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The Religious Significance
of
Circumcision in Judaism
by
Joseph Klein

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toward the degree of Rabbi

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Professor Samuel S. Cohon
Referee

PREFACE

The purpose of this paper has been to collect and collate the many scattered references to circumcision that occur in primary Jewish sources, and wherever possible, to give the religious ideas and motives behind this rite as the sources themselves express them. No attempt has been made to treat the subject of circumcision in general, or to present theories and hypotheses on the origin and development of this practice except insofar as they are related specifically to Judaism. The Jewish sources from which passages have been cited include the Bible, the Apochrypha and Pseudapigrapha, Philo's Treatise on Circumcision, the Works of Josephus, the Talmud, (including the Mishnah, Tosephta, and Yerushalmi) and the Midrashim. References from a few non-Jewish sources that have a bearing on circumcision in Judaism have likewise been cited, and these include passages from the History of Herodotus, the New Testament, and Justin's Dialogue with Trypho. The thesis does not go beyond the Midrashic and Talmudic interpretations of circumcision.

The translation of Biblical passages given here, follows, on the whole, the translation rendered by the Jewish Publication Society. Of New Testament translations, both the Moffatt edition and the King James Version were followed. The Charles edition of the Apochrypha and Pseudapigrapha was used. Dr. Lauterbach's translation of the Mekilta and Friedlander's translation of Pirke de R. El-

iezêr were generally followed. Considerable help was derived from the new English edition of the Babylonian Talmud published by the Soncino Press under the editorship of Dr. Epstein. The keen translations given in the three Sedarim already complete and the notes appended at the bottom of the pages were of immeasurable assistance. Danby's English edition of the Mishnah was also consulted and sometimes followed. All other translations of Rabbinic texts that are here included are my own.

I have made an attempt to analyze critically some of the important Biblical passages. For a great part of this critical analysis I am indebted to Dr. Julian Morgenstern who loaned me the use of the manuscript of his very important but as yet unpublished work, "Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death, and Kindred Occasions among the Semites." Dr. Morgenstern gave me the liberty to quote from his work, which I did, and to criticize some of his views, which I also did where I felt this was forthcoming. For the personal interest which he took in my task and for the personal counsel which he gave me on many occasions, I take this opportunity to express to him my thanks and appreciation.

I am also indebted to Professor Samuel S. Cohon, under whose guidance this work was written and who suggested the subject of this paper. On many occasions Professor Cohon led me to new works related to the subject and advised me on the organization and content of the thesis. For his personal interest and help I take this oppor-

tunity to express thanks and appreciation to him also.

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Part One

The Biblical Period

I. Circumcision in the Bible

References to circumcision, and its counterpart, uncircumcision, are plentiful in the Biblical record, but unfortunately they do not give a clear-cut picture of the rite, its development in Israel or its significance. Three of the references are apparently separate attempts to explain the origin of this practice. They are (a) the Priestly account in Gen. chap. 17, and its continuation in Gen. 21:1-4, which legislates the practice of this rite to Abraham and his descendants and tells of the circumcision of the patriarch and the male members of his household; (b) the fragmentary and cryptic narrative in Exod. 4:24-26, which tells of the circumcision by Zipporah of her son; (c) the account in Josh. 5:2-9 which tells of the circumcision of the children of Israel by Joshua at Gibeath-ha-araloth or Gilgal. These accounts will be treated in detail. Another narrative dealing with circumcision is the composite story of Dinah and Shechem in Gen. 34.

Besides the legislative parts of Gen. 17 there are further injunctions regarding the practice of circumcision in Exod. 12:43, where it is stated in connection with the Passover offering, that a slave may eat of it only if he has been circumcised; in Exod. 12:48, where it is again stated in connection with the Passover offering, that a stranger who wishes to keep the Passover must first be circumcised, and where it is emphasised that no uncircumcised person may eat of it; in Lev. 12:3, where the command of Gen. 17:12 is repeated, that when a male child is born, he shall be circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin when he is eight days old; and in Ezek. 44:9, where the prophet lays down the law that

"no^{no}/alien, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh" shall enter the sanctuary of God.

Scattered references to the uncircumcised of other nations are found in a number of places in the Bible. The term "uncircumcised" ~~is~~ ^{is} especially applied to the Philistines, sometimes as a synonym and most frequently as an opprobrious expression. Samson is warned by his parents against taking "a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines" (Jud. 14:3), and elsewhere he pleads to God, "And now shall I die for thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?" (Jud. 15:18). Jonathan says to his armour-bearer with reference to the Philistines, "Come and let us go over into the garrison of these uncircumcised." (I Sam. 14:6). David challengingly asks regarding the Philistine champion Goliath, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should have taunted the armies of the living God?" (I Sam. 17:26), and then offers himself to Saul for taking up arms against Goliath, with the boast, "Thy servant smote both the lion and the bear and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them." (I Sam. 17:36). Saul, bearing a death wound, begs his armour bearer to kill him, lest the "uncircumcised" Philistines come and thrust him through and make a mock of him (I Sam 31:4, I Chron. 10:4). David on hearing the report of the death of Saul and Jonathan, cries out in his lamentation over them: "Tell it not in Gath; publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice; lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph." (II Sam. 1:20). In connection with the Philistines, the account in I Sam. 18:25-27, though not directly related to circumcision, is of especial interest. Saul, seeking to do away with David lets the latter know that he will give him his daughter in marriage if he avenges

his enemies, the Philistines, by bringing him one hundred of their foreskins. Saul's intent is to put David in a position where he would surely fall into the hands of the Philistines. David, however, succeeds in slaying two-hundred of the enemy, and brings their foreskins to Saul, for which he receives Michal, Saul's daughter, in marriage. There is no connection in this narrative with circumcision in Israel; the foreskins merely serve as a trophy to indicate that the mission upon which David went was carried out.² In II Sam. 3:14 David sends to Ish-bosheth demanding the return of his wife on the ground that the Philistine foreskins were the price he paid for her betrothal.

Surprisingly, the literary prophets outside of Ezekiel have practically nothing to say of circumcision or uncircumcision. In Jer. 9:24,25 occurs a statement which apparently lists those nations that practiced circumcision in the prophet's time. "Behold the days come saith the Lord, that I will punish all them that are circumcised in the foreskin;³ Egypt and Judah and Edom and the children of Ammon and Moab, and all that have the corners of their hair polled that dwell in the wilderness." But immediately following this is the rather cryptic statement which seems to be an explanatory gloss, but which when combined with the above makes little or no sense: "For all the nations are uncircumcised but all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart."⁴

The prophet Ezekiel in his oracles against the nations makes frequent use of the word *šr* to describe a horrible kind of destruction. Against Tyre he proclaims "Thou shalt die the deaths of the uncircumcised, by the hand of strangers"(28:10) Similar calamities are proclaimed against Egypt; "Thou shalt be brought

down with the trees of Eden into the nether parts of the earth, thou shalt be in the midst of the uncircumcised, with them that are slain with the sword. This is Pharaoh and all his multitude" (31:18); "Go down and be thou laid with the uncircumcised" (32:19); Those that are uncircumcised and have gone down to the nether-world, slain with the sword are Assyria (32:22), Elam (32:24), Mechech, Tubal (32:26), Edom (32:29) and Zidon (32:30). Pharaoh and all his army shall suffer a fate like theirs, and "be laid in the midst of the uncircumcised with them, that are slain by the sword." (32:32) There is no indication here that Egypt is included in the category of the uncircumcised, but rather that the prophet foresees for her a fate similar to those uncircumcised nations that have already gone down to destruction. The inference is that Egypt, or at least Pharaoh, was classed by the prophet with the circumcised.⁵

Deutero-Isaiah in his message of comfort to his stricken people uses the term *גֵּר* with probable reference to the Babylonians, and couples it with the term *כְּנָעִי*. "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for henceforth there shall no more come unto thee the uncircumcised and the unclean" (52:1)

The terms *גֵּר* and *כְּנָעִי* are frequently employed in the Bible in a spiritual or ethical sense. The expression "uncircumcised in heart" has already been mentioned in connection with Jer. 9:25 and Ezek. 44:6-9. Ezekiel decries the abominations in the house of Israel "in that ye have brought aliens, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary to profane it. Thus saith the Lord God: No alien, uncircumcised

in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter into My sanctuary, even any alien that is among the children of Israel."

Deut. 30:6 gives a clearer understanding of this expression:

"And the Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live." Deut 10:16 gives the in-

junction "Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart and

be no more stiffnecked." ^{Jer.} 4:4 connects circumcision of the heart

with turning away from evil: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my fury go forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings."

Similarly, in Lev. 26:41 the "uncircumcised heart" is identified with iniquity. Only once in the Bible is the term "uncircumcised" employed with reference to the ear. Here the meaning is dullness of hearing, or refusal to hearken to God, "To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold their ear is dull (lit. "uncircumcised") and they cannot attend." (Jer. 6:10) Of similar significance is the expression "uncircumcised lips", meaning imperfection in speech. Moses complains against being sent on the Divine mission to Egypt with: "How shall Pharaoh hear me who am of uncircumcised lips?" (Exod. 6:12,30)

It is evident from the above that $\int \gamma$ has the meaning of imperfection and deficiency. The uncircumcised heart is the imperfect heart, in a moral sense; the uncircumcised ear and lips are deficient ear and lips. Circumcision, therefore, would imply the process of removing the deficiency and attaining perfection. In the case of circumcision of the flesh it would mean at least in later Biblical times, the removal of bodily imperfection.

Perhaps this is the meaning, as the Rabbis hold, of Gen. 17:1 where God says to Abraham "Walk before me and be thou perfect" and then, in the following verses, lays down the law of circumcision.

There are two usages of the root סח in the Bible that seem in no way to be connected with uncircumcision, physically or spiritually. In Lev. 19:23 where the law forbidding the eating of the fruit of trees during the first three years is stated, the expressions סח סח סח ("ye shall count as forbidden") and סח סח סח ("it shall be forbidden unto you") are employed. In Hab. 2:16 the Niphal form סח is used and it seems to mean "uncover your nakedness."

Notes to Chapter I

1. The rabbinic term סָּוֶה ("circumcision") occurs nowhere in the Bible; neither do the forms סָּוֶה ("circumcised") or סָּוֶה־ן ("circumciser") or any other forms of the root סָּוֶה occur. All terms in the Bible that denote circumcision are Kal or Niphal forms of the root סָּוֶה (Kal:3 perf. סָּוֶה , Josh. 5:4,7; Deut. 30:6; 2 perf. סָּוֶה־ן , Exod. 12:44; 3 perf. pl. סָּוֶה־וּם , Josh. 5:5,7; 2 perf. pl. סָּוֶה־וּם , Deut. 10:16; pt. pass., סָּוֶה , Jer. 9:24; pl. סָּוֶה־וּם , Josh. 5:5; imper. סָּוֶה Josh. 5:2; 3 impf. סָּוֶה־וּם Gen. 17:23; 21:4; Josh. 5:8. Niphal: 3 perf. סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:26; 3 perf. pl. סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:26; 2 perf. pl. סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:11; pt. pl. סָּוֶה־וּם Gen. 34:22; inf. סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:10, 13; 34:15,17,22; Exod. 12:48; Josh. 5:8; suff. סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:24,25; imper. pl. סָּוֶה־וּם Jer. 4:4; 3 impf. סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:12,13,14; 3 impf. pl. סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 34:24). There is but one nominative form, סָּוֶה־וּם (pl. of סָּוֶה־וּם), Exod. 4:26.

The root denoting uncircumcision סָּוֶה־וּם occurs twice in a verbal form, but in neither case does it have any connection with the rite of circumcision or to the prepuce. (סָּוֶה־וּם , Lev. 19:23; סָּוֶה־וּם , Hab. 2:16) All references to uncircumcision are either the nominative סָּוֶה־וּם (=foreskin, Gen. 34:14; Jer. 9:24; est. סָּוֶה־וּם , Exod. 4:25; Deut. 10:16; suff. סָּוֶה־וּם Gen. 17:11; סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:14,24,25; Lev. 12:3; סָּוֶה־וּם , Gen. 17:23; pl. סָּוֶה־וּם , Josh. 5:3; est. סָּוֶה־וּם I Sam. 18:25; II Sam. 3:14; Jer. 4:4; suff. סָּוֶה־וּם , I Sam. 18:27), or the denominative סָּוֶה־וּם (=uncircumcised, Gen. 17:14; Exod. 12:48; Lev. 26:41; I Sam. 17:26,36; Is. 52:1; est. סָּוֶה־וּם , Exod. 6:12; Exod. 6:30; Ezek. 44:9; pl. סָּוֶה־וּם Josh. 5:7; Jud. 14:3; 15:18; I Sam. 14:6; 31:4; II Sam. 1:20; Jer. 9:25;

Ezek. 28:10; 31:18; 32:19,21,24,25,26,27,28,29,30,32; I Chron. 10:4; est. לְיָדָם , Jer. 9:25, Ezek. 44:7; fem. sing. לְיָדָהּ , Jer. 6:10).

2. Bergmann: (Origine, Signification et histoire de la Castration, de l'eunuchisme et de la Circoucision, 1889) gives the untenable argument that the origin of circumcision is to be found in such practices as described in the story of David and the removal of the prepuces from the slain Philistines. For a discussion of this view see Remondino, "History of Circumcision" p. 28 f.

3. $\text{לְיָדָהּ לְיָדָהּ לְיָדָהּ}$. J.P.S. translates "all them that are circumcised in their uncircumcision; R.V. translates, "all them which are circumcised with the uncircumcised."

4. Assuming that this is an explanatory gloss the writer may have interpreted לְיָדָהּ לְיָדָהּ as R.V. does, to mean "the circumcised with the uncircumcised" and proceeded to explain לְיָדָהּ as referring to the uncircumcised nations who were uncircumcised in the flesh, and לְיָדָהּ as referring to Judah, ^{who} although circumcised in the flesh, was uncircumcised in the heart, and therefore deserving of God's punishment.

5. Cf. Kohn, Oth Brith, p. 5.

II Exodus 4:24-26

Generally considered by modern critical scholars to be the oldest reference to circumcision in the Bible is the very ambiguous and cryptic account in Exod. 4:24-26. It follows immediately upon the account that tells of Moses taking his wife and children with him on his return to Egypt¹ and presumably is intended to picture one of the incidents that took place on the journey. Practically all translators and commentators, from the very earliest times seem to have had considerable difficulty in giving a suitable translation or interpretation of this passage. A modern rendering, which seems to be as good as any from a literal standpoint reads: "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 of the circumcision.'"²

That this passage is of great antiquity can be seen from the very primitive and anthropomorphic picture of the deity that is here presented,³ the archaic use of flint in performing the circumcision, the fact that the operation is obviously a means of redemption, and the strange recitation of the formula by the mother.

The difficulties in Exod. 4:24-26 are self-evident and give immediate rise to a number of questions. First, whom did the deity seek to slay? Presumably, it was Moses if it be taken for granted that v.24 is directly connected with what precedes. However, it is the opinion of practically all critical scholars that Exod. 4:24-26 is completely divorced from what precedes and follows,

and is undoubtedly a fragment of a larger tradition or document that in a very early period became lost, and that in reality it has no visible connection with any other account or tradition in the Biblical record. Second, what was the reason for the attack by the deity, or what connection is there between the attack and the act of circumcision? Third, at whose feet did Zipporah cast the foreskin, at the feet of Moses, her son, or the deity, and of what significance was this act? Fourth, what is the significance of the formula that Zippora recites, and to whom does she speak it, to the deity, Moses or her son? Fifth, whom did the deity leave alone? And last, what is the meaning of the repetition of the formula, and particularly of the last word in the passage *וְהַיְהוָה*?

The difficulties and obscurities here enumerated seem to have been troublesome in whole or in part with all the translations and interpretations of the text. The result has been a number of widely differing expositions. The Septuagint took the liberty of attempting to interpret the formula recited by the mother, but otherwise translates almost literally. It renders the passage as follows: "It happened on the journey in the lodging place that the angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him. But Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at his feet and said, 'This is the blood of the circumcision of my son.' Then he went away from him, because she had said, 'This is the blood of the circumcision of my son.'"⁴

The Peshitta, although the most literal of the older versions, nevertheless, took the liberty of explicitly stating that it was Moses whom the deity sought to slay, by twice inserting the name of Moses where it does not occur in Massora. Thus it solved at least

one of the problems in the text. The passage is rendered: "Now while Moses was upon the journey at the lodging place the Lord attacked him and sought to kill him, viz. Moses. But Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at his feet and said, 'Thou art a bridegroom of blood to me.' Then he withdrew from him, because she had said, 'Bridegroom of blood' concerning the circumcision."

Targum Onkelos takes great liberty with the concluding part of the passage: "It happened on the way in the lodging place that the angel of the Lord attacked him and sought to kill him. But Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and drew near to him and said, 'Behold, through this blood of circumcision the bridegroom (or "child") has been given to us.' So he desisted from him because she had said, 'Had it not been for this blood of circumcision, the bridegroom would have incurred death.'"

Targum Jonathan gives a highly Midrashic interpretation of the passage: "And it was upon the journey in the lodging-house that the angel of the Lord attacked him and sought to kill him, because Gershom, his son, had not been circumcised; for Jethro, his father-in-law, had not permitted him to circumcise him. But Eliezer had been circumcised because of the agreement which both of them had agreed. And Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of Gershom, her son, and brought the severed foreskin near to the feet of the angel, the Destroyer, and said, 'The husband wanted to circumcise, but the father-in-law prevented. And now let the blood of this circumcision atone for my husband.' And the angel, the Destroyer, desisted from him, whereupon Zipporah

gave thanks and said, 'How precious is the blood of this circumcision, which has saved the husband from the hand of the angel of destruction.' "

Targum Yerushalmi gives an interpretation very similar to this. "(And Zipporah took a stone) and cut off the foreskin of her son and brought it near to the feet of the Destroyer¹, and said, 'The husband wanted to circumcise, but the father-in-law would not permit him. And now let the blood of this circumcision atone for the shortcoming of my husband!' And when the Destroyer had desisted from him, Zipporah gave thanks and said, 'How precious is the blood of this circumcision, which has saved the bridegroom from the hands of the angel of death!'"⁵

Notes to Chapter II

1. Exod. 4:20.
2. The translation is the one rendered by the Jewish Publication Society. It does not differ measurably from R.V.
3. The Septuagint and the Targumim try to remove the apparent anthropomorphism by saying that it was "an angel of the Lord" who took part in the incident. Targum Jonathan also describes the attacker as "the angel of death" and Targum Jerushalmi calls him "the Destroyer". The Rabbinic tradition likewise has been to describe the attacker as "an angel of the Lord". Cf. Mekilta Amalek chap. 3 and Rashi to this passage.
4. This rendering and those of the other versions follow the translations given in Dr. Julian Morgenstern's unpublished work "Rites of Birth, Marriage and Death and Kindred Occasions."
5. Another version of this text has $\text{מַלְאָכִים} \text{ מְהַרְגִּים} =$ "angel of destruction".

III Rabbinic Interpretations of Exodus 4:24-26

A comparative study of the different versions fails to clear up the numerous obscurities in the text of Exod. 4:24-26. Rather do the versions indicate conclusively that they are all based on a text that differed little or in no way from the present Massora, and that the variations in translation are due either to the arbitrary interpretation of the translator or to an interpretation that was based on some traditional exposition of the text. The rabbinic interpretations likewise fail to give a satisfactory explanation and on the whole are Midrashic in character.

Mekilta¹ Amalek, chap. 3, gives the following interpretation of the text: "Rabbi² says: Great is circumcision, for all the merits of Moses availed him not in the time of his trouble about it. He was going to bring out Israel from Egypt and yet because for one hour he was negligent about the performance of circumcision, the angel sought to kill him, as it is said: 'And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place', etc. (Exod. 4:24). R. Jose says: God forbid! to think that this righteous man neglected the duty of circumcision even for one hour! But should he perform the circumcision and immediately go on his journey--there is risk of life.³ Should he perform the circumcision and tarry a while--⁴ God had told him: 'Go and bring out Israel from Egypt!'⁵ It was merely because he relaxed and thought of lodging before performing the circumcision, that the angel sought to kill him.⁶ For it is said: 'And it came to pass on the way, at the lodging place,' etc. R. Simeon b. Gamliel says: The angel⁷ sought to kill not Moses but the child. For it is said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou to me' (v.25). You must reason; Go and

see who could have been designated bridegroom? Moses or the child? You must say: the child".⁸

The question raised by R. Simeon b. Gamliel as to whether it was Moses or the child who was called "bridegroom" is discussed at further length in Yerushalmi Nedarim 3:9. "There is a difference between Tannaim here, the one maintaining that it was Moses who was called 'bridegroom', the other maintaining that it was the child who was called 'bridegroom'. He who maintains it was Moses who was called 'bridegroom', (interprets Zipporah as saying to Moses) 'Husband, blood is required of thee',⁹ And he who maintains it was the child who was called 'bridegroom', (interprets Zipporah as saying to the child), 'Child of the covenant, a high price is paid for thee.'"¹⁰

In the same passage in Y. Nedarim the rabbis¹¹ discuss the meaning of *וְזִפְּוֹרָה הִטְּאֹתָיו*, which is usually translated "And she (Zipporah) cast it (the foreskin) at his feet", but which some of the rabbis render, "And it (the foreskin) touched his feet." One of the rabbis interpreted *וְזִפְּוֹרָה הִטְּאֹתָיו* to mean that the foreskin of the child touched the person of Moses¹². Another said that Zipporah cast the foreskin at the feet of the angel, saying to him "Here, you have fulfilled your mission"¹³. Another said, *וְזִפְּוֹרָה הִטְּאֹתָיו* means Zipporah touched the body of the child with the flint.¹⁴

In commenting on the unusual form of *וְזִפְּוֹרָה*, it is maintained in this same passage, that the plural form of the word is to teach regarding the several acts in the performance of circumcision, namely, Milah (cutting off the foreskin), Periah (laying bare the corona) and Mezizah (sucking out the wound).

