may lead easily to using non-religious or even Gentile physicians for the performance of this holy act.

In *La Circoncision* (Paris, 1952), Charles Merzbach, a French Jew, Orthodox scholar, and a physician, takes a similar position. Immanuel Jakobovits, the new chief rabbi of England, does not oppose the performance of *milah* by Orthodox physicians but he too is worried about the emphasis on the medical value of circumcision. Thus, he condemns the practice—which used to be common among Orthodox Jews in Germany and is now the standard procedure among Orthodox Jews in Italy, Norway, Sweden, France, Australia, and Argentina—of having circumcision performed by a "secular" physician while a rabbi or cantor is in attendance. In a letter to Dr. Weiss, who is by no means opposed to ritual circumcision but who recommends the above practice for the United States, Rabbi Jakobovits writes: "The whole essence of the operation is that it is a religious and not a medical act, and this significance is usually

lost when the operation is assigned as so much surgery to a physician. The presence of a rabbi or cantor would merely make matters worse by religiously endorsing the medical character of the act."

At a time when—at least in this country—most non-Jewish males are being circumcised, the extreme Orthodox position must be understood as an anxious attempt to preserve the specifically Jewish meaning of circumcision. The deliberate removal of the rite from the medical sphere does not, to be sure, provide a clue as to its true meaning; it does, however, clear the air for a reconsideration of its religious significance. Such an inquiry must begin with an examination of the biblical passages concerning circumcision.

## II

CIRCUMCISION IS A surprising rite to find prescribed in the Bible. It was, of course, widely practiced among Israel's pagan neighbors: Jeremiah mentions Egypt, Edom, Moab, and the Arabs (along with Judah) as being circumcised in the flesh, though not in the heart. But the whole tenor of the Bible is against the pagans and their practices; moreover, it is, in general, strongly opposed to any form of bodily mutilation or deformation, ritual or otherwise. Thus, tattooing and scarification, for example, are forbidden for the explicit reason that the Israelites are the children of God. The prohibition of scarification even extends to animals, which become ritually inadmissible if marked.

The commandment to circumcise males is held by Jews to derive from God's commandment to Abraham, in Genesis 17, to circumcise every male child on the eighth day of his life as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. According to an accompanying provision, slaves—both native and foreign, and regardless of their age at acquisition—are also to be circumcised. Beyond that, few details are given concerning the performance of the rite in ancient Israel. The stipulation of the eighth day is repeated in Leviticus (12:3); and in Exodus (4:25) and Joshua (5:2-3) one discovers that flint knives were used for the operation. The Bible contains no ruling about the place for performing the operation; however it never occurs in a sanctuary, nor is it ever performed by a priest.

The unsatisfactory character of most explanations advanced for biblical references to circumcision can be illustrated by the treatment accorded to Exodus 4:19-26, admittedly the most difficult of all the passages on this subject. Moses is on his way back to Egypt from Midian with his wife Zipporah and his children. "And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: 'Surely a

bridegroom of blood art thou to me.' So he let him alone. Then she said: 'A bridegroom of blood in regard to the circumcision.'

The interpretations of this passage have usually been even more peculiar than the passage itself. For example, Eduard Meyer, Georg Beer, and Elias Auerbach maintain that the story deals with the *ius primae noctis*; the god is struggling with Moses for his right. Zipporah quickly grasps the danger to her husband, circumcises her son, and with the bloody foreskin smears the god's sex organ in order to make him think that this is the mark of his first night with her. It is hard to determine whether these leading scholars gave less credit for intelligence to Zipporah or the god, since both would presumably have been aware of the presence of Zipporah's child, a presence which renders any reference to *ius primae noctis* mysterious indeed.

There have been other dubious interpretations of this passage, although none which so totally disregards the text itself. The late Chief Rabbi Hertz of Great Britain maintained that the story is an anthropomorphic way of saying that Moses fell ill because he postponed the circumcision of his son and that Zipporah therefore performed it for her disabled husband. Earlier commentators on the text tried to overcome some of the embarrassment to which the passage gives rise by stating that an angel tried to slay Moses for having so long postponed the circumcision of his son. Some interpreters even claim that the passage refers to the circumcision of Moses himself, which is doubtful not only because of the text's specific reference to "her son," but also because Moses had been adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and circumcision was an ancient—though not universal—Egyptian custom. Needless to say, psychiatrists have not passed up the obvious opportunity the passage affords for the application of psychoanalytic insights. According to Andrew Peto, the story represents a biblical interpretation of the Oedipus conflict: the son-hating mother symbolically castrates or kills the boy because the father has failed to do so. The aggressive Yahweh-father is thus appeased, the Moses-father is preserved, and Moses and Zipporah live happily ever after.

The most intelligent explanation of the passage comes from Hans Kosmala, a member of the Swedish Biblical Institute of Jerusalem, who solves much of the difficulty by disposing of Moses altogether as an actor in the story. The incident occurs just after Moses has been directed to tell Pharaoh that the first-born sons of Egypt will be slain. According to Kosmala, the "him" whom the Lord met and sought to kill in the text is not Moses but Moses's son, who was in danger of sharing Egypt's fate, since he was with his Midianite mother. Zipporah promptly circumcised him and said, "*hatan damim attah li*," customarily translated "a bridegroom of blood art thou to me." But, as Kosmala notes, Zipporah was a Midianite

and in her language *hatan* was the word for circumcision. What she said, then, was "You are mine, circumcised with blood." The text strives to point this up by stressing that *she*, the Midianite, called circumcision in *her* language *hatan damim*. Otherwise the repetition of the statement, "a bridegroom of blood" is pointless. With Moses absent, and the "bloody bridegroom" eliminated, the difficulties of the story disappear.

**B**UT THE greater mystery remains: why should circumcision have been the mark of Abraham's covenant with God? Biblical commentators have expended surprisingly little effort in confronting this question. Rashi merely notes that there are midrashic stories about it, including one that says circumcision makes man more perfect by removing an existing flaw. Some traditional and Hellenistic interpreters offer utilitarian explanations, along the lines of the one advanced by Philo. Others, like Josephus, look on it as a way of preserving the Jews' separate identity. Still another tradition views circumcision as a mystical rite, but this interpretation is strongly opposed by normative Jewish exegesis. More recently, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) claimed that the purpose of circumcision was to affirm that man's body, as well as his soul, is hallowed by God, and that the infliction of the mark of the covenant on man's most animal part served to symbolize this affirmation. Such moralistic and symbolic exegeses have been characteristic of the last few centuries; the identification of circumcision as a primitive practice and the challenge of an environment that put a premium on assimilation made it necessary to find explanations that would render the rite "acceptable." Hirsch's interpretation may indeed perform such a function, but it too fails to shed much light on the real meaning of circumcision.

Nor is it very helpful, when attempting to understand circumcision as it is described in the Bible, to turn to those scholars who concentrate on its practice among various primitive tribes. Herbert Spencer thought that originally circumcision was a rite performed on war captives as a sign of their subjugation. The anthropologist Westermarck held circumcision to be a device, like other bodily scarifications, for attracting the opposite sex. Frazer suggested that the reason for circumcision was that the foreskin was to provide power (*Mana*) which could be drawn upon by the disembodied spirit at the moment of reincarnation. An enumeration of all the theories that have been advanced would allow the reader to marvel at the imagination of modern social scientists, but it would scarcely enhance his understanding of circumcision. Suffice it to say, then, that circumcision has been connected, among other things, with ancestor worship, sacrifices to goddesses of fertility, tribal marks, methods of warding off evil, mating devices, marriage rites, and puberty rites.

Though widely divergent, these theories tend to have something important in common: the fact that circumcision involves the sexual organ has led most of those who have attempted to find the meaning of the rite to focus narrowly on its sexual aspects.

### III

IT MAY, however, be the case that the sexual aspect is incidental to circumcision, at least as it was practiced in ancient Israel. One is in any event led to think so by a close reading of the biblical text—which is all we really have to go by.

The Bible treats circumcision as a visible sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Actually, two covenants with Abraham are recorded in Genesis. In the first one (Genesis 15), the Lord promises Abraham—whose name is still Abram—that he shall inherit Canaan. Abraham asks for a sign and is told to divide a calf, goat, and ram, and align the parts in two rows, at the end of which a dove and another young bird are to be placed undivided. Then, in a dream vision, Abraham sees an epiphany of the Lord pass through the divided animals. Rite and vision culminate in God's declaration: "Unto thy seed have I given this land. . . ." In the second covenant (Genesis 17), the promise of the land is repeated and expanded. Abraham is now told that he will have a multitude of offspring, and that from him will spring "a multitude of nations." The Lord changes Abram's name to Abraham, repeating the promise to make nations from him and adding "kings shall come out of thee." God affirms that the covenant shall be everlasting, "to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee." He demands that every male shall be circumcised on the eighth day as a sign of the covenant. Sarai's name is changed to Sarah; she is promised a son and also promised that "she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be of her."

There are several ways to approach this passage. One may look for a clue to Abraham's circumcision in the link between circumcision and the promise of offspring. The rite then becomes a purely medical operation to remove an obstruction which made the patriarch infertile. And of course, after the surgery Sarah does become pregnant with Isaac. This interpretation—offered by Vanier du Harve in 1847—entails only one difficulty: Abraham already had a child by Hagar.

A more fruitful approach would seem to be to stick as closely to the text as possible and thus to consider circumcision as a covenant rite. The two covenant ceremonies performed by Abraham are related: in each there is a cutting. It therefore seems plausible that biblical circumcision can be understood as a special case of the ancient custom of using cutting or dismembering rites in connection with treaty and covenant obli-

gations. There is an abundance of evidence to suggest that this was a widespread custom indeed. Jeremiah mentions a dismembering rite similar to Abraham's first covenant ceremony: the nobility of Judah pledge themselves to set their slaves free by dividing a calf and walking through the parts. There were Hittite rites in which troops passed through divided animals and men to signify the renewal and strengthening of a covenant. In Africa there are even today many covenant rites involving the lengthwise division into equal parts of at least one animal. Moreover, one can find parallels to Abraham's first covenant ceremony among both the Greeks and the Romans.