A highly fantastic interpretation of Exod. 4:24-26 is given in Exodus Rabba 5:8: "Precious is circumcision for it was not to be suspended by Moses for even a moment. Therefore, when he was on the way and stopped at the lodging-place, and neglected to circumcise Eliezer,¹⁵ his son, immediately, 'the Lord met him and sought to kill him'. You find that he was an angel of mercy despite the fact (that scripture states) 'and he sought to kill him'.----Whence did Zipporah know that Moses had endangered himself because of the matter of the circumcision? The angel came and swallowed Moses from his head to his membrum. When Zipporah saw that he had swallowed him only up to the membrum she recognized that he was being endangered because of the matter of circumcision, and she knew how great was the power of circumcision, for he was not able to swallow him beyond that.¹⁶ Immediately 'she cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at his feet¹⁷; and she said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou to me'; (that is), she said:¹⁸'You are my bridegroom; you are given to me through the merit of this blood of circumcision; for behold I have fulfilled the commandment.' Immediately, the angel let him alone. 'Then she said: 'A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision'; (that is), she said, 'How great is the power of circumcision, for my bridegroom was guilty of death because he neglected to perform the commandment of circumcision, and were it not for it (the fact that the circumcision took place) he would not have been saved.'¹⁹

One of the difficulties that the rabbis had to contend with was the fact that Zipporah, a woman, had performed the circumcision. The rabbinic tradition was that only one who was circumcised could

perform circumcision on another.²⁰ Hence only a male could qualify as the circumciser. Naturally, it was pointed out that the case of Zipporah would prove that a woman also is qualified, since Scripture states "And Zipporah took a flint and she cut off the foreskin of her son."²¹ In answer to this it was suggested that

הָיָה לָהּ "she caused to take" be read for הָיָה לָהּ, "she took", and that הָיָה לָהּ "And she caused it to be cut off" for הָיָה לָהּ "she cut off"; i.e. she caused another, a man, to take the flint and perform the operation. It was also suggested that Zipporah only began the circumcision and Moses completed it.²²

Notes to Chapter III

1. (Edited and translated by Jacob Z. Lauterbach, J.P.S. Philadelphia 1933.) The same passage with some variations is quoted in Yerushalmi Nedarim 3:9; Nedarim 31b; Midrash Hagadol (Ed. Hoffman) p 41. Cf also Exod. Rabba 5:8; Yalkut Shimoni 81.
2. Rabbi Judah Hanasi. The same statement is quoted in Nedarim 31b in the name of R. Joshua b. Korha.
3. During the first three days of circumcision, on the basis of Gen. 39:25: "And it came to pass on the third day when they were sore", implying that up to and including the third day there is danger of life from circumcision. So Nedarim 31b.
4. For three days, after which the child would be out of danger.
5. Nedarim 31b and Y. Nedarim 3:9 have "Go return unto Egypt". (Exod. 4:19)
6. Midrash Hagadol teaches the lesson that "if Moses, that righteous man, because he busied himself with lodging before circumcision, the angel sought to kill him, how much the more so with ordinary men."
7. Nedarim 32 a (top) has "Satan".
8. Since the expression $\text{נָּוֶן} / \text{נָּוֶן}$ follows immediately upon "And Zipporah circumcised her son," etc. Since Zipporah spoke the formula to the child, it was evidently he who was attacked. In M. Niddah 5:3 the term $\text{נָּוֶן} / \text{נָּוֶן}$ is used with reference to a child: "A boy one day old (as regards mourning ceremonies) is counted as a full $\text{נָּוֶן} / \text{נָּוֶן}$ to his parents and relatives." Jastrow, p 514b, translates $\text{נָּוֶן} / \text{נָּוֶן}$ here, "a perfect circumcised child."
9. The commentary to Yerushalmi, Karban Ha'Edah renders

this: "Zipporah said to Moses, 'You who are my husband, the blood of the child is demanded of you.'"

10. So Jastrow translates (p. 514b). Karban Ha'Edah adds the comment, "For had I not circumcised you, you would have been killed."

11. R. Judah, R. Nehemiah and the Sages.

12. Karban Ha'Edah explains that when Zipporah saw that the danger was on account of the circumcision, she took a flint and gave it to Moses and said to him "Here, cut off the debt that you owe." Zipporah did not perform the operation since a woman is forbidden to circumcise. Therefore, when Moses drew near to the child in order to circumcise him, the foreskin of the child touched his (Moses') legs.

13. Karban Ha'Edah adds: "Therefore go away from me."

14. Because of the great haste, she not only circumcised the child but accidentally touched the flint to another part of his body and cut him there also. So Karban Ha'edah.

15. Rashi (Exod 4:24) likewise states that it was Eliezer. Targum Jonathan, however, states that Eliezer had already been circumcised, and it was Gershom who had not been circumcised.

16. Rashi (ibid) gives a similar account: "The angel became a kind of serpent and swallowed him from his head to the membrum, and then swallowed him from his legs to the membrum. Then Zipporah knew that it was because of the circumcision." In Nedarim 32a, R. Judah b. Biznah makes the statement; "When Moses was negligent in the performance of circumcision, 'Af' and 'Hemah' (personification of wrath and anger) came and swallowed him,

leaving only his legs. Thereupon, immediately 'Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son, and so immediately, 'he let him (Moses) alone.'"

17. Evidently at the feet of Moses.

18. Evidently to Moses. Rashi (Exod 4:25) has: "She said to her son, 'You have brought it about so that my bridegroom (Moses) would have been murdered on your account; you would have been to me my husband's slayer."

19. Rashi similarly renders *וְהָיָה בְּיָמֶיךָ* : "My bridegroom would have been killed on account of the circumcision."

20. The basis for this is Gen. 17:13, *וְהָיָה בְּיָמֶיךָ* ("must needs be circumcised") which for exegetical purposes the rabbis sometimes read *וְהָיָה בְּיָמֶיךָ* ("One who is circumcised shall circumcise") Cf. Genesis Rabba 46:12, Abodah Zorah 27a.

21. *לָקַח* "took" and *וַיִּכְרֹם* "cut off" are feminine.

22. Abodah Zorah 27 a.

IV Critical Views on Exodus 4:24-26

Exod. 4:24-26 has been placed by modern scholars with almost complete unanimity in the J code. But attempts even by modern critical scholarship to interpret this passage satisfactorily have not met with overwhelming success. The same obscurities that troubled the early translators and the rabbis have been the obstacles in the way of all critical research on this difficult passage. The terseness of the passage is such that every interpretation becomes the result of reading into it much that is not there. Among the modern interpretations, the one most widely accepted has been that of Wellhausen.¹ Wellhausen, whose view has likewise been advanced by scholars of no less authority than W. Robertson Smith, Marti, Stade, Bertholet, H. P. Smith and many others, holds that circumcision in Israel was originally a puberty rite, a kind of barbaric test of maturity which the youth had to undergo before he could marry. The relationship between circumcision and marriage is implied in the Dinah and Shechem story in Gen. 34. Here the brothers of Dinah compel Shechem to undergo the rite as a preliminary to his marriage with their sister.² Likewise in Exod. 4:24-26 the necessity for the bridegroom to undergo circumcision as a requirement for marriage is implied even more directly in the use of the formula *וְהָיָה בְּיָמֵינוּ*. Moses, a married man, has not been circumcised and it is for this that the deity attacks him. But Zipporah circumcises her infant son instead of her husband, and, by touching the genitals of her husband with the bloody foreskin of the child, she indicates that the circumcision of the child is equivalent in a modified form to the original pre-marital circumcision of the young men. In

other words, here is a clear-cut indication that circumcision did not originally take place in infancy, but at the age of puberty or prior to marriage. The circumcision of the infant by Zipporah was but a vicarious method of redeeming Moses from the deity whose wrath had been kindled because of the failure of Moses to have undergone the rite himself. Wellhausen, besides using Gen. 34 and Exod 4:24-26 as support for his hypothesis, also points to Gen. 17:25 where it is stated that Ishmael was circumcised in his thirteenth year, and to the practice of some Arab tribes in carrying out the rite at about this age, as further evidence that circumcision was originally connected with puberty and was a prerequisite to marriage.³

A more recent interpretation of Exod. 4:24-26 differing from that of Wellhausen has been offered by Dr. Julian Morgenstern.⁴ Dr. Morgenstern holds that Exod 4:24-26 is not a part of J, but a fragment of an earlier document of a Kenite background and origin which he calls K and regards as the oldest document of the Hexateuch. In the account of the circumcision in Exodus, Moses does not figure at all, other than perhaps, as a helpless onlooker. The characters are the deity, Zipporah and her infant son. The scene of the narrative is at the circumcision of the child, the lodging-place playing no part at all.⁵ Yahweh attacked the young son of Moses and Zipporah, seeking to kill him, but Zipporah took a flint, circumcised her son and threw the severed foreskin at Yahweh's feet, while she said to her son 'Verily thou art a blood-relative to me'. Whereupon Yahweh left the child alone. Thus she inaugurated the custom of the mother reciting this formula at the circumcision of their sons. This narrative does not mark

so much the beginning of the circumcision rite in Israel, as the custom by the mother of reciting the regular formula $\text{וְיָצֵא} / \text{וְיָצֵא}$ וְיָצֵא . Much of the strength of Dr. Morgenstern's argument is derived from the statement by R. Simeon b. Gamliel that it was the child who was attacked and to whom the formula was addressed, and not Moses⁶; and likewise from the Mishnaic use of $\text{וְיָצֵא} / \text{וְיָצֵא}$ with probable reference to a recently circumcised child.⁷

The account in Exod. 4:24-26 Dr. Morgenstern holds, reflects the ancient system of marriage that Robertson Smith designates as *be'ena* marriage⁸. Under this system the wife and her children always remain with the former's tribe. Such marriages are seldom permanent, and are generally for a stipulated period. With the termination of the marriage the husband returns to his own tribe, that is, to his mother's tribe. The permanent affiliation of the husband is with his own mother and sisters, and of the wife and her children, with her own tribe. Moses had contracted such a marriage with Zipporah of the Kenite tribe. Now under this system of marriage the oldest brother of the wife is the head of the clan and it is his prerogative to circumcise the male offspring of his sister or sisters. He is called the $\text{וְיָצֵא} / \text{וְיָצֵא}$ or "circumciser".⁹ The child who is circumcised is designated $\text{וְיָצֵא} / \text{וְיָצֵא}$. The circumcision had a two-fold purpose, the removal of taboo, or to redeem the child from the evil power that threatened, and to initiate the child into the ordinary profane life of the tribe and into all the tribal relationships. The blood that was shed during the rite symbolized the blood-relationship between the child and all the members of the tribe. Now in the case of Moses and Zipporah the $\text{וְיָצֵא} / \text{וְיָצֵא}$ was Hobab,¹⁰ Zipporah's oldest brother, and it was he who

should have performed the circumcision of his sister's male offspring. But contrary to the fundamental principles of *be'ena* marriage Zipporah leaves her tribe to accompany Moses. The child is born either shortly before they set out, or upon the journey, but at any rate he has not been circumcised. Now under the conditions of *be'ena* marriage the child should have belonged to the tribe of the mother, and the tribal deity, seeing himself about to be deprived of his due, tries to kill the child. But Zipporah acts in the emergency and carries out the function which normally belonged to her oldest brother, the *אֵלֶּיךָ*, and in circumcising the child herself and throwing the foreskin at the feet of the deity, and in pronouncing a formula by which the blood-relationship between the child and herself and consequently between the child and her tribe and deity is established, she appeases the deity and thereby saves the child's life. The formula which Zipporah recites means no more than "Surely one related by blood, i.e. the blood of circumcision, art thou to me," or in other words, "Surely thou art now a full member of my tribe." Dr. Morgenstern would retain v. 26 b (*וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אֵלֶיךָ*) as it stands and render it, "On that occasion, she (Zipporah) said *אֵלֶיךָ* at the circumcision", meaning that she was the first to use this expression, and thereby she instituted the custom of mothers calling their sons *אֵלֶיךָ* at circumcision.

On the basis of this, Dr. Morgenstern attempts to refute Wellhausen's contention that circumcision in Israel was originally a pre-marital or puberty rite, and at the same time attempts to prove that the account in Exod. 4:24-26 reflects the practice of this rite in infancy or early childhood.

There are several flaws in Dr. Morgenstern's thesis. In the first place he translates *pidna* in v 24 "at the circumcision" rather than the conventional "at the lodging-place." If so, then it was during the performance of the rite that the deity attacked the child; and yet, ^{Dr.} Morgenstern holds that it was because the child was uncircumcised that he was attacked. For the child to be attacked on the one hand while he was being circumcised, and on the other hand only because he was uncircumcised, is evidently self-contradictory. In the second place the attempt to connect the incident in Exod. 4:24-26 with *be'ena* marriage would tend to destroy the whole hypothesis of *be'ena* marriage rather than support it. In *be'ena* marriage it is the *hah*, the child's oldest maternal uncle who performs the circumcision; here the mother performs the rite. To say that the mother was merely substituting for her brother because she was leaving her tribe, is, as Dr. Morgenstern himself admits, contrary to the fundamental principal of *be'ena* marriage, namely, that the wife or mother and her children never leave the tribe. The attempt to build up the relationship between the *hah* and *hah*, (i.e. that the *hah*, was the oldest maternal uncle who circumcised his sisters child, the *hah*, and that the *hah* correspondingly was the circumcised of the *hah*, implying that originally *hah* could only mean maternal uncle to his sister's child and not brother-in-law to his sister's husband), is likewise untenable. The only occurrence of the word *hah* in the Bible where it refers to Zipporah's brother is used in connection with the name of Moses. Hobab is the *hah* of Moses¹¹ and not of his sister's children. Furthermore, *hah*, since it means "one who is circumcised by the *hah*", would imply a direct relationship

between the child and his maternal uncle, and not between the child and his mother. Yet Zipporah says, "You have become a son of blood to me", implying that the relationship is a direct one between mother and child. Finally, Dr. Morgenstern takes the liberty of proposing what cannot under any circumstances be read into the text, such as, that the child was born shortly before or during the journey. In truth, most of the proofs that Dr. Morgenstern brings to advance the be'ena marriage connection of the circumcision operate to disprove the very premise he has set up.

Between the Wellhausen and Morgenstern hypothesis regarding the interpretation of Exod. 4:24-26, the burden of proof would seem to lie more on the Wellhausen side. But assuming that Wellhausen is correct in his hypothesis that Exod. 4:24-26 reflects the original practice of circumcision on a pre-marital basis, it would be much easier to say that it was Moses who underwent the rite and not the child, just as in the J version of Gen. 34 it is Shechem who goes through with the rite and not someone else who substitutes vicariously for him. That Moses was the one whom Zipporah circumcised can be arrived at through the very simple emendation of removing the word וְיָאֵל from v. 25 and reading וְיָאֵל אֶת זִיפּוֹרָה. It is quite understandable that the word וְיָאֵל should have been inserted into the text as a harmonistic gloss at a time when the Abrahamic tradition of performing the operation on the eighth day was already in full force. Under the later Abrahamic tradition it would have been inconceivable that Moses, a fully grown married man, and the greatest figure in Israelitic history and legend, should as yet be uncircumcised. The account in Exod. 4:24-26 would then tell of the attempt on the part of

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what did y
do with
in v. 26

the deity to kill Moses because he had married and had not gone through the preliminary act of circumcision. Zipporah, however, saves her husband by circumcising him at the crucial moment. The operation completed, she throws or touches the bloody foreskin at the feet of Moses (or perhaps the deity) and recites the formula "Thou art a bridegroom of blood to me", meaning, "You have become eligible to be my husband through the blood of the rite of circumcision." This accomplished the deity lets Moses alone.

Obviously, this is an attempt to place the origin of the pre-marital form of circumcision with Moses, and likewise to place the origin of the formula recited at such occasions with Zipporah. The last part of the passage (v 26 b) can then be understood to mean, "Therefore do they say (reading וְנָתַתָּה for וְנָתַתָּה)¹² 'Bridegroom of blood' at circumcisions" (i.e. for this reason it is the custom at the circumcision for the bride to say to the bridegroom, "Thou art a bridegroom of blood to me.")

It is impossible to determine at whose feet Zipporah casts the foreskin, i.e. whether it is Moses or the deity to whom the pronominal suffix in וְנָתַתָּה refers. If it refers to Moses the act is inexplicable; if to the deity, perhaps it represents an appeasement offering. At any rate the answer can be arrived at only through pure guesswork, and this part of the text must remain an insoluble mystery.

✓ But, as stated previously, there can be no conclusive interpretation of this very cryptic passage, for the simple reason that not enough is presented in the text to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. In reality, the most that Exod. 4:24-26 can tell us, whether on the basis of Wellhausen's interpretation or

on the basis of an interpretation that would delete the word ~~2/2~~ from the text, is that Moses was uncircumcised. Hence at one time there must have been a tradition separate from Gen. 34 and Gen. 17, that held that before Moses circumcision was not practiced in Israel, either because it began with Moses and not with Abraham, or else because the practice of this rite was interrupted during the sojourn in Egypt. Perhaps the answer to this will be found in Josh. 5:2-9.

Notes to Chapter IV

1. Reste des Altarabischen Heidentums. p. 175, Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels p.339, note.

2. Genesis 34 is a composite of two narratives, one generally assigned to J, the other to E. The exact placement of all the verses in the two recensions has not yet been determined. According to Ball (Book of Genesis-Polychrome Edition) in the older narrative (J), Shechem takes Dinah, the daughter of Jacob to his house (cf v 26), has sexual intercourse with her (v 2b) and finding himself in love with the maiden, (v 3a) he determines to take her for his wife. Jacob hears of the defilement of his daughter, but prefers to remain silent until his sons come from the field (v 5). The sons of Jacob upon hearing what happened, become filled with rage. (v 7). Shechem speaks to Dinah's father and brothers and offers to undergo any condition which they may impose if they will let Dinah become his wife (v 12). The sons of Jacob answer him deceitfully (v 13a) and probably demand that he undergo circumcision as a preliminary to his marriage. (In Ball's arrangement of the verses there is no mention of circumcision in the J. narrative). Shechem does not delay in carrying out their condition (v 19). Two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, brothers of Dinah, take the sword and slay Shechem and remove their sister from his house (vv 25a, 26). Jacob reproaches Simeon and Levi for their act of vengeance, pointing out that the other inhabitants of the land may rise up against him for this. They justify their action on the ground that their sister had been dealt with as a harlot (vv 30, 39)

In the other narrative (E) Shechem, the son of Hamor the

Hivite (or according to the Septuagint, the Horite) falls in love with Dinah and asks his father to get her to be his wife. (vv 2a,4) Hamor comes to Jacob and proposes not only a marriage between Dinah and Shechem but a general scheme of intermarriage between both clans whereby Jacob's clan will take his daughters and his clan Jacob's daughters. Furthermore, he invites Jacob to dwell in the land and to carry on trade therein (vv 6,8-10). The sons of Jacob agree to this on condition that every male in Hamor's clan become circumcised. This suits Hamor, and he and Shechem go to the gate of the city where they persuade their people to undergo the rite (vv 15-18, 20-25). While they are still recuperating from the operation, the sons of Jacob steal upon the city, attack and kill all the male members of the tribe, taking the women and children captive and despoiling the city of everything it contained (v 25-29). Cf. also Skinner, Genesis (I.C.C.) p 417 f. where a slightly different arrangement of the verses in Gen. 34 is presented.

3. Dr. Morgenstern (Rites of Birth, Death, Marriage and Kindred Occasions) correctly points out that the account of Ishmael's circumcision in his thirteenth year can not be presented as evidence for the practice of this rite in puberty any more than the fact that Abraham was circumcised in his ninety-ninth year should prove that some of his descendants performed the rite at that hoary age. He also points out that the overwhelming majority of Arabs practice this rite long before puberty, and only rarely at the age of puberty. Wellhausen may have been under the influence of the statement made by Josephus that the Arabians "circumcise after the thirteenth year, because Ishmael, the founder

of their nation---was circumcised at that age" (Antiquities I, Ch. XII, 2). Regarding Wellhausen's attempt to point to Gen. 34 as evidence for the pre-marital origin of circumcision, Dr. Morgenstern writes, "In the J version of the story, Shechem is circumcised alone, or at the most, together with the male members of his father's house, and in the E version, together with all the males of the city, apparently both married and unmarried, child as well as adult, and not merely the men of marriageable age. Thus, neither version conveys anything of the thought which Wellhausen reads into it, viz. that circumcision was essentially a marriage rite, for in such case Shechem alone should have been circumcised at this time and all other males only on the occasion of their own marriages. But instead of this the J version tells no more than that for an Israelite maiden to marry an uncircumcised man would be a disgrace; but this implied nothing other than the old Israelite practice of the circumcision of males in early childhood, and by no means that it was an attendant marriage rite; since Shechem had not been circumcised as a child, naturally he had to be circumcised now before marriage".

"Moreover, the E version tells that the people of Shechem adopted the Israelite rite of circumcision; and as all the evidence indicates, this was performed very early in childhood, and never as a rite immediately preliminary to marriage. Accordingly, all the males of the city--- were circumcised in conformity with the principles of circumcision as practiced in Israel. In other words the tradition in Genesis 34, in either version, does not evidence any connection at all between the rite of circumcision

and marriage, other than that marriage was certainly, according to the Israelite practice, the latest possible date at which circumcision might be performed, and that, accordingly, an uncircumcised person was ^{not} qualified to marry."

4. Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions among the Semites, as yet unpublished and therefore lacking in pagination. Cf. also by the same author 'The Oldest Document of the Hexateuch' H.U.C.A. 1927 pp 51 f.

5. ^{Dr.} Morgenstern holds that *sin* is a katalan form of *sin* (to circumcise) and not a maktal form of *sin* (to tarry or lodge). Cf. 'The Oldest Document of the Hexateuch' p 51, note 65.

6. Mekilta Amalek Chap. 3.

7. M. Niddah 5:3

8. Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia. pp 86 ff

9. On the meaning of the word *sin*, Dr. Morgenstern writes: "In the typical beena marriage, where paternity was unstable, if as a rule known at all with any certainty, and the children remained with their mother and were accounted members of her clan, and her husband or husbands were, perhaps, admitted into her clan, at least temporarily, the head of the clan was, of course, as Robertson Smith has shown so clearly, the mother's oldest brother. Regardless of who it was that was circumcised, he would be the natural, if not the sole person to perform this rite; he, therefore, would be the *sin*, the "circumciser". Hence undoubtedly under the conditions of true be ena, --- *sin*, "circumciser" could not have meant father-in-law, nor yet "brother-in-law", but only primarily the oldest brother of his sister when she became the mother of children, and therefore the senior uncle of

her children, regardless of whether these were by one or more husbands; and only secondarily and remotely could it have meant the oldest brother of the wife of the stranger-husband, whose identity might not have been known. In other words, the term $\text{אָה}^{\text{א}}$ must have designated originally the relationship of the oldest brother to his sister's children, and not at all his relationship to her husband or husbands, whom he might not even have known and never have seen.---- Actually, it was the children of his sister or sisters whom the $\text{אָה}^{\text{א}}$ circumcised, and not her or their husbands at all." (Rites of Birth, Marriage and Death)

Elsewhere in the same work Dr. Morgenstern writes: "Under the conditions of transition from בֵּנָא to בָּאָל marriage (in which the husband takes the wife with him) $\text{אָה}^{\text{א}}$ gradually took on the secondary meaning "father-in-law" rather than "brother-in-law". And as בָּאָל marriage eventually became the normal form of marriage in Israel, and among the Semitic peoples in general, the meaning father-in-law for $\text{אָה}^{\text{א}}$, although actually a secondary or even a tertiary, development, became established as the common, colloquial meaning of the word, and the original meaning, "brother-in-law" was eventually almost completely forgotten."

10. In Num. 10:29-32 Hobab is called the $\text{אָה}^{\text{א}}$ of Moses.

11. Num. 10:29

12. So Ehrlich emends. (Randglossen zur hebraischen Bibel, I, 271) Ehrlich holds that v 26 b should be regarded as an independent editorial comment, and the passage rendered, "At that time (i.e. in the days of Moses) they said $\text{אָה}^{\text{א}}$ at circumcision."

V Joshua 5:2-9

Joshua 5:2-9 reads as follows:

2"At that time¹ the Lord said unto Joshua: 'Make thee knives of flint and circumcise again² the children of Israel the second time².' 3. And Joshua made him knives of flint, and circumcised the children of Israel at Gibeath-ha-araloth. 4. And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise; all the people that came forth out of Egypt, that were males, even all the men of war, died in the wilderness by the way, after they came forth out of Egypt. 5. For all the people that came out were uncircumcised; but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt had not been circumcised. 6. For the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, till all the nation, even the men of war that came forth out of Egypt were consumed, because they hearkened not to the voice of the Lord; unto whom the Lord swore that He would not let them see the land which the Lord swore unto their fathers that he would give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. 7. And He raised up their children in their stead; them did Joshua circumcise; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised by the way.³ 8. And it came to pass, when all the nation were circumcised, every one of them, that they abode in their places in the camp, till they were whole. 9. And the Lord said unto Joshua: 'This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you.' Wherefore the name of that place was called Gilgal unto this day."

A critical study of this passage reveals a number of irreconcilable difficulties which indicate clearly that it is made up of more than one stratum. In v 2 Joshua is told to circumcise

the people a second time, but there is no record of an incident during which the children of Israel were circumcised the first time. Obviously, the words *אֵל* "again" and *שֵׁנִי* "the second time" are either redactorial additions or marginal glosses that crept into the text. The words are not present in some of the Greek versions. The writer was prompted to insert them because he was probably attempting to harmonize vv 2-3 with the Abrahamic tradition regarding the origin of circumcision. Vv 2-3 together with vv 8-9 undoubtedly represent a tradition, separate from Genesis 17 and older than it, which held that the institution of this rite took place under Joshua shortly before the penetration into the land. Scholars generally assign these verses to J. Vv. 4-7 read almost like a rabbinic comment on vv. 1-2 and are likewise later additions which also attempt to harmonize the original passage with the Abrahamic tradition. These verses are regarded by some as Deuteronomistic expansions⁴, by others as the work of P, and by still others, together with the interpolated words in v 2, as the work of an even later writer than P.⁵

The J account relates that Joshua was told to make knives of flint and to circumcise the people. This he did, carrying out the rite at Gibeath Ha'araloth, "the hill of foreskins." Obviously, the attempt here is to associate a legend with the name of a place. In vv 8-9, the direct continuation of vv 2-3, we are told that after everyone had been circumcised they sat in the camp until they were healed, and we are given the reason for the circumcision; to roll away the "reproach of Egypt". For this, was the place where they encamped called "Gilgal", i.e. "rolling away".⁶

The striking feature of the J account is that it reveals a tradition which maintained that circumcision was not practiced

in Israel before the encampment at Gilgal, and which connected the neglect of the practice in some way with Egypt. But the meaning of "today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt" is not clear. Some writers believe the passage reveals that the Israelites had been uncircumcised during their sojourn in Egypt and the neglect of this had excited the reproach of the circumcised Egyptians. The circumcision at Gilgal repaired this.⁷ It has also been suggested that the Hebrews were prohibited the use of this rite during the Egyptian period, circumcision being the distinctive mark of the ruling race.⁸ At any rate, either view would conform somewhat with Exod. 4:24-26 which implies that Moses, an Egyptian Israelite, was uncircumcised until the incident on the journey. Herodotus,⁹ writing in the fifth century B.C.E. tells us that "the Colchians, and Egyptians, and the Ethiopians are the only nations who have practiced circumcision from the earliest times. The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine themselves confess that they learnt the custom of the Egyptians." Evidently, by "the Syrians of Palestine" Herodotus means the Jews.¹⁰ Possibly, in the time of Herodotus a tradition still persisted that Israel had borrowed circumcision from the Egyptians, and Joshua 5:9 may be a remnant of this tradition.

Vv. 4-7, as stated, are an attempt to harmonize the previous verses with the Abrahamic tradition of Gen. 17. The writer in saying that all the males were circumcised when they left Egypt, thus removes any chance of suggestion that vv. 2-3 contradict Gen. 17, or that circumcision had not been practiced before this time, or that the institution of the rite took place for the first time at Gilgal. Therefore, it was necessary for him to state why this wholesale circumcision of the people took place here. His

answer is a contradiction of the J account which makes the rite a removal of the "reproach of Egypt; but in an almost Midrashic style, he tells us that all of the old generation that had been born in Egypt had died on the way, while those born during the forty years wandering had not been circumcised. Perhaps he also had in mind Gen. 17:8, wherein, in connection with the covenant of circumcision the promise to Abraham of the land of Canaan is made. Thus, because the older generation had been lax in hearkening to God, one of their laxities being the failure to circumcise their children, it became necessary, in accordance with the covenant of Gen. 17, for the new generation to be circumcised before they entered the land.

Notes to Chapter V

1. Between the tenth and fourteenth of the first month.

In 4:19 it is stated: "And the people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month and encamped in Gilgal, on the east border of Jerico". In 5:10 it is stated: "And the children of Israel encamped in Gilgal; and they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at even in the plains of Jerico." Thus it appears that the circumcision took place just before the Passover.

2. Lacking in some of the Greek texts.

3. Vv. 4-7 have a widely different reading in the Septuagint.

4. Cf Bennett, The Book of Joshua (Polychrome Bible)

5. Cf Dictionary of the Bible (ed. Hastings) II p 771, article Joshua by G. H. Smith

6. This is a poor explanation of Gilgal. Gilgal generally means "a wheel of a chariot" (Is. 28:28; Jer. 47:3) or a "stone-circle" (Cf. Dictionary of the Bible, ed. Hastings II, p 781 b) There is an obvious contradiction between v.3 and v.9; v.3 attempts to associate the account of the circumcision with Gibeath Ha'araloth; and v.9 with Gilgal.

7. Cf. *ibid.*

8. Cf. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia I p 656 b, article "Circumcision" by T. Lewis. Pirke de R. Eliezer ch. 29 makes the assertion that circumcision was prohibited to Israel in Egypt.

9. Book II, Ch. 104 (ed. Rawlinson)

10. Radin (Jews Among the Greeks and Romans, p. 80) writes, "He (Herodotus) obviously writes at second hand, so that we have no means of knowing whether or not he refers to Jews. That he

knew the name 'Ιουδαῖοι (Jew) is not likely, but the fact that his source was probably a literary one makes it possible to date the acquaintance of Greeks with the practice of circumcision in this region, and, therefore, perhaps with Jews, at least to the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E." Herodotus, however, himself testifies that he was "in that part of Syria called Palestine" (Book II, 106) so that his information is undoubtedly first hand. Josephus (Antiquities, Book VIII, Ch. X, 3) commenting on Herodotus' statement that the Syrians in Palestine learned circumcision from the Egyptians, says, "Yet it is evident, that no other of the Syrians that live in Palestine, besides us alone, are circumcised; but as to such matters let everyone speak what is agreeable to his own opinion." Josephus here discredits Herodotus' statement as being baseless, but the fact that he too uses the name "Syrians" with reference to the Jews would indicate that Herodotus likewise had the Jews in mind. Cf also, Against Apion, Book I, sec. 22). In Deut. 26:5 the word *כנעני*, usually translated "Syrian", is used with reference to Israel.

VI Rabbinic Comments on Josh. 5:2-9

Since Scripture had stated that Joshua was told to circumcise the children of Israel a second time, this naturally invited speculation by the Rabbis regarding the first circumcision. With Scriptural evidence that the whole nation was uncircumcised at Gilgal, many questions arose, such as, Who carried out the sacrificial laws during the forty years wandering, since only the circumcised could enter the sanctuary of God?¹, and, How could the people partake of the Passover offering, if, according to Exod. 12:48, no uncircumcised person could eat of it? In answer to the first question the Sifri² has the following: "R. Simeon b. Yohai said: The Israelites did not offer up sacrifice (in the wilderness). Then who offered the sacrifice? The tribe of Levi, as it is said³, 'They put incense before thee and whole burnt offering upon thine alter'; and Scripture also says, 'Then Moses stood at the gate of the camp and said: Whoso is on the Lord's side let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him.'⁴ The Israelites worshipped idolatry, but the Levites did not worship idolatry, (as it is said), 'For they have observed thy word and have kept thy covenant.'⁵ (Moreover Scripture says), 'For all the people that came out were circumcised; but all the people that were born in the wilderness____had not been circumcised.'⁶ The Israelites were not circumcised. Then who was? The tribe of Levi, as it is said, 'And they have kept thy covenant'⁷ Hence, as this homily points out, because they were uncircumcised, as well as for their other disqualifications, the Israelites were not permitted to offer up

sacrifice, whereas the Levites, who were circumcised and obeyed the word of God, were given that privilege.

Midrash Tanhuma⁸ gives a similar statement: "During the time when the Israelites were in Egypt they rejected the Torah and circumcision and all of them became idolaters----What did God do? He brought darkness upon Egypt for three days⁹ and in them slew all the wicked of Israel---- But as for the tribe of Levi, all of them were righteous and they observed the Torah, as it is said, 'For they have observed thy word'¹⁰--this is Torah, 'And they have kept thy covenant'¹⁰ --this is circumcision."¹¹

Another view, however, was that Israel did not wilfully give up circumcision in Egypt. Pirke de R. Eliezer chap. 29 holds that the sons of Jacob were all circumcised¹² and that they circumcised their sons and grandsons, handing down circumcision "as an inheritance for an everlasting statute, until Pharaoh, the Wicked, arose and decreed harsh laws against them and withheld from them the covenant of circumcision. But on the day when the children of Israel went forth from Egypt, all the people, young and old were circumcised, as it is said, 'For all the people that came out were circumcised.'"

The first circumcision, according to the Rabbis, took place in the night of Israel's departure from Egypt in connection with the first celebration of the passover.¹³ Exodus Rabba 19:6 gives the following account. "Our Rabbis said: The Israelites did not want to practice circumcision in Egypt. Except for the tribe of Levi, all of them neglected circumcision.....And yet God wanted to redeem them but they had to merit. What did God do? He called to Moses and said to him: Go and circumcise them. (And some say

that Joshua was there and it was he who circumcised them, for Scripture says, 'And again circumcise the children of Israel a second time')¹⁴ But there were many who would not take it upon themselves to be circumcised. Therefore, God commanded that the passover be celebrated, and when Moses prepared the Paschal lamb, God decreed that the four winds that blow in the garden of Eden come and blow upon the Paschal lamb....And the savoury odor that resulted lasted for forty days. As a result, all Israel came to Moses and said to him: 'Pray let us eat of the Paschal lamb,' for they were already fatigued from the odor. But God said; Unless you be circumcised you may not eat of it', as Scripture says, 'And the Lord said unto Moses and Aaron: This is the ordinance of the passover....no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof' (Exod. 12:43-48). Immediately, they gave themselves over for circumcision and the blood of the passover became mixed with the blood of the circumcision. And God passed by and took each and everyone and kissed him and blessed him, as it is said: 'And when I passed by thee, and saw thee wallowing in thy blood, I said unto thee: In thy blood, live; yea, I said unto thee: In thy blood live' (Ezek. 16:6),¹⁵--i.e. live by the blood of the passover, live by the blood of the circumcision!¹⁶ Pirke de R. Eliezer chap. 29 states that it was the twofold blood of the circumcision and the passover that the Israelites put upon the lintel of their houses, and that when God passed over to plague the Egyptians and saw the blood of the passover, mingled with that of the circumcision, on the lintel, he was filled with compassion for Israel.¹⁷ R. Eliezer raised the question,¹⁸ Why did Scripture see fit to say "In thy blood live" twice? The first refers to the

blood of the circumcision and the blood of the passover, through the merit of which God delivered Israel from Egypt; the second refers to the blood of the circumcision and the Passover through the merit of which Israel would be redeemed in the future at the end of the fourth kingdom.¹⁹

Thus the circumcision in Egypt, like the one at Gilgal took place just before the passover²⁰ and the rabbis were able to answer to their own satisfaction the meaning of the term *niq* in Josh. 5:2, and likewise of the statement in v.5 that "all the people that came out were circumcised." But Scripture had also stated that all the people who were born in the wilderness were not circumcised (v.5), and the rabbis had to answer why the rite was neglected during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

One answer was that the affliction and fatigue of the journey did not permit circumcision²¹ Another answer²² was that the North wind which brings wholesome weather, did not blow upon them,²³ because the people were under Divine displeasure,²⁴ or, according to another opinion, in order that the clouds of glory,²⁵ which surrounded Israel on the journey, might not be scattered.

R. Ishmael did not accept the view that the whole generation born in the wilderness had not been circumcised.²⁶ "Would the uncircumcised have heard the voice of God on Mt. Sinai?" he asked, "Or would God have given to them the Torah? God forbid! They were circumcised, but not according to regulation. They had cut off the foreskin but they had not performed Periah,²⁷ and whoever has been circumcised, but has not had Periah performed, it is as though he had not been circumcised."²⁸ Therefore, the text says 'They had not been circumcised.' (Josh. 5:7) And when the Israelites

came to the land of Israel God said to Joshua: Do you not know that the Israelites are not circumcised according to proper regulation; therefore circumcise them again, a second time." Genesis Rabba 46:9 points out that the circumcision was performed at Gilgal in accordance with the promise made to Abraham, "I will give to thee and to thy seed after thee the land of thy sojourning" (Gen. 17:8) on condition that "thou shalt keep My covenant (ibid v.9) Since Gilgal was on the border of the land, Joshua said to the people: "Did you think you would enter the land uncircumcised?" and speaking thus he circumcised them. Similarly in Genesis Rabba 46:9 God is reported to have offered the condition that if they accepted circumcision they would enter the land, and if not, they would not enter the land.

Regarding the name Gibeath-ha-araloth in Josh. 5:3 the rabbis say little more than what the text itself implies, that all the foreskins were gathered together until they became like a hill; hence the name Gibeath-ha-araloth.²⁹ The Israelites then took the foreskins and the blood and covered them with the dust of the wilderness, so that when Balaam came and saw all the wilderness filled with the foreskins of the Israelites, he said "Who can count the dust of Jacob?" (Num. 23:10), meaning, Who will be able to stand against the merit (which this people has) of the blood of the covenant of circumcision, which is covered by the dust? Hence the sages decreed that the practice should be followed of covering the foreskin and the blood with the dust of the earth, since Israel is compared to the dust of the earth in Gen. 28:14, "And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth." Thus did the people practice the law of circumcision, the rabbis say,

until the division into the two kingdoms, when the kingdom of Ephriam discarded the covenant of circumcision.³⁰

The generation that Moses circumcised, declared R. Nahman,³¹ was the seventh,³² and the generation circumcised by Joshua was the eighth. Therefore "give a portion to seven, yea even to eight" (Eccl. 11:2)³³

Regarding the expression in Josh. 5:9 "This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you" Yalkut Shimoni Joshua 15³⁴ gives the following homily. "By means of his astrology Pharaoh foresaw the future. He said to Israel: 'Look evil is before you' (Exod. 10:10), that is, Pharaoh said to them, 'I see by my astrological art a certain star rising toward you, and its name is Evil, and it is the symbol of blood and slaughter.' And when the Israelites sinned in the wilderness over the golden calf and God intended to slay them, Moses entreated with his prayer: 'Wherefore should the Egyptians say: He brought them forth with Evil? (Exod. 32:12), i.e. under the influence of the star Evil. God repented over the evil he had intended for them, and he changed the blood (of which the star was the symbol) to the blood of circumcision (that was shed) when Joshua circumcised them. This is what is meant when Scripture says, 'This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you', for they said to you 'We see blood impending over you in the wilderness,'" Hence the circumcision at Gilgal removed the evil that the Egyptians foresaw for Israel in the wilderness.

Notes to Chapter VI

1. Cf. Ezek. 44:9
2. Be'haalothcha, 67
3. Regarding the tribe of Levi. Deut. 33:10.
4. Thus proving that they alone were loyal to God and therefore worthy of offering sacrifice. Exod. 32:26.
5. This likewise refers to the tribe of Levi. Deut. 33:9.
6. Josh. 5:5.
7. Deut. 33:9. "Covenant" here is naturally taken to mean the covenant of circumcision.
8. Be'haalothcha, 8; (Buber, Be'haalothcha, 13)
9. Exod. 10:22
10. Deut. 33:9
11. Similarly in Tanhuma Shemoth, 5, the rabbis, commenting on the verse, "They have deceived the Lord; for they have begotten strange children" (Hos. 5:7), say, "The meaning of this is that they (the Israelites in Egypt) bore sons but they did not circumcise them. For when Joseph died they nullified the covenant of circumcision. They said, 'Let us be like the Egyptians.' When God saw this He turned away from His love for them and caused new decrees to be issued against them by Pharaoh." (Cf. also Tanhuma, Buber, Shemoth 7).
12. In Gen. 34:15 the sons of Jacob say to Shechem and Hamor, "Only on this condition will we consent unto you: if ye will be as we are, that every male of you be circumcised."
13. See Rashi on Josh. 5:2.
14. Josh. 5:2. Since Joshua is commanded to circumcise a second time, evidently there must have been a previous circumcision which he performed.

15. The repetition of the phrase "In thy blood live", indicates that the prophet was referring to two kinds of blood, i.e., the blood of the Passover and the blood of circumcision.

16. A variation of this homily is given in the same Midrash (Exod. Rabba 19:6) "R. Simeon b. Halapta said: When Israel went out from Egypt, God said to Moses, Give heed to Israel regarding the commandment of the Passover that 'no alien shall eat thereof, and every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof' (Exod. 12: 43) When the Israelites saw that the uncircumcised were forbidden to eat of the Passover, they circumcised in a short time all their servants, their sons and all who went forth with them, as it is said, 'And all the children of Israel did as the Lord commanded' (Exod. 12:50). It is comparable to a king who made a banquet for his friends. The king said: Unless the guests show my seal, (on the invitation cards) let not one of them enter here. Thus too, God made a banquet for them of flesh roasted in fire, and unleavened bread and bitter herbs, because he had delivered them from their trouble. But he said to them, "If the seal of Abraham is not in your flesh you may not taste of it. Immediately, everyone that was born in Egypt became circumcised. It is of them that Scripture says, 'Gather My saints together unto Me: those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice'. (Ps. 50:5)

In Canticles Rabba 3:7 the following homily, based on the verse "Every man hath his sword upon his thigh" (Cant. 3:8), occurs: "When Moses said to them, Thus in short did God say to me, 'No uncircumcised person shall eat of it' (Exod. 12:48), immediately each and every one put his sword upon his thigh and circumcised

himself. Who circumcised them? R. Berachiah said, Moses was the circumciser and Aaron performed the Periah and Joshua gave drink to those who were being circumcised. And there are some who say that Joshua did the circumcising and Aaron performed the Periah and Moses gave the drink. Thus is it written, 'At that time the Lord said unto Joshua: Make thee knives of flint and again circumcise the children of Israel a second time.' (Josh. 5:2) And why is it stated 'a second time'? From this we learn that it was he who circumcised them the first time." Genesis Rabba 46:6, 47:7 has that it was Moses who circumcised them the first time in Egypt.

In Numbers Rabba 11:6 it is stated that the Israelites were prompted to circumcise themselves because of the dread in the night. "Scripture says: 'Every man hath his sword upon his thigh because of the dread in the night.' (Cant. 3:8) What is the meaning of 'the dread in the night'? They were not able to celebrate the Passover as it is written, 'No uncircumcised person shall eat of it'. (Exod. 12:48) And if they did not celebrate the Passover, they would die in the nights of the Passover as the first born of Egypt died, as it is said, "And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and there shall no plague be upon you to destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt'. (Exod. 12:13) Hence because of 'the dread in the night', (the children of Israel consented to be circumcised)."

17. Exod. 12:13. The root *פסח* means "to spare". Hence *אֶפְסָח* means both "I will pass over", and "I will have compassion".

18. Pirke de R. Eliezer. Chap. 29.

19. I.e. during the Messianic redemption.

20. They encamped at Gilgal on the 10th of the first month (Josh. 4:19) and they celebrated the Passover at Gilgal on the 14th (Josh. 5:10) The circumcision took place between these two dates.

21. Pirke de R. Eliezer, chap. 29; Yebamoth 71b (bot.)

22. Yebamoth 72 b (top)

23. The circumcision wound becomes extremely painful in inclement weather. All the more so would this have been the case under the added hardships of the journey in the wilderness. Hence R. Papa ruled that circumcision may not be performed on a cloudy day or on a day when the South wind, (which brings unwholesome weather) blows. R. Papa's ruling, however, was not followed, "since many people are in the habit of disregarding these precautions, and 'the Lord preserveth the simple'" (Ps. 116:6), i.e. God protects those who cannot protect themselves. Yebamoth 72 b.

24. On account of the sin of the golden calf. Exod. 32.
(So Rashi)

25. Exod. 13:21 f.

26. Pirke de R. Eliezer, chap. 29.

27. Uncovering the corona.

28. Cf. M. Shab. 19:6.

29. Pirke de R. Eliezer, chap. 29. In Leviticus Rabba 25:7, R. Levi describes Gibeath-ha-araloth as meaning "a place that is heaped with foreskins." In Genesis Rabba 47:7 R. Abahu gives a similar account in the case of the circumcision by Abraham of his household. "When Abraham had circumcised those born in his house, he set up a hill of foreskins (גִּבְעַת אֶרְלֹת). When the

sun shone on them they rotted and their odor came up before God as a sweet-smelling incense. And God said, When my children come into the power of others, I will remember that odor and I will have compassion on them."

30. Pirke de R. Eliezer, chap. 29.

31. Yalkut Shimoni Joshua 15.

32. I.e. in the geneology beginning with Abraham.

33. I.e. give honor to the number seven etc.

34. Rashion Exod. 10:10 and Josh 5:9 give the same homily.

In the latter he attributes this teaching to R. Moses Hadarshan.

VII The Eighth Day

Outside of what the several passages already discussed tell us (Gen. 34; Exod. 4:24-26; Josh. 5:2-9), little else is definitely known about circumcision in Israel during pre-exilic times. Gen. 34:15 strongly suggests that intermarriage with uncircumcised peoples was prohibited. This is likewise true of Jud. 14:3 where Samson's parents are described as attempting to persuade their son not "to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines." The fact that the opprobrious epithet "uncircumcised" was applied so distinctively to the Philistines would indicate that the other neighboring peoples, the Canaanites who lived inland, and those who lived on the sea-board, whom Herodotus (II. 104) calls Phoenicians, all practiced circumcision¹. Among the other circumcised peoples, as Jeremiah² lists them, were "Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and they that dwell in the wilderness", the last probably referring to the bedouin Arabs³. Herodotus (II. 104) names the Egyptians, the Colchians, the Ethiopians, the Phoenicians and Syrians of Palestine, the Syrians who dwell about the rivers Thermador and Parthenius, and the Macronians, as the nations that subjected themselves to this rite. Herodotus, of course, lived after the exile, but his statement that the Egyptians, the Colchians and the Ethiopians were the only people that practiced circumcision from the earliest times, and that the Phoenicians and Syrians of Palestine learned this custom from the Egyptians, is of particular interest, since by the Syrians of Palestine he undoubtedly means the Jews.⁴

The use of flint knives in performing the operation was probably common in pre-exilic times. So Exod. 4:25 and Josh 5:2

would indicate. Unless Exod. 4:25 be taken as it stands, there is no evidence that in the earliest times the rite was performed in infancy or early childhood. Exod. 4:24-26 and Gen. 34 would indicate that it was a pre-marital rite, or at least it was necessary for one to be circumcised, regardless at what age he underwent the operation, in order for him to be eligible to marry. Josh. 5:2-3, 8-9 does not specify any age and seems to give the picture of a general circumcision which included both young and old. As for the religious significance of this rite and its relation to Yahweh, we are left almost completely in the dark. Exod. 4:24-26 alone suggests that failure to comply with this practice would arouse the anger of the deity and threaten a person's life. But what is behind this idea is not made very clear. Whatever conclusions are drawn regarding the religious significance of circumcision in pre-exilic times must be based largely on conjecture.