In this respect, it is also significant that the biblical term for covenant-making is *likrot berith*, the literal meaning of which is "to cut a covenant." Moreover, some biblical scholars have argued that *berith*, though it certainly means "covenant" in the contexts in which it is used in the Bible, was originally a preposition meaning "between" so that *likrot berith* may actually mean "to cut between." Thus, the biblical terminology also suggests a close association of covenants with cutting.

The meaning of that close association is not, however, clear. The division of animals in two as a covenant sacrifice, which is found so widely, has been explained by anthropologists as a conditional self-cursing: the human participants in the covenant agree to sharing the fate of the animals, should they break their oaths. Indeed, this is the way Jeremiah understood the rite of the Judaeans nobility. But the deeper significance of the rite, which had its origin in a pre-Hebrew world picture, may have eluded Jeremiah just as much as it may today elude its pagan practitioners and their anthropological observers.

The whole notion of cutting as a covenant sign seems strange to us, for we associate covenants and treaties with binding together. Yet it was the cutting of the Gordian knot by Alexander the Great which was to bind Asia and Europe together, and even today we cut silk ribbons when inaugurating bridges and highways; we thereby symbolize the joining together of places that were previously separate. In terms of ancient ritual too, the act of severing was not symbolic of separation, but rather of a prior and subsequent state of wholeness. The ritual worked both backward and forward in time. It worked backward because it stipulated that in the mythical past the partners to the covenant had been united or at least closely bound together; it worked forward because it asserted that the partners, though separated now, belonged together as parts of an original whole. In the ceremonial, a mythical past is recreated to give substance and status to an alliance directed to the future.

There is some evidence that early circumcision among the Jews involved only a simple cutting. The kind of circumcision performed in the case

of Abraham may well have been the incomplete circumcision which M. Merker found among the Masai in the first years of this century. In this operation the foreskin is cut but not removed. The "second circumcision" mentioned in Joshua (5:2) may refer to the completion of the operation; indeed, an old Jewish tradition maintains that this is the meaning of the passage. The tradition is repeated by Rashi, who states, "Our rabbis said that 'a second time' refers to the tearing off [of the praeputium] which was not required of our father Abraham." Moreover, there is evidence that incomplete circumcision was practiced as late as the Greco-Roman era. Because he was an object of derision in the gymnasium, the circumcised Jew often subjected himself to an operation to conceal his circumcision. It was to obviate this possibility that the rabbis made *periah* (complete exposure of the glans) a prerequisite for ritual circumcision. While the operation as now performed is thus the outcome of anti-pagan ordinances, pagan ceremonial—reworked to give it Jewish associations—also found its way into the ritual during the Greco-Roman era. For example, the "throne of Elijah," upon which the child is put at the beginning of the circumcision ceremony, apparently derives from the thrones reserved for "divine" visitors to Roman child-naming ceremonies.

**E**VEN IF WE accept the hypothesis that biblical circumcision is a covenant rite (which is, after all, what the redactors of the biblical text claim it is), the full meaning of circumcision is bound to elude us, for it grew out of a world picture whose psychological foundation must remain foreign to us. Nor can one make an easy equation between the meaning the rite may have for present-day primitive people, and its meaning for the Jews, with their long history. With the passage of the centuries, circumcision, the spilling of the blood of the covenant, has inevitably taken on new associations for the Jews. The blood of the

covenant has become the blood of Jews who were killed because they kept the covenant; the central importance which circumcision assumed in the mind of the occidental Christian, for whom it defined the Jew, has lent force to this association. I suspect that psychological depth-studies would reveal that the historical and religious experience of the Jew has virtually wiped out any sexual meaning the ritual may once have had for him. However, such studies might well show that even for Orthodox Jews the "blood of the covenant" symbolizes not only Abraham's covenant with God but also the blood of Jewish martyrs.

Consciously, of course, the Orthodox Jew is simply obeying a commandment when he agrees to have his male children circumcised. If pressed for the meaning of the rite he would probably agree with Zacharias Frankel, the head of the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary, who understood circumcision as a sacramental act that establishes the religious community of Jews. Frankel was not completely correct, to be sure: unlike baptism, circumcision does not establish the male child as a Jew. If he is born of a Jewish mother, he is a Jew in the eyes of Jewish law and remains one whether or not he is circumcised. Circumcision does, however, act as a sacrament for the convert, and it is a powerful symbol of the Jews as a community of faith.

Yet circumcision remains a mysterious rite, and one that must to some extent be problematical even to the Orthodox Jew, especially when it is stripped of its medical aura. For circumcision is a blood rite, and Judaism is clearly at variance with the idea of blood rites.

This, incidentally, may be precisely that "function" of circumcision which anthropologists have overlooked: to be at variance, to serve as an unmistakable reminder that religion is not a system of autonomous ethics, to teach the Jew who accepts this covenant rite that morality must be understood as commanded rather than as part of a rational natural order.