Aside from Jeremiah 9:24-25, the pre-exilic prophets, and for that matter the whole range of literature coming from the time of the Deuteronomic reforms to the exile, have nothing to say for or against circumcision. Jeremiah threatens divine punishment against all the circumcised peoples, including Judah. When he continues, 'For all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel uncircumcised in heart' (v.25 b), Moore⁵ suggests that his meaning is that the circumcision in the flesh will not save them in the day of visitation--it is not the true circumcision. But this part of the passage is an obvious contradiction of the preceding statement, 'I will punish all them that are circumcised in the foreskin' (v.24), and doubtless is not original with Jeremiah.⁶ But the concept of the circumcised heart as the

ideal ethical standard, and as denoting obedience to God, and of the uncircumcised heart as denoting the evil impulse in man, is pre-exilic, as evidenced by Deut. 10:16; 30:6 and Jer. 4:4. The silence on the part of the literary prophets regarding circumcision can only mean that the practice was taken so much for granted, and was so universal, that there was no need for them to preach to the people for or against it. It was during the exile that a new importance was attached to the rite. With the national life no longer in existence, it became together with the Sabbath a badge of unity with fellow Jews in a strange land.⁷ With the suspension of the sacrificial worship, the Jew could express faith and allegiance to his God only in the practice of those rites and ceremonial practices which were possible for him to observe, and of these circumcision and the Sabbath became dominant. Where the earlier legal codes made no mention at all of circumcision, it now became, together with the Sabbath, a law of first magnitude, so that Ezekiel could decry as an abomination the bringing in of "aliens, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh to be in My sanctuary, to profane it" (44:7) and could lay down the law that "no alien, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh shall enter into My sanctuary, even any alien that is among the children of Israel" (44:9). It was undoubtedly in Babylonia that there was first attached to circumcision the significance that P later gave to it in Gen. 17, namely, that it was the sign of the covenant between God and Israel. It was probably during the exile, too, that the concept was first advanced that the fate of the uncircumcised was to "lie in the nether-world slain with the sword", and that "the uncircumcised male----shall be cut off from his people". (Gen. 17:14)

The Priestly account of the circumcision of Abraham and the male members of his household in Gen. 17 is by far the most important passage relating to circumcision in the Bible, and the chief basis for later rabbinic legislation governing the practice of this rite. The obvious intent of this account is to tell of the origin of a practice already in long usage and to confirm its importance by placing its institution with no less a personage than the patriarch Abraham.⁹ The details of the account are as follows: In Abram's ninety-ninth year God appears before him, revealing himself for the first time under the new name El Shaddai. He tells Abram to walk before Him and be wholehearted (v.1) The purpose of the revelation is to establish a covenant. (v.2) The terms of the covenant are; (a) Henceforth the patriarch's name is no longer to be Abram, but Abraham (v.5) and Sarai's name is to be Sarah (v.15); (b) Abraham and Sarah will be multiplied exceedingly and become the father and mother of a multitude of nations; nations and kings will issue from them (vv. 2,5,6,15,16); (c) The covenant is to be not only between Abraham and God, but an everlasting one between God and all the generations of Abraham's descendants to follow (v.7); (d) The land of Abraham's sojournings, the land of Canaan, will be given to him and his descendants for an everlasting possession (v.8); (e) In exactly a year's time Sarah will bear Abraham a son, to be called Isaac. Through him the covenant relationship will be continued (vv. 16,19,21); (f) Abraham and his descendants are to accept the deity who appeared before him as their God (vv.7,8); (g) The keeping of the covenant is to be marked by the circumcision of every male; the circumcision in the flesh of the foreskin to be the sign of the everlasting

covenant between Abraham and God. The circumcision is to take place on the eighth day of birth. Those who are not of Abraham's seed but are bought with money of a foreigner are likewise to be circumcised (vv.10-13); (h) Whoever does not become circumcised has broken the covenant of God and will be cut off from his people (v.14). In accordance with these terms, and on the same day that God spoke to him, Abraham circumcised himself, his son, Ishmael, who was then thirteen years of age, and all the male members of his household, both "those born in the house and those bought with money of a foreigner (vv.23-27) In the continuation of the narrative in Gen. 21:1-4, when the divine promise is fulfilled and Isaac is born, the Priestly writer relates that "Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded."

The most significant part of the covenant is the command to circumcise on the eighth day of birth. This command is repeated by P in Lev. 12:3. Although later Rabbinic legislation permitted circumcision to be performed after the eighth day (never before) if circumstances demanded postponement, P seems to stress that it may not take place on any other than the eighth day. V.14 originally read, "And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin on the eighth day, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant". The Massorah omits "on the eighth day", from v. 14, but the Samaritan version, the Septuagint and the repetition of Gen. 17 in Jubilees 15,⁸ include this phrase.⁹ The realization that a too rigid adherence to the principle of circumcising only on the eighth day might endanger the lives of some children probably accounts for the deletion of this phrase from the Hebrew text.

A most plausible explanation for the observance of the rite on the eighth day, is that which Dr. Morgenstern offers.¹⁰ Dr. Morgenstern connects circumcision with the aqiqa rites practiced by many Arab tribes. These rites consisted in the cutting off of the child's first hair and of the sacrifice of an animal on the seventh or eighth day of the child's life. The first seven days in the child's life were thought to be days of evil and taboo, and the purpose of the aqiqa ceremonies was to redeem the new-born infant from the taboo that was thought to rest upon him and threatened his life. By cutting off the child's hair and offering it as a sacrifice, it was believed that the taboo would be removed, the underlying principle being that the sacrifice of a part of the tabooed object would redeem the remainder. Circumcision in Israel, as it is described in the Priestly code, is such a rite. The circumcision on the eighth day redeemed the infant from the taboo that threatened his life during the first seven days, the same principle that a part redeems the whole being the underlying motive here too. The seven day period of taboo figures prominently in the Bible in a number of other ways. A Nazirite, who came into contact with a dead body, became defiled for seven days. On the eighth day he brought a sacrifice to atone for his defilement.¹¹ Similarly, if an ordinary person came into contact with a dead body his period of uncleanness lasted for seven days. On the third and seventh day of his defilement he had to undergo rites of purification.¹² The seven day period of taboo also applied to a priest who touched a corpse.¹³ A leper,¹⁴ a menstruating woman, a man who had intercourse with a menstruating woman, a man or woman who had an issue or who came into contact with a person thus contaminated, all had to undergo purification rites that

lasted for seven days after they had been declared clean. The rites culminated on the eighth day with a double sacrifice of animals.¹⁵ Similarly with the rites of purification of the alter and priests; the period of purification lasted for seven days, and only on the eighth day did consecration take place and the holy service begin.¹⁶ But most significant of all is the case of a woman who bears a male child. Her initial impurity lasts for seven days. On the eighth day, when the child is circumcised this initial impurity ends and she enters into a period of purification that lasts for thirty-three days. Should she bear a female child the periods of both her impurity and purification are doubled.¹⁷ The close connection between the circumcision and the seven day period of impurity of the mother would indicate that the rite of circumcision both brought to an end the initial impurity that attached to the mother, and culminated the seven days of impurity or taboo that attached to the child. The circumcision of the foreskin on the eighth day was the sacrifice paid by the child to redeem him from his taboo, just as the double sacrifice of animals on the eighth day of purification atoned for a person who was ritually defiled.

Even today, among some Orthodox Jews the night before the circumcision is a night when the "shedim" evil spirits, hover about the child and seek to use their power over him. Someone is always in the room to guard the mother and child on that night. The other days in the first week of the child's life are also filled with evil import, but the seventh night, the "watchnight", is the most dangerous. The circumcision on the eighth day removes the taboo and takes the child out of the power of the "shedim".

similar beliefs prevail among the native Jews of Jerusalem and also among the Jews of Turkey. Another common Jewish superstition is the belief that Lilith (the night demon) has the power to carry off new-born children, and to ward against this, both mother and child are provided with proper amulets and charms.

The practice of circumcision on the eighth day probably had its origin in human sacrifice. In Exod. 22:28,29 occurs the passage: "The first born of thy sons shalt thou give unto Me. Likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen and with thy sheep; seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day thou shalt give it to Me". The first born of the mother among both men and animals belonged to the deity.¹⁸ The principle underlying this was that all the offspring of the mother belonged to the deity, but by sacrificing the first born male the remainder of the issue from the mother would be redeemed. The sacrifice of a part redeemed the whole. The sacrifice of the first born male, both human and animal took place on the eighth day after birth as Ex. 22:28,29 conclusively indicates. In later years, when human sacrifice was abolished, the principle still remained that the offspring of the mother belonged to the deity and that it was still necessary to sacrifice a part in order to redeem the whole, and this form of redemption came to include not only the first born son of the mother, but all of her male offspring. The part sacrificed would naturally be a part of the body that was not of great importance; among the Arabs it was the child's first hair; among the Israelites it was the prepuce. But the eighth day as the day of redemption remained and was later incorporated into the Priestly code, although there it loses somewhat its redemptionary character and becomes the sign of a covenant relationship with the deity.

In this connection mention should be made of a seemingly close relationship between circumcision and the Passover. It will be recalled that the circumcision at Gilgal by Joshua (Josh. 5:2-9) took place just before the Passover. 4:19 tells us that the Israelites encamped at Gilgal on the tenth of the first month, and 5:10 tells us that they celebrated the Passover at Gilgal on the fourteenth of the month. The account of the circumcision comes between these two verses. Now 4:19 and 5:10 show all the characteristics of P, while the original account of the circumcision at Gilgal (vv. 2-3,8-9) is generally assigned to J. But it is reasonable to assume that the circumcision account would not have been placed by the redactor into its present position in the text, where it comes immediately before the very verse that tells of the celebration of the Passover, unless there was an old tradition that made for a close interconnection between the two. Similarly in Exod. 12:43-48 which is a part of P. there is also a close relationship between circumcision and the Passover. There we are told that when a man buys a servant for money the servant must first be circumcised and then he may eat of the Passover (v.43), and that "when a stranger/shall sojourn with thee and will keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it, and he shall be as one that is born in the land; but no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof." The Rabbis likewise lay great stress on the tradition that a wholesale circumcision took place on the eve of the first Passover.¹⁹ In Pesahim 69 b the statement is made that if on the eve of Passover a whole community was found to be uncircumcised, they were told 'Arise, circumcise yourselves and sacrifice the Passover'. The same words were spoken to an uncircumcised individual²⁰

and if he did not circumcise himself and sacrifice the Passover, he was punished with "Kareth".²¹

Now a relic of the original practice of sacrificing the first born in connection with the Passover is found in Exod. 13:1-2. There the ordinance is given that "all the first born, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast" be sanctified to God, for it is His. The previous verse (12:51) tells us that the ordinance was given on the selfsame day that the Lord brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, namely the Passover. And in Exod. 13:14 f the explanation of this ordinance, to sanctify all the first born to the deity, is given. "And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come saying: What is this? that thou shalt say unto him: By strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage: and it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that the Lord slew all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man, and the first-born of beast; therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord all that openeth the womb, being males, but all the first-born of my sons I redeem." Again in Exod. 34:18-20 a close connection is found between the sacrifice of the first^{born} animals, the redemption of the first born son, and the celebration of the feast of unleavened bread.²²

The meaning of all this is obvious, Originally, among the early nomadic Israelites the Passover was celebrated by the sacrifice of the first-born among the animals, and also of the first-born son of a woman. The sacrifice was of a redemptionary character whose purpose it was to redeem all the other offspring both of men and of animals. It also had the character of a thanksgiving offering,

since it was carried out in the spring when the lambs were born. The sacrifice of the first born animals continued on the Passover, but human sacrifice gave way to the circumcision of, first, the first-born-son, and later, of all the males. The same principle that the sacrifice of a part redeemed the whole underlay circumcision too. Naturally, since circumcision was but a substitute for the original human sacrifice, it continued to be practiced just before the Passover. The circumcision made one eligible to eat of the Pascal lamb and probably each year at the Passover celebration, a new "class" of children underwent the rite. Perhaps, sometimes, a period of years went by without the circumcision taking place, which may account for the fact that in Josh. 5:2-9 the picture is given of a general circumcision, that included both young and old. A slave who came into the tribe, or a foreigner, likewise had to undergo the rite before he could partake of the Passover offering. (Exod. 12:43-48) The circumcision of slaves and aliens would naturally take place at the logical time of Passover when the others were circumcised.

When the nomadic wanderers came into Palestine and gradually changed their mode of life from a pastoral to an agricultural one, they naturally took over many of the customs and practices of their Canaanite neighbors. The pastoral Passover celebration was easily synthesized with the agricultural feast of unleavened bread, since both took place in the spring. The sacrifice of the first-born animals to the deity continued in the synthesized Passover-unleavened bread festival, but the practice of circumcision at this season was gradually dropped. Nevertheless, a relic of the original redemptionary rite of sacrificing the first-born son continued.

As he was still thought to belong to the deity something else had to be offered in his place for him to be redeemed. The redemption was probably carried out either with a grain offering or an animal sacrifice. Perhaps this is the meaning of Exod. 34:20, "And all the first-born of thy sons thou shalt redeem and none shall appear before Me empty." In later years the original significance of both the sacrifice of the first born animals and the redemption of the first born son (originally the sacrifice of the first-born son) was either forgotten or given a new interpretation. This interpretation connected both with the story of the first-born in Egypt, and as Exod. 13:15 and Num. 3:13 attempt to explain, the sacrifice of the first-born animals and the redemption of the first-born son were an atonement for the slaying of the first-born of man and beast in the land of Egypt. Still later the Levites took the place of the first-born as the possession of the deity, but the process of redeeming the first-born continued, this time by payments of money to the sanctuary.²³ Similarly, the first-born of domesticated animals that were levitically unclean, such as the ass, no longer had to be sacrificed but could be redeemed by sacrificing a lamb instead.²⁴

Now in the native agricultural life of Palestine, the first-born of the oxen and sheep were sacrificed to the deity on the eighth day after they had issued from the womb. This is obviously the meaning of Exod. 22:29. While the previous verse (28 b) suggests very strongly that the first-born son was likewise sacrificed to the deity on the eighth day. Here too, in both cases, the sacrifice was of a redemptionary character. With the abolition of this form of child sacrifice the substitute also became circumcision--on the same day that the sacrifice had previously been carried out,

namely, on the eighth day. It was natural in an agricultural society that the seventh and eighth days should become important from a ritualistic standpoint. The seventh day, for example, as the day of rest could only evolve out of a stabilized agricultural life; never out of a roving pastoral kind of life where the people had to tend the flocks and be on the move all the time. So that it was natural that the seventh and eighth days should be reckoned with importance when any change in the life cycle took place. As noted previously, when someone died and a person came into contact with his body, that person became defiled for a period of seven days. Similarly, in the case of a menstruating woman or a person who had a flux; for seven days they went through a process of purification, and on the eighth day with the offering of the proper sacrifice they were declared ritually clean. These changes in the life cycle were evidence of taboos that rested upon the defiled individual and which threatened both him and anyone who had contact with him. All the more so should this have been the case of a mother who underwent so revolutionary a change in the life cycle as to bear her first male child. The taboo that rested on her, and probably on the whole community, lasted for seven days. But on the eighth day expiation came for her, her future offspring and the community, when her first-born son was sacrificed to the deity. This same significance was attached to circumcision when it supplanted the original sacrifice, except that now the circumcision became an act whereby the child redeemed himself, from his initial impurity at birth, by sacrificing a part of his body, and an insignificant part at that, to the deity.

When the nomadic Israelite tribes came into Palestine and underwent the change from a pastoral to an agricultural people,

they gradually dropped their practice of circumcising their male children at the Passover spring festival, and took over the native agricultural practice of circumcising on the eighth day. But vestiges of the former Passover connection of circumcision continued to remain, in the story of the circumcision at Gilgal, in the Priestly requirement that a slave or alien had to undergo the rite before he could eat of the Passover offering, and that only the circumcised could partake of it, and in the traditions that came down to the Rabbis telling of a wholesale circumcision in Egypt on the eve of the first Passover.

Now this hypothesis does not necessarily contradict the hypothesis previously presented, namely that circumcision was originally a pre-marital requirement as Exod. 4:24-26 and Gen. 34 seem to indicate. In all probability the pre-marital form of circumcision preceded the eighth day observance of the rite and was in practice concurrently with the time that human sacrifice of the first-born was carried on. When the sacrifice of the first-born male on the eighth day gave way to circumcision of the first born on the eighth day, the older form of circumcision which all the males had to undergo as a pre-marital requirement, was also shifted to the eighth day, perhaps for the sake of uniformity. There is no definite proof for all this, but it seems to be the logical development in the synthesis of three obviously original and separate forms of circumcision, namely, as a pre-marital rite, as a ceremony connected with the Passover, and as a practice that grew out of the original redemptionary sacrifice of the first-born male on the eighth day.

Notes to Chapter VII

1. See Moore, Judaism, II, 17.

2. 9:24 f

3. See Moore, *ibid.*

4. See above p. 36.

5. Judaism, II, 17

6. See above p. 5, 8 (notes 3,4)

7. Dr. Finkelstein, *The Pharisees*, 171 f. writes: "After the deportation to Babylonia....institutions which in Palestine appeared neutral or assimilatory because they were common to all the inhabitants, assumed in the foreign Babylonian environment where they were unknown to the general population, the status of a covenant between God and his chosen people. The Sabbath, circumcision and the sacrificial system, the observance of which the Palestinian prophets had taken for granted as part of the countries cultural life and involving no superior piety, became symbols of identification with the Jewish community and of resistance to assimilation. Hence the wide difference between Jeremiah and Ezekiel in their attitude toward the ceremonial law, the priests, the Temple and the sacrifices. Jeremiah is always critical of the institutions and their observance: Ezekiel insists on their value and importance." Cf. also, Cooke, *The Book of Joshua* (Cambridge Bible) p.37; Skinner, *Genesis* (I.C.C) p. 297. Graetz, *History of the Jews* (J.P.S.) I, p.339 says that the exiles in their zeal for Judaism won over many new proselytes who "after their conversion, kept the Sabbath, obeyed the statutes, and even submitted to the rite of circumcision." (Cf. also *ibid* p.364)

8. Jub. 15:14

9. See Charles Apocrypha and Pseudapigrapha, II, p.36, note on Jub. 15:14.

10. Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions.

11. Num. 6:9 f

12. Num. 19:11-19; 31:19,24

13. Ezek. 44: 26

14. Lev. 15. Cf. also Num. 12:14

15. Lev. 15:19 ff.

16. Exod. 29-30, 35, 37; Lev. 8, 33, 35; Ezek. 43:25 ff;
cf. also II Chron. 7:9

17. Lev. 12:2-5

18. Cf. also Exod. 13:2, 12 f.; Lev. 22:27; Num. 3:12; 18:15

19. Exodus Rabba 19:6; Pirke de R. Eliezer chap. 29; Canticles R. 3:7; Numbers Rabba 11:6; Rashi on Josh. 5:2. Cf. above p41f.

20. An individual who remained uncircumcised because two of his brothers had died as a result of the operation and it was feared that he might suffer a like fate. In such a case the rabbis permitted postponement of the circumcision until it was felt that the individual was able to undergo the rite in safety. See Tos. Shab. 15 (16) 8.

21. נִסְּךְ = exterpation from one's people through Divine punishment. See Gen. 17:14 where it is stated that one who is not circumcised "will be cut off from his people", and Exod. 12:15,19 where it is stated that a similar fate is in store for one who eats leaven during the Passover.

22. Cf. also Num. 3:12; 18:15

23. Cf. Num. 3:40 f.

24. Exod. 13:13; 34:19; Num. 18:15.

25.

Part Two

Early Post-Biblical Times

VIII The Hellenistic Period

The rite of circumcision as it was embodied in the priestly code became the standard practice in early post-Biblical and Hellenistic times. In contrast to the later rabbinic view which permitted the rite to take place from the eighth to twelfth days in order to avoid possibilities of desecrating Sabbaths and festivals,¹ and which also permitted circumcision to be postponed indefinitely in the case of illness² or hereditary physical weakness,³ the earlier post-Biblical view adhered rigidly to its performance on the eighth day only.⁴ Failure to comply meant the Biblical punishment of "Kareth". The Book of Jubilees (15:24 f.) indicates how zealously the Priestly law of circumcision was guarded by faithful Jews of the Hasmonean era. "This law is for all the generations for ever, and there is no circumcision of the days, and no omission of one day out of the eight days; for it is an eternal ordinance, ordained and written on the heavenly tablets. And everyone that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction; nor is there, moreover, any sign on him that he is the Lord's, but (he is destined) to be destroyed and slain from the earth, and to be rooted out of the earth, for he has broken the covenant of the Lord our God." The author of Jubilees in his zeal for the law goes on to say that even the angels of the presence and the angels of the sanctification have been circumcised since their creation (v.27), an idea so anthropomorphic that the Rabbis would have received it only with repugnance. The ordinance of circumcision, the author of Jubilees continues, is the sign of a covenant promise that the

children of Israel will never be rooted out of their land. (v.28) But, he adda, "I announce unto thee that the children of Israel will not keep true to this ordinance and they will not circumcise their sons according to all this law; for in the flesh of their foreskin they will omit this circumcision of their sons, and all of them, sons of Belial will leave their sons uncircumcised as they were born and there will be a great wrath from the Lord against the children of Israel, because they have forsaken His covenant and turned aside from His word and provoked and blasphemed, inasmuch as they do not observe the ordinance of this law, for they have treated their members like the Gentiles, so that they may be removed and rooted out of the land and there will no more be pardon or forgiveness unto them for all the sin of this eternal error" (vv.33-34).

The author of Jubilees, though pretending to write of the future, is actually condemning the neglect of circumcision that was current in past years and possibly in his own time. The threat of divine punishment for this neglect is in accordance with the Biblical threat that "the uncircumcised male....shall be cut off from his people" (Gen. 17:14). If there were some Jews such as he who were zealous in demanding rigid adherence to the rite, there were other Jews, who refused to submit themselves or their sons to circumcision, and even went so far as to obliterate the mark of the covenant if they had already been circumcised.

At the end of the third century and in the early years of the second century B.C.E. the influence of Greek culture was already becoming strong in Palestine. A group of Hellenized Jews, known as the Tobiads, who belonged chiefly to the aristocratic

families of Jerusalem, adopted the Greek customs, established a gymnasium in Jerusalem, and participated in the Greek games, which were carried on in complete nakedness. Becoming ashamed of the circumcision mark when it was thus exposed, despite the fact that they were in their own land and amidst their own people, many proceeded to obliterate it by drawing forward what was left of the prepuce, so to eventually hide the covenant sign and make them appear like Greeks.⁵ Often they would undergo painful surgical operations to achieve the same result.⁶ Naturally they discontinued the circumcision of their sons. In the overthrow of the Jewish state by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, these Jews no doubt found particular delight, for it meant to them the complete Hellenization of Palestine. In 168 B.C.E. Antiochus attacked Jerusalem, took the city, desecrated the Temple by placing therein a statue of Jupiter, and issued a series of unbearable decrees against the practice of Judaism, which included the proscription of circumcision. In the words of the First Book of Maccabees (1:44-49): "The king sent messengers to Jerusalem and to the cities of Judah (to the effect that) they should practice customs foreign to the traditions of the land and that they should cease the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary....and that they should profane the Sabbaths and Feasts, and pollute the sanctuary and those who had been sanctified; that they should build high places, and sacred groves, and shrines for idols and that they should sacrifice swine and other unclean animals: and that they should leave their sons uncircumcised, and make themselves abominable by means of everything that was unclean and profane, so that they might forget the Law and change all the traditional ordinances." Refusal to obey these decrees meant the death penalty.

Perhaps nothing else aroused so much the spirit of revolt, as the brutal action by the Greek authorities in taking two Jewish women who had circumcised their children, parading them around the city with their babies hanging at their breasts and then flinging them from the top of a wall, at the same time putting to death their entire families and those who had performed the circumcision.⁷ As the Maccabean revolt against the tyranny of Antiochus spread Mattathias and his friends went about "pulling down alters and circumcising by force as many uncircumcised children as they found within the borders of Israel."⁸ The victory of the Maccabees meant for a time at least the stoppage of the Hellenic influence, the Greek games, the practice of epispasm, or obliteration of the covenant mark by drawing forward the foreskin, and of wilful neglect of circumcision by wealthy Hellenized Jews. Nevertheless, the practice of epispasm and opposition to circumcision sprang up again during the period of the Roman occupation of Palestine and continued down through Tannaitic times.

Faithful Jews believed the persecution by Antiochus to be a divinely sent punishment for their violation of the covenant rite. The author of the Apocalyptic book, Assumption of Moses, although writing as if to foretell the future, but actually telling of contemporary events in which he indicts the Hellenized Jews of his own time, gives some evidence that this belief was common. "And there shall come upon them a second visitation and wrath, such as has not befallen them from the beginning until that time in which He will stir up against them the king of kings of the earth and one that ruleth with great power, who shall crucify those who confess to their circumcision: and those who conceal it he shall torture and deliver them up to be bound and led into prison. And their

wives shall be given to their gods among the Gentiles, and their young sons shall be operated on by the physicians in order to bring forward their foreskin. And others amongst them shall be punished by tortures and fire and sword and they shall be forced to bear in public their idols, polluted as they are like those who keep them." (8:1-4) The expressions "a second visitation" and "king of kings of the earth" can only refer to Antiochus Epiphanes and his persecution of the Jews.

The Maccabean victory restored the old religious zeal of the people and the ancient covenant rite was again given its cardinal position in the religious life. The great zeal for Judaism during the reign of the Hamoneans resulted in forced conversions of other peoples, and their compulsory submission to the rite of circumcision. Josephus tells us,⁹ "Hyrceanus¹⁰ took also Dora and Marissa, cities of Idumea, and subdued all the Idumeans; and permitted them to stay in that country if they would circumcise their genitals, and make use of the laws of the Jews; and they were so desirous of living in the country of their forefathers, that they submitted to the use of circumcision, and of the rest of the Jewish ways of living; at which time therefore this befell them, that they were hereafter no other than Jews."¹¹ The successor to John Hyrcanus, Aristobulus I performed a similar service for his people in his conquest of Iturea (106 B.C.E.). Josephus relates,¹² "He (Aristobulus)....made war against Iturea and added a great part of it to Judea, and compelled the inhabitants if they would continue in that country, to be circumcised and to live according to the Jewish laws." More than a century and a half later when Josephus was governor of Galilee, he relates¹³

that once when two non-Jews came to that province, the Galileans were so zealous that they attempted to force circumcision on the new-comers, if they would stay among them. Josephus, however, refused to permit this on the ground that "everyone ought to worship God according to his own inclination and not to be constrained by force."

In the fateful and turbulent years of the first century C.E. opposition to circumcision reached a new climax. Philo remarks that the rite was held up for ridicule by people in general. By "people in general" he no doubt means Greeks and Romans and possibly Jews with strong Hellenistic tendencies. At any rate, this ridicule was partly responsible for calling forth his notable Treatise on Circumcision¹⁴ in defense of the rite. The Treatise was at the same time a part of his great attempt to explain rationally and comment upon allegorically the ritual law of the Bible. He points out at first that the Egyptians, one of the mightiest and most prolific of nations, practice circumcision, which in itself is proof that there is wisdom behind this custom. First of all, he says, circumcision is a preventive of a painful disease. Philo calls this disease "a carbuncle." Evidently he has in mind the disease known as phimosis. And this disease, he adds, is very apt to be engendered among those who have not undergone the rite of circumcision.

"Secondly, circumcision secures the cleanliness of the body in a way that is suited to a people consecrated to God....for some of the evils which ought to be got rid of lodge under....the prepuce."

"Thirdly, there is a resemblance of the part that is circumcised to the heart; for both parts are prepared for the sake of generation; for the breath contained within the heart is generative of thoughts, and the generative organ itself is preductive of living beings.

Therefore, the men of old thought it right to make the evident and visible organ by which the objects of the outward senses are generated, resemble that invisible and superior part, by means of which ideas are formed."

As his fourth and most important reason for circumcision Philo holds that the performance of the rite makes for prolific-ness. "For it is said that the seminal fluid proceeds on its path easily, neither being at all scattered nor flowing on its passage into what may be called the bags of the prepuce. On which account those nations which practice circumcision are the most prolific and the most populous."

Moreover, Philo looked upon circumcision as a symbol of two ethical ideas of fundamental importance. First, it is symbolic of the excision of superfluous and excessive pleasures which de-lude the mind. This the lawgivers signified figuratively by mutilating the organ which gives the most exquisite pleasures, the association of man with woman. Secondly, it is a symbol of man's knowing himself and discarding his vanity. "For some men, like good statuaries have boasted that they can make the most beautiful animal, man; and being puffed up with arrogance, have deified themselves, hiding from sight the true cause of the creation of all things, namely God, although they might have corrected that error from a consideration of other persons among whom they live; for there are among them many men who have no children and many barren women whose connections lead to nothing, so that they grow old in childlessness."

But Philo's highly rationalistic defence of circumcision, which incidentally in some parts reached the same conclusions as those

of modern medicine, seems to have had little effect in stemming the tide of opposition to the covenant rite. Being an Alexandrian in all probability his work never reached Palestine or if it did, was known to only a few. The Rabbis seem to have been totally unaware that such a work existed, for in none of their discussions on circumcision is his name mentioned or his ideas advanced.

Notes to Chapter VIII

1. M. Shab. 19:5. "A child could be circumcised on the eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth days. How so? Ordinarily he was circumcised on the eighth. But if he was born at twilight he was circumcised on the ninth; if at twilight on the eve of Sabbath, he was circumcised on the tenth. If a festival day came after the Sabbath, he was circumcised on the eleventh. If the two days of Rosh Hashana came after the Sabbath he was circumcised on the twelfth." Circumcision, however, was permitted on Sabbaths and Festivals if they were the eighth day.

2. Ibid. "A child who was ill was not circumcised until he became well." After he recovered from his illness it was customary to wait another seven days and then to circumcise. (Shab. 137 a)

3. If the child had two brothers who died because of circumcision, the rite was postponed until it was felt that he would be able to withstand it with safety. (Tos. Shab. 15 (16) 8)

4. The Samaritans and Falashas still follow this practice and never postpone circumcision. See Charles Apoc. and Pseud. II p. 36, note.

5. I Macc. 1:11-15 gives the following account: "In those days there came forth out of Israel lawless men and persuaded many saying: Let us go make a covenant with the nations that are round about us; for since we separated ourselves from them many evils have come upon us. And the saying appeared good in their eyes. And as certain of the people were eager (to carry this out) they went to the king and he gave them the authority to introduce the customs of the Gentiles. And they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the manner of the Gentiles. They also submitted

themselves to uncircumcision and repudiated the holy covenant: yea, they joined themselves to the Gentiles, and sold themselves to do evil."

6. Cf. Assumption of Moses 8:3; Josephus Antiq. Bk. XII, chap. V, 1.

7. I Macc. 1:59; II Macc. 6:10. Cf. also IV Macc. 4:25.

8. I Macc. 2:45-46.

9. Antiq. Bk. I, chap. IX, 1.

10. John Hyrcanus (135-106 B.C.E.)

11. This account indicates that the Idumeans were accepted as full proselytes (גויים). But elsewhere (Antiq. Bk. XIV, chap. XV, 2) Josephus relates that Herod whose forebears were such proselytes was called by his enemy Antigonus an Idumean, i.e., a half-Jew. Josephus' account of the proselytization of the Idumeans is confirmed by Ammonius (d. 241 C.E.) "The Jews," he says, "are such by nature and from the beginning, whilst the Idumeans were not Jews from the beginning, but Phenicians and Syrians, but being afterward subdued by the Jews, and compelled to be circumcised, and to unite into one nation, and be subject to the same laws, they were called Jews." (Quoted in Josephus (Bigelow Brown & Co. 1924) II, p.340, note.)

12. Antiq. Bk. I, chap. XII, 2

13. Life, sec. 23.

14. In Works of Philo Judaeus, trans. by C. D. Yonge, London 1855, II, p. 175 f.

* Name editor or translator

IX The Christian Opposition

In Palestine, the real opposition to circumcision came from the newly rising Christian sect. From the first the Judeo-Christians seem to have accepted circumcision as they did the rest of the ritual law. But in their zealous attempts to gain new proselytes among the heathens, the circumcision requirement proved to be a great setback. A faction arose, headed by Paul, which took the view that "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing"¹ More than that, Paul went about teaching Jews in the Diaspora to forsake the law of Moses and "that they ought not to circumcise their children or to walk after the customs!"² However, there was a faction of the new sect in Jerusalem that continued to oppose the abrogation of the covenant rite. On one occasion when Peter came to Jerusalem after having baptized some new proselytes from among the Gentiles, he was rebuked by the Jerusalem faction for having associated with the uncircumcised and eaten with them.³ When Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch preaching the new religion among both Jews and Gentiles, certain men from Judea came and declared that there could be no salvation for the new adherents unless they had first been circumcised. Paul and Barnabas, therefore, went to Jerusalem to raise this question before the apostles and elders there. The apostles and elders took up deliberation over this matter, and after hearing arguments on both sides reached the conclusion that circumcision was not mandatory. In accordance with this decision, letters were dispatched through Paul and Barnabas to the Gentile proselytes of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia saying, "Forasmuch as we have heard that certain men which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls,

saying, Ye must be circumcised, (we write to you that) we gave to them no such commandment."⁴

Nevertheless the struggle between the two opposing factions continued, the one, maintaining that circumcision was necessary, the other that it was not. Peter headed the former, Paul the latter. Eventually a compromise was reached and it was agreed that Peter was to preach the gospel among the Jews, while Paul and Barnabas were to carry on their preaching among the heathen.⁵ However, when Paul found it to his advantage to circumcise one of his disciples, he did so without hesitancy. This he did with Timotheus, the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. The circumcision was performed to enable Timotheus to go with him among the Jews, since the Jews knew his father was a Greek.⁶

Paul gives generous expression in the Epistles to his views on circumcision and uncircumcision. In I Corinth. 7:18-20 he writes: "Was a man circumcised at the time he was called? Then he is not to efface the marks of it. Has any man been called when he was uncircumcised? Then he is not to get circumcised. Circumcision counts for nothing, uncircumcision counts for nothing; obedience to God's commands is everything. Everyone must remain in the condition of life where he was called."⁷ In Romans 2:25f he writes: "Circumcision is certainly of use providing you keep the Law; but if you are a breaker of the Law then your circumcision is turned to uncircumcision. If then the uncircumcised observe the requirements of the Law shall not their uncircumcision be reckoned equivalent to circumcision? And shall not those who are physically uncircumcised and who fulfil the Law, judge you who are a breaker of the Law for all your written code and circumcision? He is no

Jew who is merely a Jew outwardly, nor is circumcision something outward in the flesh; he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual not literal--praised by God, not by man." He points out that Abraham was a righteous man before he was circumcised, and that he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness he already had when uncircumcised.⁸ Therefore faith and righteousness have nothing whatever to do with circumcision, and whether a man is circumcised or uncircumcised can only be justified by faith.⁹ The real circumcision requires no cutting of flesh from the body, but is the burial with Christ in baptism and belief in the power of the God who raised him from the dead.¹⁰ Paul attacks viciously the opposing party, accusing them of advocating circumcision in order "to make a grand display in the flesh" and "to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ." "Why even the circumcision party," he writes, "do not observe the Law themselves! They merely want you to get circumcised so as to boast over your flesh."¹¹ On one occasion when Peter came to Antioch where Paul was carrying on his preaching, and there at an assembly of believers in the new faith separated himself from those who were uncircumcised, which led to the other Jews and even Barnabas doing likewise, Paul severely rebuked Peter for this act. In the presence of everyone, he said to Peter, "If you being a Jew live after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why do you compel the Gentiles to live as do the Jews."¹² Paul's views on circumcision eventually won out, but the struggle between the two factions continued, and even today, the Coptic church in Ethiopia demands circumcision of its adherents.

Another New Testament criticism of circumcision was the fact

that the Jews permitted the rite to be carried out on the Sabbath. The rather late gospel of John puts this criticism into the mouth of Jesus. When Jesus allegedly enraged the people for his having healed a man on the Sabbath, he is said to have answered this charge by saying: "Moses gave you the rite of circumcision....and you will circumcise a man on the Sabbath. Well, if a man gets circumcised on the Sabbath to avoid breaking the Law of Moses, are you enraged at me for curing, not cutting, the entire body of a man upon the Sabbath?"¹³

The Christian attacks on circumcision were taken up again by the early Church apologists, one of the foremost of whom was Justin. In his Dialogue with Trypho the Jew¹⁴ (written C.138) he tells Trypho that the circumcision in the flesh that was derived from Abraham was really intended to distinguish the Jews from other nations and from Christians in order that they alone might suffer the inflictions that were now being laid upon them,¹⁵ "for by fleshy circumcision alone can you be distinguished from other men."¹⁶ "It is because circumcision is not necessary for all", he continues, "but only for you Jews that, as I said before, you might undergo your present justly merited sufferings.... You, who are circumcised in the flesh, require our circumcision;¹⁷ whilst we who possess this have no need of yours. For had circumcision been absolutely necessary, God would not have created Adam without it, nor would he have regarded the sacrifice of Abel, which he offered in uncircumcision, nor would Enoch have been pleasing in his sight in uncircumcision....Lot was saved without circumcision, the Angels and the Lord Himself leading him out of Sodom. Noah, the father of man, being in uncircumcision, entered with his children

into the Ark. Melchisedic, the priest of the Most High, was uncircumcised, to whom Abraham the first who received circumcision, gave tithes, and was blessed by him. All those were just men, and righteous in the sight of God, without even keeping the Sabbath."¹⁸

Justin takes up the same argument that Paul did with regard to Abraham's circumcision,¹⁹ namely, that Abraham was righteous while he was yet uncircumcised, and that circumcision was given to him for a sign of righteousness and not for righteousness itself.²⁰ "And since women are incapable of receiving fleshy circumcision, we have a positive proof that it is given as a sign, and not as a work of righteousness. For God has made that sex capable of performing all the duties of justice and righteousness."²¹

That circumcision in itself is not pleasing to God, Justin tries to prove by turning to Jer. 9:25,26: "For behold the days come saith the Lord that I will visit all that have circumcised their foreskins; Egypt and Judah and Edom, and the children of Moab; for all these nations are uncircumcised and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart." "Do you not perceive", Justin comments, "that God does not want that circumcision which is given for a sign, for it profits not the Egyptians, nor the children of Moab and Edom."²²

To Trypho he presses the question that seemed to bother the early Christians so much, namely, the one relating to circumcision on the Sabbath. "Tell me, did God desire that your high priests, who offered oblations on the Sabbath, or those who were circumcised themselves, and circumcised others on that day should commit sin? since He commanded that circumcision should certainly be practiced on the eighth day, though that were the Sabbath? Could He not have

commanded it to be done, the day before or the day after the Sabbath if He knew that it were wrong to do it on that day? or why did He not teach those who lived before Moses and Abraham to observe the same laws, who are termed just men and pleasing to God, though they were not circumcised and observed not the Sabbaths?"²²

It was God's intention, says Justin, that circumcision of the flesh and the ritual law should cease with the coming of Christ. Those who come to God through Christ receive not the fleshy circumcision but the spiritual one which the righteous men before Abraham observed.²⁴ The blood of the former circumcision is now done, and the blood of the new circumcision is the blood of the Savior. A new law has come out of Zion, and in this law Christ circumcises all who are willing with knives of stone, to make the people a righteous nation keeping faith, truth and peace.²⁵ The expression "knives of stone" has reference to the circumcision at Gilgal (Josh. 5:2 f) where Joshua was told to take "knives of flint and circumcise the people a second time." Justin attempts to connect the names Joshua and Jesus. The second circumcision at Gilgal figuratively heralded the second circumcision through Christ, i.e. the circumcision of the heart. The "knives of stone" are the doctrines of Christ, "by which so many who were wandering in error were circumcised from uncircumcision, with the circumcision of the heart."²⁶

Notes to Chapter IX

1. I. Corinth. 7:9

2. Acts 21:21

3. Acts 10:44-11:2

4. Acts 15:24

5. Galatians 2: 7-9

6. Acts 16:1-3

7. Cf. also Gal. 6:15

8. Romans 4:1ff

9. Romans 3:28 f.

10. Col. 2:10-12

11. Gal. 6:10-12

12. Gal. 2:11 f

13. John 6:22 f.

14. Works of St. Justin the Martyr, London 1861, p.71 ff.

15. The reference is to the destruction wrought by the Romans under Hadrian to Judea at the time of the Bar Kochba revolt.

Trypho had fought with Bar Kochba and had escaped.

16. Ibid, sec. 16

17. I.e. spiritual circumcision of the heart.

18. Ibid, sec. 19

19. Romans 4:1 f

20. Elsewhere in the Dialogue (sec. 91, Justin says, "Abraham did not obtain the testimony of God that he was righteous through circumcision, but through his faith. For before he was circumcised it was thus said of him: "Abraham believed God and it was accounted unto him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6)

21. Dialogue with Trypho sec. 23.

22. Ibid. sec. 28. The Apostolic work, Epistle of St. Barnabas gives a similar argument. "You will say that 'the people' (the Jews) were circumcised for a sign. But every Syrian and Arabian, and all the priests of the idolators (were circumcised) also. Are these then of His covenant?" (Quoted in Works of St. Justin the Martyr, p. 104, note.)

23. Ibid sec. 40

24. Ibid sec. 43

25. Ibid sec 24

26 Ibid sec. 113

Part Three
Aggadic Interpretations

X Polemics

Against such attacks as these, the logic of which was indeed difficult to dispute, the Rabbis had to defend the ancient covenant rite. Thus, many of the Aggadic passages on circumcision are of a polemical character. They are directed not only against the attacks of Christians, but also against the sceptical attitude that many Jews had fallen into. Unfortunately, the Rabbis had not the rationalistic approach of a Philo; in all probability they had never heard of the Alexandrian philosopher and his remarkable defense of circumcision. Or if they did, they paid no heed to him or his work, and regarded Scriptural proof as a stronger basis for upholding a religious practice than the rationalistic approach which he had undertaken. Moreover, the Rabbis were unalterably opposed to anything that smacked of Hellenism, and Philo's writings would certainly have been classed by them as such.

The Christians and heretically-minded Jews had based their opposition to a large extent on their own interpretation of Scripture. Therefore it was but natural that the Rabbis should seek to defend the validity and importance of circumcision with their own application of Scriptural evidence.

In contrast to the Christian view expressed by Paul, that "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing"¹ the Rabbis gave the most glowing of tributes to the covenant rite, not hesitating to emphasize that it was the most fundamental of all the commandments.² "Great is circumcision," R. Ishmael declared, "for thirteen covenants were made therein."³ R. Jose said, "Great is circumcision for it overrides the Sabbath." R. Joshua b. Korha said: "Great is circumcision for the neglect of

which Moses did not have his punishment suspended even for a single hour." R. Nehemiah said: "Great is circumcision for it supersedes the laws of leprosy."⁴ Rabbi said, "Great is circumcision, for despite all the precepts that Abraham fulfilled, he was not designated perfect until he circumcised himself, as it is said, 'Walk before Me and be thou perfect.'" (Gen. 17:1) "Great is circumcision since but for that, God would not have created the universe, as it is written, 'Thus saith the Lord, But for My covenant'⁵ by day and night, I would not have appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth.'" (Jer. 33:25) Great is circumcision for it is equal to all the works of creation mentioned in the Torah, as it is said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you in agreement with all these words!'" (Exod. 24:8)⁶ "Great is circumcision for it is equal to all the other precepts of the Torah, as it is written, 'For after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel' (Exod. 34:27)⁷ "Great is circumcision, for it is one of the three covenants that God made between Himself and his creatures, namely, the rainbow, the circumcision, and the Sabbath."⁸

No doubt many heretically minded Jews had raised the same questions that Christians like Justin had advanced; that if circumcision was so important, how is it that there were righteous men who lived before Abraham and who therefore could not have been circumcised? Furthermore, why was Abraham not circumcised until his ninety-ninth year?; if circumcision was so fundamental God would have established the covenant with him when he was a much younger man. It was also noted that the Bible made no mention of the circumcision of other important Biblical figures. To these

challenges the Rabbis had the fitting answer. Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, they said, were all born circumcised. Similarly, there were others of whom no mention of circumcision was made in the Bible, who were born circumcised, namely, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses Samuel, David and Jeremiah. Naturally an appropriate Scriptural verse was supplied to prove each case.⁹ As for Abraham's circumcision, it was pointed out that it was for the sake of the proselytes that he did not undergo the rite until his ninety-ninth year.¹⁰ "For had he been circumcised at twenty or thirty years of age, only those under the age of thirty could have become proselytes to Judaism. Therefore, God bore with Abraham until he reached ninety-nine years of age so as not to close the door to future proselytes--and also to determine the reward according to the days and years, thus increasing the reward of him who does His will."¹¹

Similarly in Tanhuma Lech Lecha 17,¹² the statement is made. "Why was Abraham circumcised in his ninety-ninth year? To teach strangers who wish to become proselytes not to say: I am too old (to become circumcised), I cannot become a proselyte. Let him learn from Abraham who circumcised himself in his ninety-ninth year."

Again in answer to the question, Why was Abraham circumcised in his ninety-ninth year?, the following statement is made.¹³ (Because) "'To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven' (Eccl 3:1) There was a time for circumcision to be given to Abraham, (as Scripture says) 'In the self-same day was Abraham circumcised.' (Gen. 17:26) There was a time for it to fall to his descendants in the wilderness, (as Scripture says): 'For all the people that came out were circumcised; but

all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt had not been circumcised.' (Josh. 5:5) He (Abraham) might have been circumcised in his forty-eighth year, at the time he recognized his Creator, (but was not) in order not to close the door to future proselytes. He might have been circumcised in his eighty-fifth year at the time when God spoke to him "between the pieces" (Gen. 15:17,18) (but was not) in order that Isaac might issue forth from a holy drop.¹⁴ He might also have been circumcised in his eighty-sixth year at the time Ishmael was born. Said R. Simeon b. Lakish: (God said): I will establish a "Kinnamon" (an everlasting principle) in the world. Just as the kinnamon (the cinnamon tree,¹⁵ no matter how old) will bear fruit when you manure and hoe around it, so shall Abraham (bear fruit) after his blood is tied up and his passion is gone and his desire is gone." (In other words R. Simeon b. Lakish was saying that by becoming circumcised Abraham was able to beget children in his old age, the circumcision restoring his generative powers.)

The arguments for and against circumcision are put forth in a dialogue between Abraham and God.¹⁶ Abraham first asks God: "Why, if circumcision is so precious, was it not given to Adam?" In reply God reminds him, "I am אלהים (reading אל , i.e., I am God who is sufficient). It should be sufficient for you that I and you are in the world; it should be sufficient for you that uncircumcision prevailed and circumcision was suppressed until now." When Abraham argues that until now many have joined him, and now with circumcision demanded, they will no longer come and join him, God replies that it should be sufficient for him that

He is the God and protector of both Abraham and the world.¹⁷

The role that the Rabbis claimed circumcision played in saving the world, is illustrated in the following passage which also makes a play on the word *לָצַד*. "God said to Abraham, 'Since I created the world I have waited through twenty generations that you might come and accept circumcision. And if you do not accept it, the world has existed long enough (*לָצַד*) until now, and I will turn it back into chaos, for I do not need the world.'" Therefore did he say. 'I am El Shaddai' (reading *לָצַד* and meaning) 'I am God, for whom the world has existed long enough (*לָצַד*), but if you accept circumcision, you and I are sufficient (*לָצַד*) in the world (and I will not destroy it)'."¹⁸ Thus, the Rabbinic view seems to have been that only by virtue of Abraham's acceptance of circumcision was the world saved from God's determination to completely annihilate it.

The question, why, if circumcision is so important, was it not given to Adam, was asked of R. Hoshayiah by a philosopher.¹⁹ Instead of replying immediately, R. Hoshayiah asked him, "Why do you shave the side of your face and yet let your beard grow." The philosopher answered, "Because it (the hair on the side of my face) has grown with me in folly." "In that case," the Rabbi countered, "why not blind your eyes and cut off your hands and break your legs, since they too have grown with you in folly."²⁰ "But," R. Hoshayiah continued, "I cannot dismiss you without an answer. Everything that was created in the six days of creation needed improvement; the mustard needed sweetening, the lupines needed sweetening, the wheat needed to be milled, and man too needed improvement."²¹

It is reported that a Roman lady once asked R. Jose b. Halaftha, "Why if circumcision is so pleasing to God, was it not included in the Ten Commandments?" R. Jose replied, "It has already been included in the phrase, 'And the stranger who is in thy gates.' (Exod. 20:10) This refers to the proselyte who keeps the Sabbath and the covenant of circumcision just as an Israelite does."²²

When Aquila²³ the proselyte put this same question to R. Eliezer he was given a much better answer. "It was given before the Ten Commandments," R. Eliezer replied, "in the injunction, 'And thou shalt keep my covenant.'" (Exod. 19:5)²⁴

The Rabbis went to considerable length in commenting on the expression in Gen. 17:1 "Walk before Me and be thou perfect." Out of their comments they produced the only rationale for circumcision in the whole of the Talmudic and Midrashic literature. The foreskin was a blemish and its removal brought about bodily perfection.¹ This was the meaning of God's command to Abraham to walk before Him and be perfect. "It is comparable," said R. Levi, "to a lady to whom a king said, 'Pass before me.' She passed before him and she was made to feel ashamed. She said to him, 'Is there, perhaps, some worthless object to be found on me?' He said to her, 'There is no worthless object on you except the nail of your small finger which is about the size of an amulet; remove it and the blemish is gone.' Thus God said to Abraham; 'There is no worthless object on you except this foreskin. Remove it and it is gone: Walk before Me and be thou perfect.'"²⁵

In a similar vein R. Judan said,²⁶ "Just as a fig-tree has no worthless matter except the peduncle; remove it and the

blemish is void; so the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham: You have no worthless object on you except this foreskin;²⁷ remove it and the blemish is void; 'Walk before me and be thou perfect.'"

R. Akiba taught:²⁸ "There are four kinds of 'arlah' (uncircumcision). 'Arlah' is spoken of with respect to the ear, as it is said, 'Behold their ear is 'arlah', dull' (Jer. 6:10). And 'arlah' is spoken of with respect to the mouth; 'Behold I am of uncircumcised ('arel') lips. (Exod. 6:30) And 'arlah' is spoken of with respect to the heart: "And all the house of Israel are uncircumcised ('arle') in the heart" (Jer. 9:25). And yet it was said to Abraham, 'Walk before Me and be thou perfect' (Gen. 17:1). Should he be circumcised in the ear, he would not be perfect; or on the mouth he would not be perfect; or in the heart, he would not be perfect. Where could he be circumcised and still remain perfect? The answer is, in the foreskin of the body....Moreover, were he to be circumcised in the ear, he would not be able to hear; on the mouth, he would not be able to speak; in the heart, he would not be able to think. Where could he be circumcised and still be able to hear, speak and think? Namely in the foreskin of the body.

In Tanhuma Lech Lecha 16 occurs the interesting proof by means of gematria that Abraham's circumcision brought about his physical perfection. "When God said to Abram, 'Walk before Me and be thou perfect' (and at the same time told him to become circumcised), Abram said: 'At present I am perfect (whole) but if I circumcise myself I will be lacking in one of my limbs (and hence will no longer be perfect).' To this God said: 'Did you think you were actually perfect? You are lacking in five of your

limbs. While you are uncircumcised your name is Abram (אֲבְרָם)³⁰ the gematria of which is 243, and the number of limbs in a man is 248. Circumcise yourself and become perfect.' And when he did become circumcised God said to him: 'Your name shall no longer be Abram but Abraham' (אֲבְרָהָם);³¹ and by adding the ו in his name, God added to him five more limbs, to total 248: Therefore, 'Be Thou perfect';" (i.e., by means of the circumcision Abraham received five more limbs to total 248, which is the gematria of the name Abraham, and at the same time the number of limbs in a perfect man).

Similarly in Nedarim 32 b (top) R. Ammi b. Abba taught: "At first Abram is written, then Abraham. At first God gave him mastery over 243 limbs and then over 248, the additional ones being the two eyes, the two ears and the membrum."³²

Proof of God's love for circumcision is expressed in the following homily: "Scripture says (with regard to Abraham's circumcision), 'Walk before me and be thou perfect' (Gen. 17:2); and elsewhere it says, 'As for God, His way is perfect.' (Ps. 18:31) What is the meaning of "perfect" (in the second verse)? (It can only refer to circumcision, and hence it means) that God cherishes circumcision."³³

The same thought is more elaborately expressed in the following passage, which incidentally also seems to give the view that circumcision is a partial substitute for the former Temple sacrifice. "Come and see how cherished the commandment of circumcision is before God; for every Israelite who brings his son to be circumcised in the morning, is accounted as though he were bringing the continual offering of the morning on that day.

And the blood of the circumcision appears to God as the sacrifice of the two he-lambs that were offered continually on the alter, one for the morning and one for the evening. And his son is made perfect as a he-lamb a year old without blemish, and it is concerning him too, that Scripture writes, 'He shall offer it, a male (זכר) without blemish (פ'ק) (Lev. 1:3). Therefore through (circumcision of) his male genitals (מילה) is he (the child) made without blemish (פ'ק) as it is said, 'Walk before Me and be thou perfect.' For this reason is the commandment of circumcision cherished."³⁴

Notes to Chapter X

1. I Cor. 7:19

2. M. Ned. 3:11; Ned. 31 B; Tos. Ned. 2:5,6; Y. Ned. 3:9; Mekilta Amalek, 3.

3. The term *ברית* "covenant" occurs thirteen times in the passage enjoining circumcision on Abraham and his descendants (Cf. also Shab 132 a top)

4. It is forbidden to cut off a leprous spot, but if it is on the foreskin it may be removed together with it. Cf. Shab. 132 b.

5. "Covenant" here is taken to refer to circumcision.

6. Tos. Ned. 2:6. The phrase "in agreement with all these words" in the Hebrew reads *וְעַל כָּל אֵלֶּה*, which may also be translated "over all these things", i.e. "Behold the blood of the covenant....is over (greater than) all these things (the works of creation)".

7. Ned. 32 a. "After the tenor of all these words" is taken to refer to all the laws of the Torah, while "covenant" is taken to refer to circumcision. The fact that the two are in juxtaposition to each other indicates that they are equated.

8. Midrash Hagadol (Quoted in Kasher's Torah Shelemah p. 702). Weiss, Dor II, 9 holds that all the above statements were called forth by the Christian abrogation of the covenant rite.

9. Aboth de R. Nathan Chap. 2.

10. Mekilta Nezikin chap. 18; Genesis Rabba 46:2; Tract. Gerim chap. 4; Yalkut Koheleth 968

11. Mekilta Nezikin chap. 18

12. Also in Buber's Tanhuma, Lech Lecha 24

13. Genesis R. 46:2

14. This is a rather inconsistent statement. Isaac would have issued from a holy drop regardless of whether Abraham was circumcised in his eighty-fifth or ninety-ninth year.

15. A play on words.

16. Gen. R. 46:3.

17. The arguments given by Abraham are undoubtedly those which were advanced by Jews opposed to circumcision. The answer given by God in the play on the word 'q, expresses the view that whenever God gives a command that in itself is sufficient. Hence the argument that Adam did not receive circumcision has no bearing whatsoever on circumcision as it touches Israel. The argument that circumcision would keep away proselytes was common in Judaism as it was in earliest Christianity. The answer expresses the view that even though proselytes are kept away from Judaism because of circumcision, and hence the possibilities of Judaism growing mighty in strength and saving the world are diminished, nevertheless, God is sufficient to protect Israel and the world.

18. Tanhuma (Buber) Lech Lecha 24. The same thought is expressed in Midrash Hagadol to Gen 17:1 (Quoted by Kasher, Torah Sh'leimah p. 687): "Scripture says: 'He hath remembered His covenant for ever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations; (the covenant) which He made with Abraham, and His oath unto Isaac. And He established it unto Jacob for a statute, to Israel for an everlasting covenant.' (Ps. 105:8-10) It was taught in the school of R. Eliezer: From the day that God created the world, He decreed that a thousand generations

should arise without circumcision. When the generation of the flood came and they corrupted their ways, their evil deeds caused them to perish. After ten generations came the generation of the dispersion and they dealt more wantonly than their predecessors, and so He caused them to become confounded. But when Abraham, our father, came, and God saw that he walked in integrity and uprightness of heart, He said: This one is worthy enough for the commandment of circumcision to be given through him. Immediately, God revealed Himself to him and said: 'I am El Shaddai.' That is, He said to him: 'If you accept the covenant of circumcision, it is well; but if not, I shall say unto the world: 'It is enough!' ('3) and I will turn it back into chaos.

Likewise in Gen. R. 49:--a similar thought occurs. "It is written: 'The secret (310) of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and His covenant, to make them know it.' (Ps. 25:14). What is the secret (310) of the Lord? This is circumcision. For He did not reveal it from the time of Adam and until twenty generations later, until Abraham arose and it was given to him, as it is said, 'And I will make My covenant between Me and thee' (Gen. 17:2). God said to him: If you will be circumcised then you will receive the secret (310) of the Lord. What is the secret (310) of the Lord? 0 equals sixty, / equals six, 3 equals four, a total of seventy. By merit of the circumcision I will raise up seventy of your descendants, as it is said, 'Thy fathers went down into Egypt with seventy persons' (Deut. 10:22) and I will raise up from among them seventy elders, as it is said, 'Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel' (Num. 11:16), and from among them I will raise up Moses who will know the Law in seventy tongues, as it said, 'In the land of Moab Moses took

it upon him to expound this Law.' (Deut. 1:5). By merit of what (shall all this take place)? By merit of the circumcision, as it is said, "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him." God also said to Abraham: It is sufficient ('3) for the servant that he should be like the master." (i.e., if Abraham accepts circumcision, his descendants will likewise accept it. (The word "sufficient" '3 is a play on '32)).

19. Gen. R. 11:1; Pesikta Rabbati 23 (Friedman p.116 b)
In the latter it is Rabbi and not R. Hoshayiah who takes part in this discussion.

20. R. Hoshayiah was merely pointing out to him how irrelevant his question was. That Adam did not receive circumcision is no indication that it is not important, any more than that because a man shaves his face, it should follow that he must also blind his eyes and cut off his hands.

21. The implication of this answer is that circumcision is an act of improvement and perfection in man. Although the first man was not circumcised, neither were the other works of creation perfect. It remained for later generations to bring about the improvement.

22. Pesikta Rabbati 23 (Friedman p. 117 a)

23. Ibid. Tanhuma, Lech Lecha 20 has "King Agrippa" instead of "Aquila".

24. In Mekilta Ba Hodesh chap. 3, a R. Eliezer holds that this verse refers to the Sabbath, while R. Akiba claims it refers to circumcision.

25. Genesis Rabba 46:4; Yalkut, Lech Lecha 81

26. Genesis R. 46:1; Yalkut Lech Lecha, 80; Yalkut Hosea, 525. Cf. also Tanhuma (Buber) Lech Lecha 21.

27. The stigma and repugnance that the Rabbis attached to the foreskin and the uncircumcised person is well expressed in the following passages: "The foreskin is a reproach, as it is said, 'We cannot....give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that (the foreskin) is a reproach to us' (Gen. 34:14), because the foreskin is more unclean than all unclean things, as it is said, 'For henceforth there shall no more come unto thee the uncircumcised and the unclean' (Is. 52:1). For the foreskin is a blemish above all blemishes." (Pirke de R. Eliezer chap. 29, beg.)

"The foreskin is a festering sore that hangs from the body."
(Gen. R. 46:10)

'Uncircumcised' is a term applicable only to heathens, for it is said, 'For all the nations are uncircumcised and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart' (Jer. 9:25), (i.e. the nations are called uncircumcised because they are heathens, and Israel too when it takes on heathen customs is called uncircumcised) (M.Ned. 3:11)

"R. Eleazer b. Azariah says: Uncircumcision is detestable, for the wicked are reproached with it, as it is said 'For all the nations are uncircumcised.'" (M.Ned. 3:11; Mekilta Amalek chap.3)

"We find that the fate of the Nations was sealed only on account of their uncircumcision, as it is said: 'For all of them are uncircumcised, fallen with the sword.'" (Ezek. 32:26)
(Tos. Ned. 2:4)

"He who separates himself from circumcision is like one separated from God"...."He who eats with an uncircumcised person

it is as though he were eating flesh of abomination (another version, "as though he were eating with a dog"). All who bathe with the uncircumcised are as though they bathed with carrion (another version, "a leper"), and all who touch an uncircumcised person are as though they touched the dead, for in their lifetime they are like the dead; and in their death they are like the carrion of the beast, and their prayer does not come before the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said, 'The dead praise not the Lord' (Ps. 115. 17). (Pirke de R. Eliezer chap. 29. This last denunciation of the uncircumcised does not occur in the published Hebrew texts, probably because of censorship, but it is included in Friedlander's translation p. 208.)

28. Gen. R. 46:5; Lev. R. 25:6

29. Cf. also Buber's Tanhuma Lech Lecha 20:

30. $k=1$, $\lambda=2$, $\gamma=200$, $\rho=40$, a total of 243

31. $k=1$, $\lambda=2$, $\gamma=200$, $\gamma=5$, $\rho=46$, a total of 248

32. The eyes, the ears and the membrum all entice one to immorality, but now by becoming circumcised Abraham received mastery over those limbs and the willpower to resist looking upon or listening to sin, as well as the willpower to control his sex-lust. Thus he became the perfect man from a moral standpoint. But, on the other hand, it was also reported by R. Judah in the name of Rab, that when God told Abraham to walk before Him and be perfect, Abraham was seized with trembling for he thought that God meant by this that there was something imperfect and shameful in him. But his mind was appeased when God added, "And I will make My covenant between Me and thee", thus indicating that it was not because of any imperfection in himself that Abraham was told to become circumcised, but because of the absence of a formal covenant between him and the Almighty. (Nedarim 32a, bot.)

33. Tanhuma, Lech Lecha, 17.

34. Quoted in Kasher, Torah Shelemah p.691 (on Gen. 17:1).

The source given is "Midrash" (?).

XI The Saving Powers of Circumcision.

Circumcision according to the Rabbis, had a saving effect on the life beyond the grave and delivered one from Gehinnom. According to R. Nahman B. Isaac, an infant was eligible to enter the future world only from the time of his circumcision.¹ "At the gate of Gehinnom" R. Levi taught,² "Abraham sits and will not permit a circumcised Israelite to descend into its midst. But as for those who have sinned more than their share, he transfers to them the foreskins of infants who died before they could be circumcised and (since they now appear to be uncircumcised) brings them down into Gehinnom. Thus it is written, 'He puts forth his hands against them that were at peace with him, he destroys the covenant.' (Ps. 55:21)³

Similarly in Tanhuma, Lech Lecha 20, it is stated that God made the promise to Abraham that none who were circumcised would descend into Gehinnom. But all the uncircumcised nations mentioned by Ezekiel (chap. 31,32) will descend there as Ezekiel promised. And as for the heretics and sinners in Israel who deny the existence of God and follow idolatrous practices, despite the fact that they are circumcised, God draws out their foreskins, and they fall into Gehinnom. In the opinion of R. Eliezer the Modaite, one who breaks the covenant of circumcision, even though he may have many good deeds in his favor, is worthy of being thrust out of the world.⁴

That circumcision was cherished by the patriarchs because they knew of its saving powers could be proved from Scripture. "Even Jacob, when he adjured Joseph, said to him, 'Put I pray

thee, my hand under thy thigh' (Gen. 47:29) Why did they cherish the circumcision? Because they knew that in the future it would save them from Gehinnom, and because they had undergone the rite, bring them into the world to come, as it is said, 'The nether-world hath enlarged her desire and opened her mouth without measure'. (Is. 5:14) What is the meaning of 'without measure' (*ללא מידה*)? 'Measure' (*מידה*) can only mean circumcision, for it is said, 'The covenant which he made with Abraham....and he established it unto Jacob for a statute (*לעולם*)' (Ps. 105:10). (Therefore *ללא* means circumcision, and for those without *ללא*, i.e., circumcision, the netherworld opens wide her mouth). But the Israelites, since they are circumcised escape from it, as it is said, 'When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee' etc. (Is. 43:2)⁵

A story is told⁶ of a non-Jew, Ketiah b. Shalom, who, because he defended the Jews and thereby shamed the Emperor, was ordered to be cast into a furnace. While he was being led away a Roman Matron said of him, "Pity the ship that sails toward the harbor without paying the tax."⁷ Forthwith, Ketiah b. Shalom circumcised himself and exclaimed, "I have paid the tax, I will enter paradise." As he was being cast into the furnace he bequeathed all his possessions to R. Akiba and his friends. A Bath Kol then exclaimed: "Ketiah b. Shalom is destined for life in the world to come." Thus for the single act of circumcision Ketiah b. Shalom was privileged to enter Paradise. Rabbi, upon hearing this story, remarked that one person may acquire eternity in a single hour, another only after many years.

From the above passages it would seem that the Rabbis in general felt that there was no room in the world to come for

anyone who did not undergo circumcision, whether Jew or non-Jew. And yet in striking contrast to this is the famous Rabbinic statement that "the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come."⁸

Not only did circumcision deliver one from Gehinnom, but it also had certain talismanic powers which delivered one in times of danger. On one occasion when David stepped into the bath and stripped himself of his phylacteries (which provided protection against evil) he thanked God for the covenant mark which was still on him, for it now gave him the necessary protection; and he, therefore, sang Ps. 12 which bears the superscription "Al Hashminith"(lit. "on the eighth") which the Rabbis interpreted as referring to circumcision.⁹

A story is told of R. Tanhum, to whom the Emperor made the proposal, "Come and let us all be one people." R. Tanhum agreed, "But", he continued, "we who are circumcised cannot possibly become like you; do you become circumcised and you will be like us." The Emperor, provoked by this answer, ordered R. Tanhum to be thrown into the vivarium to be devoured by beasts. But when he was thrown in he was not eaten. Thereupon a heretic remarked, "The reason they did not eat him is that they are not hungry." They threw the heretic in and he was eaten.¹⁰

A story with some historical basis, is told in the Midrash,¹¹ of Monobasus and Izates, the sons of King Ptolemy who had become interested in Judaism. They were reading in the Book of Genesis and when they came to the verse "And ye shall be circumcised" first one turned his face to the wall and wept and then the other turned his face to the wall and wept, for neither had been circumcised. Some days later they were again sitting and reading

in the Book of Genesis, and when they reached the same verse, one said to the other, "You continue my brother", and the other said, "No, you continue and not I." Then they revealed to each other what was on their minds. Their mother perceived this and so she went to their father and told him that their sons had an ulcerated sore and that the physician advised circumcision. The father gave his consent and they were circumcised. In reward for this, when they were engaged in a war and fell into a ditch that had been dug by the enemy, an angel came and saved them.

Notes to Chapter XI

1. Sanh. 110 b,

2. Genesis Rabba 48:8. Cf. also Yalk. Gen. 82; Yalk. Ps. 777; Tanhuma Tazria 5; Exod. R. 19:4; Mid. Tehilim 6:1

3. *וְאֵלֶּיךָ יְהוָה יָדָא וְיָדָא יְהוָה*: That is to say, even though they were *פְּרִיט*, (perfect) and circumcised, he nevertheless "sends forth his hand to destroy the covenant." So Theodor explains. This homily is interesting, because it indicates conclusively that the practice of circumcising at the grave those infants who died before they could undergo the rite, was not carried on at the time this statement was penned, i.e., in Tannaitic times. In Erub. 19a, commenting on the verse, 'Passing through the valley of Baca (Ps. 84:7) the Rabbis say that this verse refers to the wicked who are under sentence to suffer in Gehinnom, but our father Abraham comes, brings them up and receives them (evidently saving them from the netherworld) except such an Israelite as had immoral intercourse with the daughter of an idolator, since his foreskin becomes drawn, and he cannot be recognized (as an Israelite by Abraham, who mistakes him for a heathen and so permits him to descend into Gehinnom.) The tradition that Abraham guards the portals of Gehinnom is undoubtedly indicated in this passage too.

4. Sifri Shalah 112. There are thirty-six commandments in the Torah, of which the failure to observe is punishable by extermination (*מית*). Of these two are positive, circumcision and the Passover. (M. Ker. 1:1)

5. Buber's Tanhuma Hayye Sarah, 6. Cf. also Tanhuma Lech Lecha 20. A similar teaching is found in Exod. R. 19:5, which

also adds the remark that as soon as Gehinnom sees the foreskin suspended from the wicked, she opens up wide her mouth and swallows them.

6. Abodah Zarah 10 b.

7. The Roman matron was saying that Ketiah b. Shalom who was giving up his life for the Jews, was going to the hereafter without having conformed to the Jewish rite of circumcision.

So. Rashi.

8. Tos. Sanh. 13:2

9. Yebamoth 43 b.

10. Sanhedrin 39 a.

11. Gen. R. 46:10. Josephus (Antiq. XX chap. 2:3,4) tells this same story of Izates, son of Monobasus and Queen Helena. A Jew Ananias had succeeded in converting Queen Helena to Judaism. Her son Izates wished to follow in her path, and offered to undergo circumcision. Both his mother and Ananias urged him not to do so because the people might be aroused by this act and overthrow the dynasty. Nevertheless, Izates did submit to the operation, and God rewarded him for his piety, and delivered him and his sons out of many dangers.

XII The Circumcision of Abraham

According to one tradition Abraham was circumcised on the Day of Atonement,¹ according to another, on the Passover².

Proof that he was circumcised on the Day of Atonement is supplied by the phrase *ביום כיפור* which occurs with reference to both circumcision and the Day of Atonement: "Ye shall do no manner of work in that selfsame day, for it is a day of atonement" (Lev. 23:28) and, "In that selfsame day was Abraham circumcised." (Gen. 17:26) Because the circumcision took place at that time, every year, on the Day of Atonement God sees the blood that Abraham shed and he forgives the sins of Israel. In the very place where Abraham was circumcised, there the altar of the temple was built. The circumcision was the eighth of the ten trials to which Abraham submitted in order to prove his loyalty to God.³

On the third day of the circumcision in order to test him still further, Abraham was made very sore. What did God do? He made a hole in Gehinnom so that the day became very hot, like the day of the wicked and Abraham in order to escape from the heat went and sat down at the door of the tent, as it is said, "And he sat at the tent door in the heat of the day." (Gen. 18:1) Then God said to his ministering angels, "Come and let us descend and visit the sick for the virtue of visiting the sick is great before me." So God and the angels descended to visit Abraham, as it is said, "And the Lord appeared unto him." (ibid) Then God said to His ministering angels, "Come and see the power of circumcision. Before Abraham was circumcised he fell on his face before Me and afterwards I spoke to him," as it is said,

"And Abraham fell upon his face." (Gen. 17:17) "Now that he is circumcised he sits and I stand." Whence do we know that God was standing? Because it is said, "And he looked and lo, three men stood over him." (Gen. 18:2)⁴

When the command was given to Abraham to be circumcised, he said to God, "While I am uncircumcised every passerby comes to visit me. Perhaps, if I become circumcised they will no more visit me." To this God replied, "While you are uncircumcised, only uncircumcised people come to you. But, now, I in my glory will be revealed to you." And thus Scripture says, "And the Lord appeared unto him." (Gen. 18:1)⁵

According to one tradition, Shem, the son of Noah performed the circumcision of Abraham and his household.⁶ According to another tradition, taught in the name of Rabban Gamliel, the circumciser was the angel Raphael.⁷ A rather fantastic picture of Abraham's circumcision, based on still another tradition is given in Tanhuma, Lech Lecha 17.⁸ "Abraham was sitting and had to ask in wonderment, 'How shall I be circumcised?' when God told him, 'And I will put my covenant between Me and thee.' (Gen. 17:2). But what is written immediately after this? 'And Abraham fell upon his face.' (v.3) God gave him a hint regarding that place (which was to be circumcised, and moreover) a scorpion came and stung him there (and severed the foreskin). Whence do we know this? Because it is said, "And God talked with him saying: As for Me, behold, My covenant is (already) with thee and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations' (v.4) i.e., 'behold you are already circumcised;' and moreover it is written, 'On the self-same day Abraham was circumcised' (v.26).

R. Levi said: $\int N$ ('He circumcised himself') is not written but $\int N \int$ ('He was circumcised'). He examined himself and found that he was already circumcised. It is comparable to the friend of a king who wanted to marry the king's daughter, and he was abashed and did not know whether to put the proposal in his own name or in the name of another person. The king perceived what was on his mind and said to him, 'I know what your desire is. Behold, my daughter is already in your house.' So too, Abraham became abashed when God said to him, 'And I will put My covenant between Me and thee,' and he fell down upon his face. But in falling he found that he was circumcised, (as Scripture proves) when God said to him, 'Behold my covenant is (already) with you.'"

Equally fantastic is the account given in Aggadath Bereshith 16. "(When Abraham was told to be circumcised), he said to God, 'And who shall circumcise me?' God said to him, 'You yourself'. Abraham then took a sword and seizing hold of his foreskin he was about to cut, but he was afraid because he was an old man and he began to tremble. What did God do? If this were possible, He sent forth his hand, and took hold with him as Abraham cut. Whence do we know this? Because it is written, 'Thou art the Lord, the God, who didst choose Abram....and madest a covenant with him.' (Neh. 9:7,8). It is not written $\int N \int$ 'And madest a covenant to him', but $\int N \int$, 'and madest a covenant with him.' We thus learn that God was holding on with Abraham and Abraham did the cutting."

Abraham was a high priest, R. Ishmael said,⁹ for the verse "Thou art a priest forever after the manner of Melchizedek." (Ps. 110:4) refers to him. Now, as a high priest, where could

he be circumcised and still be fit to offer sacrifice? Scripture speaks of four kinds of circumcision, on the ear, the mouth, the heart and the foreskin. Should he be circumcised on the ear the mouth or the heart he would not be fit to offer sacrifice. Hence only by circumcising the foreskin would he remain fit.

Rab Huna taught¹⁰ in the name of Bar Kappora: "Abraham our father sat and expounded as follows: 'Arlah' is spoken of with reference to trees (Lev. 19:23) and it is also spoken of with reference to man. (Gen. 17:11) Just as the 'arlah' spoken of with reference to trees is in that place where the tree produces fruit, so too, the 'arlah' spoken of with reference to man is in that place which produces fruit." To this R. Hanin b. Pazi said: "And was the principle of argument from minor to major, or of inference by analogy actually given to Abraham?"¹¹ In answer, R. Huna said, "He was given a hint in the verse 'And I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and I will multiply thee exceedingly' (Gen. 17:2); namely, the place that multiplies and produces fruit (is the 'arlah' of the body that is to be circumcised)"¹²

The Rabbis held that the verse, "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O mighty one, thy glory and thy majesty." (Ps. 45:4) refers to the circumcision of Abraham. "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh", that is, put the circumcision between thy thighs, and it will be "thy glory and thy majesty."¹³

Why was it necessary for Scripture to say, "On the self-same day was Abraham circumcised?" (Gen. 17:26) R. Berachiah answered, "(Because it is written of God) 'I do not speak in secret' (Is. 45:19) For God said to Himself, 'If Abraham were

circumcised in the night, then all of his generation would have said: We knew nothing about it; had we known we would not have permitted him to be circumcised." Therefore it was necessary for Scripture to say "On the selfsame day." ¹⁴

It was also noticed that with regard to Abraham Scripture said, *וְאַבְרָהָם בָּרִיתוֹ*, while of Ishmael it was written, *וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בָּרִיתוֹ*. Why the extra *וְ* in the case of Ishmael? The answer was that Abraham's genitals had already been crushed by sexual intercourse and so he did not require *וְ*. While, Ishmael who had not yet experienced such relations, required both *וְ* and *וְ*, therefore the added *וְ*. ¹⁵

Why were "all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money" circumcised with Abraham? "Because of purity," R. Johanan answered, "so that they should not defile their masters with their food and with their drink, for whosoever eateth with an uncircumcised person, is as though he were eating flesh of abomination." ¹⁶

R. Ayybo taught that when Abraham finished circumcising himself and the members of his household, he took all the fore-skins and piled them into a heap. When the sun shone on them they rotted and their odor went up to God as a sweet-smelling incense. For this God promised that when Israel would fall under the power of others, He would remember the good deed and have compassion on them. ¹⁷

The promise made by God to Abraham "And I will give to thee and to thy seed after thee the land of thy sojournings" (Gen. 17:2) was a conditional one, R. Judan explained. "If your descendants accept circumcision" God told him, "then they will enter into the

land, but if not, they will not enter into the land."¹⁸

Why does Scripture state twice "And Abraham fell on his face" (Gen. 17:3,17). "Abraham fell on his face twice" R. Pinhas explained in the name of R. Levi, "corresponding to the two times that his descendants accepted circumcision, once in Egypt and once in the wilderness. In Egypt Moses came and circumcised them, while in the wilderness Joshua came and circumcised them."¹⁹

Notes to Chapter XII

1. Pirke de R. Eliezer chap. 29.
2. Baba Mezia 86 b.
3. Pirke de R. Eliezer ibid. According to II Aboth de R. Nathan chap. 36, it was the sixth trial.
4. Pirke de R. Eliezer, ibid.
5. Gen. R. 47:10. In ibid 48:1 a verse from Job is used to prove that God was revealed to Abraham only by virtue of his circumcision: "It is written 'And when after this my skin is destroyed ~~my skin is destroyed~~, then without my flesh shall I see God' (Job 19:26). Abraham said: 'After I am circumcised many proselytes will come to cleave to this sign (for Scripture says): 'Without my flesh shall I see God!' For had I not done so, how could God have been revealed to me, as it is said, 'And the Lord appeared unto him.'" (Cf. also Yalk. Job 907)
6. Pirke de R. Eliezer 29.
7. Yelamdenu on Gen. 17:2 (Quoted in Kasher, Torah Shelema p. 692).
8. Cf. also Gen. R. 47:9.
9. Gen. R. 46:5; Lev. R. 25:6, Yalk. Gen. 81
10. Gen. R. 46:4; Lev. R. 25:6
11. I.e. How could Abraham argue with hermeneutic principles, if these principles were not introduced until Rabbinic times.
12. In a similar vein R. Tanhuma taught regarding the expression "uncircumcised male" (Gen. 17:14) "Is there such a thing as an uncircumcised female? But in the place where the child is recognized as male or female, there they circumcise him."

(R. Tanhuma did not think that *וְיִסְרָאֵל* teaches that the male is to be circumcised, since that is self-evident; but it is necessary to teach in what part of the body circumcision is to take place, namely in that part which determines that the child is a male) Gen. R. 46:5; ibid 46:3, (where this teaching is made by R. Haggai in the name of R. Isaac) Cf. also Lev. R. 25:6; Shab 108 a.

13. Tanhuma Lech Lecha 18.

14. Gen. R. 47:9.

15. Gen. R. 47:8 (So Rashi on Gen. 17:25 explains this passage.)

16. Pirke de R. Eliezer, 29. The Rabbinic view was that food touched by a heathen or uncircumcised slave was defiled, and likewise wine touched by them was rendered 'nesek', the reason being that such food and drink was suspected of having been dedicated to an idol. Even the place where they tread was regarded as unclean. If a slave was circumcised he was still suspected of idolatry until he underwent ritual ablution, and until he did so, the use of food and drink that he touched was prohibited to Jews. The same principle applied to heathens who had become circumcised but had not formally entered Judaism by immersion. See Abodah Zorah 57 a,b; 59 a.

17. Gen. R. 47:7

18. Ibid 46:9, Yalkut Gen. 82.

19. Gen. R. 46:6; 47:3.

Part Four

Halachic Interpretations

XIII. Periah and Epispasm

The most important change instituted by Rabbinic Judaism in connection with circumcision was the injunction to perform Periah; that is, to tear the mucous lining underneath the foreskin so as to lay bare the corona.¹ There was no Biblical basis for this practice; Scripture in fact had given no directions whatever regarding the rite other than the command to cut off the foreskin.² The institution of Periah was undoubtedly an attempt to check the widespread practice of epispasm³ which seems to have continued until late Tannaitic times. Just as the early Hellenists had attempted to obliterate the circumcision mark to enable them to assimilate more easily into Greek life and culture, so in the later Roman period the same tendency was strong among some Jews. No doubt many of the Judeo-Christians used this method as a means of escape from Judaism, particularly after the Roman~~war~~, when if one was a Jew he was compelled to pay the humiliating Fiscus Judaicus instituted by Vespasian and was singled out as not being a full citizen of the Roman empire and hence was denied all the privileges and exemptions that were attached to Roman citizenship.⁴ Likewise many Jews found in the obliteration of the covenant mark a convenient method of hiding their Jewish identity also for the purpose of escaping the Fiscus Judaicus. By instituting Periah the Rabbis felt they would check altogether the possibility of restoring the foreskin either through epispasm or by means of surgical operations. Its institution, however, did not come about until after the Bar Kochba revolt of 132 C. E., for the Talmud relates⁵ that during the days of Bar Kochba many Jews

still practised epispasm. Had Periah been a part of the circumcision rite before the insurrection, the widespread practice of epispasm would have been impossible then. The Bar Kochba revolt invited the Hadrianic persecutions, and among the decrees issued by Hadrian was the prohibition of circumcision.⁶ But with the ascendancy of Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius (138 C. E.) the edict against circumcision was revoked and the Jews were able to continue their ancient practice freely. It seems that it was at about this time or shortly after that Periah became a permanent part of the circumcision rite. By the time the Mishna was compiled less than a century later, it was undoubtedly an already long established tradition that circumcision without Periah was not valid circumcision. (M. Shab. 19:6)

The Rabbis regarded epispasm as the height of wickedness and did not hesitate to accuse some of the villainous characters of the Bible with having indulged in this practice. Achan was declared to have been an epispastic by R. Il'ea.⁷ Some of the kings in the Davidic dynasty were likewise so accused, particularly Jehoiakim.⁸ R. Isaac by manipulating verses was able to prove that Adam was also an epispastic: "For it is written 'like man (Adam) they have transgressed the covenant (Hos. 6:7) and elsewhere it is said 'He hath broken My covenant (Gen. 17:14)'"⁹

The same verse that applied to an Israelite who had failed to undergo the rite was likewise taken to refer to an epispastic: "That soul shall be cut off from his people, he hath broken My covenant."¹⁰ (ibid) Moreover, there was no share for the epispastic in the life of the world to come,¹¹ and he was declared¹² "deserving of being pushed out of the world."

There could be no pardoning of one who broke the covenant of Abraham, whether by epispasm or by neglect. Rabbi declared that even the Day of Atonement, although it procured atonement for all transgressions of the laws of the Torah, in three cases did not procure atonement; namely, "where one threw off the yoke of the Torah, (i.e., denied the existence of God), or interpreted the Torah unlawfully, or broke the covenant of Abraham our father." However, Rabbi continued, the day did procure atonement in these cases if there was repentance, that is, if the source of guilt was removed.¹³

One of the questions put forward by the Rabbis was whether the "mashuk" or epispastic needed to be circumcised again.¹⁴ One view held that it was necessary that he do so. Another view, and this by R. Judah, held that the operation would be dangerous in his case and so should not be carried out. Against R. Judah's view it was argued that during the days of Bar Kochba many who had practiced epispasm were recircumcised and afterwards begat children, thus proving that it was not dangerous. An attempt was made to prove that Pentateuchally the "mashuk" was required to be recircumcised. Scripture had stated *וְיָחֹלֵט* "He must needs be circumcised," the emphatic form teaching that if necessary, one may be circumcised as often as a hundred times. However, it was pointed out that in reality the command to recircumcise was Rabbinical and not Pentateuchal and the Scriptural statement was merely brought ⁱⁿ to support the Rabbinical decree. R. Huna declared that Pentateuchally a "mashuk" was even permitted to eat "terumah" but was forbidden to do so by Rabbinical ordinance since his appearance was like that of an uncircumcised person.

Notes to Chapter XIII

1. Periah was never adopted by non-Rabbinic sects, such as the Samaritans, Karaites, or Falashas.

2. Nevertheless, a Scriptural basis was found for Periah in the expression *סני סני*. The double form was to indicate Milah on one hand and Periah on the other. (Y. Shab. 19:2) Sechel Tob on Gen. 17:10 says that Periah was not given to Abraham, but was commanded to Moses in Egypt. (Quoted by Kasher, Torah Shelemah, p. 704)

3. *סני סני* - "drawing forward of the foreskin." A person who indulged in this practice was called a "mashuk". See Yebamoth 72a; Gen. R. 46:13.

4. See Graetz, Gesch. IV, p. 73, note 1.

5. Yebamoth 72a, Cf. also Genesis Rabba 46:13

6. See Rosh Hashona 19a and Taanith 18a. For a full account of the prohibition of circumcision by Hadrian, see Radin, Jews Among the Greeks and Romans, p. 344f. Despite the proscription of circumcision it was nevertheless scrupulously observed by most Jews. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said, "All those commandments which during their interdict by the Roman government Israel would rather die than infringe, such as those respecting idolatry and circumcision are still scrupulously observed by them. But those for the sake of which they would ^{not} sacrifice their lives during the interdict, such as those relating to the phylacteries, are still loosely observed by them. (Shab. 130a)

During the persecution it was often necessary to disguise the name of the rite to allay the suspicions of the Roman authorities. Thus the name *שבועת בן* "week of the son" was used in place of the more common *ברית מילה* "covenant of circumcision." (Tos. Meg. 4 (3):15; Sanh. 32b; Baba Kama 80a) In Baba Bathra

60b, the following statement is made by R. Ishmael b. Elisha: "Since the days of the destruction of the Temple we should by right bind ourselves not to eat meat nor drink wine, only we do not lay a hardship on the community unless the majority can endure it. And from the day that a government has come into power which issues decrees against us and forbids us to enter into the "week of the son" *שבוע בן* (according to another version, "the salvation of the son" *שבוע ילד*) we ought not to marry and beget children, and the seed of Abraham our father would come to an end of itself. But let Israel go their way; it is better that they should err in ignorance than presumptuously." Both Rashi and Rashbam (Sanh 32b) hold that *שבוע בן* refers to circumcision. The term *שבוע בת* "the week of the daughter" occurs in Nachmanides *Torath Ha'adam* 35b. Dr. Mann (H.U.C.A. 1924 p. 325 note 3) claims that this title refers to the ceremony of naming girls in the synagogue.

Another probable reference to the Hadrianic persecution occurs in Sanh. 32b. There we are told that in Burni, a town near Lydda, the "week of the son" was announced by the noise of grindstones, which was probably an indication that the ingredients used for healing the circumcision wound were being ground. Against the view that *שבוע בן* was a disguised name for circumcision during the reign of the emperor Hadrian, the use of this term by R. Eleazar b. Zadok who lived in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Temple, can be pointed to.

(Tos. Meg. 4(3):15)

7. Sanh. 44a

8. Tanhuma Lech Lecha, 20

9. Sanh. 38b. Since 'covenant' in Gen. 17:14 refers to circumcision, hence it must also refer to circumcision in Hos. 6:7.

10. Sanh. 99a

11. Ibid; Aboth 3:2
12. Sifri Shalah 112 (on Num. 15:31)
13. Yoma 85b.
14. Tos. Shab 15(16):9; Yebamoth 72a

XIV. The Ceremony

The performance of the circumcision as it was regulated in Talmudic times¹ consisted of four separate acts: 1. 'Milah' (or 'Hituch'); the cutting of the foreskin; 2. 'Periah', the tearing of the mucous lining; 3. 'Mezizah', the sucking out of the wound; 4. 'Zizin', the trimming of the membrum, or removal of the shreds of the foreskin that remained. The Mezizah was a necessary precaution for the safety of the child. The sucking out of the blood created a stricture in the blood vessels which had a haemostatic effect, thus reducing the danger of hemorrhage.²

After the operation a special bandage called a "haluk" was applied to the wound together with cummin and a mixture of wine and oil.³ Bertinora⁴ describes ~~the~~^{haluk} as a piece of cloth with a hole in it. The special construction of the bandage was to prevent the skin from slipping forward, and covering up the organ. Abaye, following his foster-mother's advice, cautioned that the side-selvidge or hem of the haluk should be uppermost and not face the flesh, lest a thread from it stick to the wound and mutilate the child privily. If no haluk was available, a hemmed rag could be used with the hem tied at the bottom and doubled⁵ over at the top so as to keep the edge on the outside. The severed foreskin and the blood from the wound were covered with⁶ earth.

Shreds of the foreskin that remained had to be removed. If the shreds that were left covered the greater part of the corona, the circumcision was invalid and had to be done over again. If in such a case, the individual was a priest, and the shreds that invalidated the circumcision continued to remain, he was forbidden to eat "terumah."⁷ If a child waxed fat so

that it appeared as if he were uncircumcised, this had to be set
 aright for appearance's sake.⁸ R. Simeon b. Gamliel taught⁹
 that if the child's membrum was so overgrown with flesh that
 the prepuce was invisible they examined him at a time when he
 forced himself.¹⁰ If he then appeared to be uncircumcised, they
 circumcised him again. A circumciser who failed to trim the mem-
 brum of the remaining shreds of the foreskin was regarded as
 punishable with "Kareth."¹¹ If a child was such that he appeared
 to have been born without a foreskin, he was regarded as one
 having a suppressed foreskin, and it was necessary to prick the
 membrum to bring the flow of a few drops of "covenant blood."¹²

The circumcision always took place in the daytime,¹³ and
 the ceremony was usually performed in the synagogue.¹⁴ An early
 practice was to give the child his name at that time.¹⁵ In

Jerusalem, before the destruction of the Temple, there were
 societies whose special purpose it was to participate in the
 ceremony.¹⁶ A custom that was initiated in later times, for the
 first mention of it is made in Pirke de R. Eliezer,¹⁷ was to
 set aside a special seat of honor at the circumcision for Eli-
 jah who was considered the patron saint or "Messenger of the
 Covenant." A Scriptural basis for this tradition was found in
 Mal. 3:1: "And the messenger of the covenant whom ye delight
 in, behold he cometh."

Circumcision was always a joyous occasion, and a day on
 which the father of the child was bound to make festivities and
 a banquet.¹⁸ The joyous spirit in which the rabbis accepted
 circumcision is illustrated by Rab Judah's interpretation of Est.
 8:16: "And the Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor."
 "Light", said Rab Judah, "means the Torah; gladness means a feast
 day; joy means circumcision, and honor means the phylacteries."¹⁹

In a similar vein, R. Eliezer said: "Circumcision is one of the commandments which having been accepted with joy are ever obeyed with joy."²⁰

Special benedictions and prayers were recited by the circumciser and the child's father. The order of benedictions in the ceremony as it is given in Shab. 137b was as follows: "He who circumcises must recite: 'Blessed art Thou.....who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments and commanded us concerning circumcision.'²¹ The father of the child recites: 'Blessed art Thou...who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments and hast commanded us to enter into the covenant of our father Abraham.' The bystanders exclaim: 'Even as he has entered the covenant, so may he enter into the Torah, the marriage canopy, and good works.' He who recites the benediction says: 'Blessed art Thou...who has sanctified the beloved one²² from the womb: He set a statute in his flesh, and sealed his offspring with the sign of the holy covenant. Therefore in reward of this, O living God, Who art our portion, give Thy command to deliver the beloved of our flesh from the pit, for the sake of Thy covenant which Thou hast put in our flesh. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Who establishest the covenant.'

He who circumcises proselytes says: 'Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified^{us} by Thy commandments and commanded us concerning circumcision.' He who recites the benediction says: 'Blessed art Thou....Who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments and commanded us to circumcise the proselytes and to take from them drops of the covenant blood, for were it not for the blood of the covenant, heaven and earth would not endure, as it is said: 'If not for my covenant

by day and by night, I would not have appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth.' (Jer. 33:25) Blessed art Thou O Lord who establishest the covenant.'" The same benedictions were recited at the circumcision of slaves, except that the word "slaves" was substituted for "proselytes."

Notes to Chapter XIV

1. See M. Shab 19.

2. A circumciser who did not perform "Mezizah" was dismissed. (Shab. 133b) In modern times the Mezizah is done by means of a glass case that produces a vacuum suction. On the haemostatic effect of Mezizah, see Remondino, Circumcision, p. 150f.

3. M. Shab 19:2; Shab 133b

4. Ibid.

5. Shab. 134a)

6. Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 29. The practice of covering the foreskin and blood with earth was followed by the Palestinian Jews. But in Babylonia they used water to cover the blood. So Friedlander (P. de R. E., p. 212 note 3).

7. M. Shab. 19:6. Bertinoro explains: "It is said with regard to the Passover offering, 'A sojourner and a hired servant shall not eat thereof,' (Exod. 12:47) and it is said with regard to terumah, 'a tenant of a priest or a hired servant shall not eat of the holy thing.' (Lev. 22:10) Just as the Passover offering is forbidden to an uncircumcised person, so is 'terumah' forbidden to the uncircumcised." (In Exod. 12:47 "hired servant" refers to an uncircumcised person, for in the next verse Scripture says: "No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof." Hence "hired servant" in Lev. 22:10 must also refer to an uncircumcised person, thus teaching that the uncircumcised may not eat 'terumah'. Hence an uncircumcised priest may not eat 'terumah'. By an "uncircumcised priest" was meant one who did not undergo the rite because his brothers had died from the operation and it was therefore considered dangerous for him to be submitted to circumcision.)

8. M. Shab. 19:6

9. Tos. Shab. 15(16):9

10. i.e., when he had a bowel movement, at which time the membrum was in a state of partial erection.

11. Shab. 133b

12. Tos. Shab. 15(16):9

13. Tos. Shab. 15(16):9

14. See M. Betzah 1:5 and comment in Soncino Talmud, Betzah p. 157, note 8.

15. See Luke 1:59; 2:21. See also Mann, H.U.C.A. 1924, page 324f

16. Tos. Meg. 4(3):15, quoted in the name of R. Eleazar b. Zadok: "Thus it was customary for the societies in Jerusalem to conduct themselves; some attended a betrothal feast, some a wedding celebration, some the 'week of the son'", etc.

17. Chap. 29 end. Pirke de R. Eliezer is dated in the ninth century (Strack, Introd. to Tal. and Mid. p. 226).

18. Pirke de R. Eliezer, 29

19. Megillah 16b

20. Shab. 130 a

21. If the father himself performs the circumcision, he must say "to circumcise." (Pes. 7b)

22. The reference is to Isaac. So Rashi: Tos. however, say it refers to Abraham.

XV. Who May Circumcise?

It was the duty of every father to have his child circumcised. If he did not do so, the Beth Din undertook this responsibility. And if the Beth Din did not have him circumcised the child was bound to arrange for the operation himself, that is, when he attained his majority. If he failed to do so then, he became subject to the Pentateuchal threat: "And the uncircumcised male who will not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off." (Gen. 17:4)¹

The question was raised as to whether the mother had the obligation of seeing that her child was circumcised. The Rabbis held that she had no such obligation, for it is written, "And Abraham circumcised his son...as God had commanded him." (Gen. 21:4): "him" (the father) is written, and not "her" (the mother).²

The professional circumciser was common even in pre-Talmudic times. Often he was a physician or a surgeon.³ In the Talmudic literature, the circumciser was designated by a number of titles: ⁴ ציד, ⁵ מלח, ⁶ קוץ, and most commonly ⁷ סדין, all of these names of course meaning "surgeon", but the last, more specifically, "circumciser." To know how to circumcise⁸ was one of the requirements of a disciple of the wise. Hence in most cases any learned Jew was able to perform the operation, but the professional circumciser seems to have been given preference.

The Rabbis had some difficulty in determining whether a non-Jew or a Cuthean were permitted to perform the operation.⁹

R. Meir held that while an Israelite may perform circumcision on a heathen for the purpose of making him a proselyte, a heathen may not perform circumcision on an Israelite, because he is liable to take his life. The Sages, however, would permit a heathen to perform the operation; that is, if others were standing by, but not if he was on his own. But to this also R. Meir objected, holding that even if others were standing by, he might find occasion to let the knife slip, and so sterilize the child. On the other hand, a tradition was quoted in which it was stated that R. Meir would permit an idolator who was an expert physician to circumcise a child; that is, in a town where there was no Jewish physician, but he would not permit a Cuthean to do so, even if he were an expert physician. R. Judah held the opposite, that it could be performed by the Cuthean but not by the idolator.¹⁰ When R. Dimi came from Palestine to Babylon, he told the scholars there that if a heathen physician is recognized as an expert by many, it is permissible for an Israelite child to be circumcised by him, thus supporting R. Meir's view.

The opposition to having a Cuthean perform the operation was due to the suspicion that he was doing so in the name of Mt. Gerizim. One would expect the Rabbis to give unanimous approval of the Cuthean over the idolator since the Cutheans, or Samaritans, were at least partly Jewish and accepted the Pentateuch and circumcision. However this very factor militated against them, for circumcision was a religious act with them, and since they interpreted the Pentateuch in their own way, it was suspected that all their religious conduct was carried on in the name of their sanctuary at Mt. Gerizim. On the other hand, the idolator had no interest in circumcision other than to perform it because he was being paid to do so. However, it was permiss-

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able for an Israelite to circumcise a Gathean.

What Scriptural basis was there for excluding the non-¹² Israelite from performing circumcision? Daru b. Papa following the teaching of Rab saw in the expression "As for thee, thou shalt keep my covenant," (Gen. 17:9)¹³ the basis for the prohibition of heathens; only one who was bound to keep the covenant may circumcise. On the other hand R. Johanan deduced this prohibition from the words $\int n' \int n \gg$, which he read $\int n' \int n \gg$ $\int n'$, "One who is circumcised shall circumcise." (Gen. 17:13) Against this it was argued that $\int n' \int n \gg$ did not exclude circumcision by Arabs or Gibeonites, who were circumcised heathens. However, it was pointed out that all heathens, whether circumcised or not, are designated as "uncircumcised,"¹⁴ hence $\int n' \int n \gg$ is a valid basis for excluding the heathen. The question was then raised, Is an Israelite who did not undergo the rite because two of his brothers died from the operation designated as "uncircumcised"? and hence would he be prohibited from performing circumcision on others? In answer to this, a statement from the Mishnah was quoted to prove that such an Israelite was to be designated as "circumcised" and hence $\int n' \int n \gg$ ("He who is circumcised shall circumcise") is a valid basis for permitting him to perform the operation on others.

The question was then raised with regard to a woman; is she permitted to perform circumcision? On the basis of "Thou shalt keep my covenant" it was answered, a woman is not qualified, for she is not subject to the commandment, while on the basis of "He who is circumcised shall circumcise" she is qualified for a wo-¹⁵ man should be classed among the "circumcised." It was also held that a woman is qualified because Zipporah performed circum-

cision on her son, as Scripture says, "And Zipporah took (*אֶפֶס*) a flint and she cut off (*שָׁחָה*) the foreskin of her son." In answer to this it was argued, "Read into *אֶפֶס* 'She caused to be taken', and read into *שָׁחָה* 'she caused to be cut off', in other words, she asked another person, a man, to perform the operation, or you may say that she only began, and Moses came and completed it."

Notes to Chapter XV

1. Kidd. 29a. Y. Kidd 1:6 has the following: "Whence do we know that if a father did not circumcise his son, that the latter is bound to have himself circumcised? Because Scripture says, *פְּדוּ אֶתְכֶם*, i.e. "Ye shall circumcise yourselves." (Gen. 17:11)

2. Kidd. 29a

3. Cf. Josephus, Antiq. XX, chap. 2:4

4. Cf. Shab. 130b

5. Cf. ibid. 133b

6. Cf. Baba Bathra 21a; Abodah Zarah 26b

7. Cf. Gen. R. 46:12

8. Hullin 9a. Rav Judah (quoting Rab) said: "A disciple of the wise (*רַבּוֹן זָכָה*) must learn three things, writing, slaughtering, and circumcising." R. Hananiah b. Shelemia added to these requirements the ability to make the knots in the phylacteries, to recite the benediction for bridegrooms, and to make fringes (zizith).

9. Abodah Zarah 27a

10. Since in the earlier statement R. Meir had held that under no circumstances should a heathen be permitted to circumcise because of his possible intent to take the life of the child, it would be inconsistent to have another statement coming from him permitting a heathen who was an expert to perform the operation. Therefore it was suggested that the names be reversed; that is, R. Meir permitted a Cuthean but not an idolator, while R. Judah permitted an idolator but not a Cuthean. On the other hand, it was also pointed out that R. Judah had taught elsewhere,

and had given Scriptural support for his teaching, that an idolator may not circumcise. It was therefore suggested that the names be not reversed, and that the inconsistency in R. Meir's statements be accounted for, because in the second statement he was speaking of an expert physician. Again it was pointed out that R. Judah elsewhere (Tos. Abodah Zorah 3:12) had prohibited a Cuthean from operating on an Israelite, although he permitted an Israelite to circumcise a Cuthean. It was therefore found necessary to reverse names again and attribute the teaching of R. Judah not to R. Judah b. Ilai, but to R. Judah Hanasi. In the final analysis R. Meir would permit an idolator but not a Cuthean, while R. Judah Hanasi would permit a Cuthean but not an idolator.

11. Abodah Zorah 27a; Tos. Abodah Zorah 3:12; Tract. Kuthim 1

12. This question and the discussion which follows are based entirely on Abodah Zorah 27a.

13. In Gen. R. 46:9 the proof is expressed a bit differently: "And thou shalt keep my covenant, thou and thy seed." The twofold mention of "thou", said Rab, is an indication that only one who is circumcised may circumcise others.

14. M. Ned. 3:11: "One who says: 'I vow not to benefit from the circumcised', may benefit from circumcised heathens, but not from uncircumcised Israelites." This proves that all heathens are designated "uncircumcised", while all Israelites (whether circumcised or not) are designated "circumcised."

15. Since "circumcised" here is but another word for "Israelite."

16. Exod. 4:25

XVI. Circumcision and the Sabbath

Circumcision could take place only in the daytime regardless of whether the circumcision was in its proper time or not.¹ R. Simeon b. Eleazar took exception to this rule and said that circumcision takes place in the daytime if in its proper time, but^{if} not in its proper time it may take place either in the day or night.² His opinion, however, was not followed. The principle laid down in the Mishnah was that the rite should not be performed until sunrise.³ However, it was considered valid if performed at the break of dawn.⁴ The whole day until sundown was valid for circumcision, but those who were zealous to perform a religious duty would do so at the earliest possible moment.⁵ The Biblical basis for performing circumcision only in the daytime was the injunction in Lev. 12:3: "And in the eighth day shall the flesh of his foreskin be circumcised," with emphasis on the word "day." The purpose of the word "day" was also to teach that circumcision may be performed on the Sabbath; for since Scripture states, "He who profanes it (the Sabbath) will surely die", (Exod. 31:14) one might think that circumcision is like manual labor and may not take place on the Sabbath. Therefore Scripture tells us *וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי* "on the eighth day" to include the Sabbath, for the Sabbath is also in the category of the word "day."⁶

By "the eighth day", however, was meant the eighth daytime in the child's life. Hence if a child was born in the evening, his circumcision took place not on the eighth day, but in the daytime of the ninth, since this was in reality the eighth daytime. A problem naturally arose in the case of a child who

was born at twilight. Since it was not certain whether twilight was day or night, was the circumcision to take place on the eighth or ninth day? The Mishna⁷ ruled in favor of the ninth, that is, if the ninth day did not fall on a Sabbath or festival, the principle being that if the ceremony takes place on any day other than the eighth day, it may not override the Sabbath or festival.⁸ Hence if the ninth day was the Sabbath the ceremony was shifted to the tenth, and if the Sabbath was followed by a festival day, to the eleventh. To quote the Mishnah itself: "A child can be circumcised on the eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, or twelfth day, but never earlier and never later. How so? The rule is that it shall be done on the eighth day; but if the child was born at twilight, it is circumcised^{on the ninth day}; if at twilight on the eve of the Sabbath, it is circumcised on the tenth day; if a festival day falls after the Sabbath, it is circumcised on the eleventh day; and if the two festival days of Rosh Hashona fall after the Sabbath, the child is circumcised on the twelfth day."

The reason for shifting the days in the case of a Sabbath or festival, is, as Bertinore⁹ explains, due to the undetermined character of twilight. One does not know whether it is day or night. As such there is the possibility that twilight is still day. Therefore if the child is born at twilight on the eve of the Sabbath, and the circumcision takes place on the following Sabbath, there is the possibility that the Sabbath will be the ninth day and the circumcision will not be in its proper time. And since circumcision which is not in its proper time may not override the Sabbath, it is postponed until the day after the

Sabbath, which is the tenth day. Similarly if a festival day fell after the Sabbath, since circumcision that is not in its proper time may not override the festival day, the child is circumcised on the eleventh day. The two days of Rosh Hashona being of equal sanctity, circumcision not in its proper time may not override the second day of Rosh Hashona, and the child is circumcised on the twelfth.

In its practical application, the principle would work out as follows:

1. A child born Thursday (or any other day of the week) before twilight is circumcised on the following Thursday (or on the corresponding day of the following week).

2. A child born Thursday at twilight is circumcised on Friday of the next week.

3. A child born Thursday evening is circumcised on Friday of the next week.

4. A child born Friday before twilight is circumcised on the following Friday.

5. A child born Friday at twilight is circumcised on the second Sunday following, or on the Monday after, if that Sunday was a festival day, or on the Tuesday after, if Sunday and Monday were the two days of Rosh Hashona.

6. A child born Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday, is subject to the same rule that applies to Thursday.

Naturally the above principles held only in the case of a normal child. If the child was ill they waited until he was well¹⁰ and then let seven complete days after he had become well¹¹ pass by before they circumcised him. The principle that circumcision did not override the Sabbath if not performed in its

proper time also applied in the case of infants whose circumcision had been postponed because of illness or for some other reason, and likewise in the case of slaves and proselytes, who obviously could not undergo the rite on the eighth day.

A purely theoretical problem was argued by R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus and R. Joshua b. Hananiah¹² that involved the case of one who had two children to circumcise, one on the Sabbath and the other after the Sabbath. If he erred and circumcised on the Sabbath the child who was to be circumcised after the Sabbath,¹³ it was agreed that he was culpable of a sin offering. But if he had two children, one to be circumcised on the eve of the Sabbath, i.e. on Friday, and the other on the Sabbath, and he erred and circumcised on the Sabbath the child who was to be circumcised on the eve of Sabbath, R. Eliezer held him culpable of a sin offering while R. Joshua declared him exonerated. The¹⁴ Tosephta takes up the argument and states that against R. Joshua's opinion R. Eliezer could argue, "Did you not agree that a child who should have been circumcised after the Sabbath, but was circumcised on the Sabbath, is a case of change in time and therefore culpable? Then a child who was to have been circumcised on the eve of the Sabbath but was circumcised on the Sabbath is also culpable since his too was a case of change in time." But R. Joshua could answer him: "No! You might say that if he should have been circumcised after the Sabbath, but was circumcised on the Sabbath, (he is culpable) since his case has not been a fulfillment of circumcision. (i.e. he was circumcised earlier than the eighth day and any circumcision before the eighth day is not a fulfillment of circumcision). But can you say that the case of one who should have been circumcised on the eve of Sabbath, but was circumcised on the Sabbath is not a fulfillment

of circumcision?" (i.e. the obligation is fulfilled if it takes place later than the eighth day, but not if it takes place earlier, even though its performance on the Sabbath when not in its proper time was a violation of the Sabbath). In such a case R. Joshua would say, the man having two children to circumcise was pressed for time, and in his desire to perform the commandment and in his anxiety that the day should not pass without its performance, he may easily fall into error and circumcise the wrong child on the Sabbath. And such an error according to R. Joshua, is exonerated.¹⁵

Notes to Chapter XVI

1. Tos. Shab. 15(16):9

2. Ibid.

3. M. Megillah 3:4. Cf. also Sifra, Tazria Chap. 1

4. Bertinora (on M. Meg. 2:4) explains: "The break of dawn is also called day, as it is written, 'So we wrought in the work...from the break of dawn until the appearance of the stars' (Neh 4:15), and in the next verse it is written, 'And they shall be unto us in the night for a watch, and in the day for work.' (Therefore the day is from the break of dawn until the appearance of the stars). And the reason the Mishnah states (~~that~~ circumcision may not be performed) "until sunrise" is to remove doubt, since not all are expert in determining when the break of dawn comes."

5. Pesahim 4a, Sifra Tazria Chap. 1

6. Y. Ned̄erim 3:9; Sanhedrin 59b; Sifra, ibid. Another proof that circumcision may supersede the Sabbath was given by R. Eleazar b. Azariah (Shab. 132a). This proof may be derived from the fact that certain terms that occur in passages relating to circumcision also occur in passages relating to the Sabbath. With respect to circumcision Scripture says, "And it shall be a sign of a covenant between me and you" (Gen 17:11) and with respect to the Sabbath, "For it is a sign between me and you" (Exod 31:13). Again, with respect to circumcision Scripture says, "A covenant between me and you" (Gen. ibid) and with respect to the Sabbath, "The children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath...for a perpetual covenant." Again, with respect to circumcision Scripture says, "Every male throughout your generations" (Gen. 17:12), and with respect to the Sabbath, "To observe the Sabbath throughout your generations" (Exod. ibid). It was objected that if this line of reasoning were consistent, then the same method of

"Gezerah Shavah" could teach that "tefillin" and the circumcision of an adult male may supersede the Sabbath (and it is common knowledge that these are prohibited on the Sabbath) for Scripture says of "tefillin", "And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy Hand" (Deut. 6:8), and of an adult male, "And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin...hath broken my covenant" (Gen. 17:14). And likewise, "fringes" could supersede the Sabbath, since it is written, "Bid them...make them fringes...throughout their generations" (Num. 15:38). R. Nahman b. Isaac answered this objection by pointing out that all three terms "sign", "covenant", and "generations" are written in connection with both Sabbath and circumcision, whereas only one of these terms, separately, is written in connection with "tefillin", the uncircumcised adult male, and fringes.

On the other hand, Ulla and R. Isaac maintained that the principle that circumcision superseded the Sabbath was a traditional law, and therefore needed no Scriptural proof.

7. M. Shab. 19:5

8. Shab. 133a: "Circumcision supersedes festivals only when performed at its proper time", i.e. on the eighth day.

9. On M. Shab. 19:5

10. Ibid.

11. Shab. 137a

12. M. Shab. 19:4

13. Bertinora (on ibid) explains R. Joshua's reasoning as follows:

"R. Joshua thought that if one erred in a religious duty, and performed on the Sabbath a religious rite that does not override the Sabbath, he is exempt, for he might have thought that he was doing it with the sanction of the Beth Din." Bertinora states that the Halacha

is in accordance with R. Joshua.

14. Tos. Shab. 15(16):10

15. Yebamoth 34a. For further discussion of this problem,
see Shab. 137a

XVII. The Preliminaries of Circumcision and the Sabbath

According to the Mishnah,¹ all the requirements of circumcision,² Milah, Periah, Mezizah, the application of the bandage, and cummin, and the mixture of wine and oil on the wound, could be performed on the Sabbath. However, whatever preliminary preparations were necessary for the circumcision, such as bringing the knife, grinding the cummin, making the "haluk" or special bandage, and mixing the wine and oil, were to be done before the Sabbath. But there were possibilities due either to neglect or forgetfulness wherein these preliminaries were not arranged before the Sabbath, and the question arose as to whether under such conditions they could be done on the Sabbath, since the circumcision was in its proper time and had to be performed on that day. R. Eliezer took the extreme point of view and permitted all the preliminaries of circumcision to supersede the Sabbath. He even went so far as to declare that one may cut ~~time~~ on the Sabbath to make charcoal for manufacturing the iron out of which the circumcision knife was made.³ It was reported that such practices were actually carried out in R. Eliezer's locality.⁴ R. Isaac reported⁵ that in one community in Palestine they followed this view of R. Eliezer and yet the people there did not die prematurely, and moreover, when the Roman government issued a decree against circumcision,⁶ this community was exempted from the decree; thus R. Eliezer's opinion was not in violation of the law.

The more moderate view and the one which was accepted as the Halacha was stated in a general principle by R. Akiba: "Any act of work which can be done on the eve of Sabbath does not over-

ride the Sabbath, but what cannot be done on the eve of Sabbath overrides the Sabbath."⁷ Thus the circumcision itself, since it was impossible to circumcise on the eve of Sabbath, if the eighth day was the Sabbath, and the various acts in the circumcision that could be carried out only during the operation, were permitted, but the preliminaries, which could be done the day before, were not permitted. However, if the cummun had not been ground the day before, it could be ground with the teeth on the Sabbath, and if the wine and oil had not been mixed previously, each could be applied separately. A "haluk" could not be made on the Sabbath but a rag could be wrapped around the membrum. If this had not been brought before the Sabbath, it could be brought⁸ on the Sabbath provided the bearer had wound it about his finger and in this fashion he could carry it even from another court-⁹ yard.

R. Eliezer permitted the circumcision knife to be brought on the Sabbath if it had not been brought the day before, provided¹⁰ it was carried openly. The purpose of carrying it openly as Bertinora explains, was to show the people the great importance of this religious duty, that even the Sabbath could be profaned in its behalf. However, in times of danger, such as during the Hadrianic persecutions, when all religious rites were banned by the Roman authorities, and it was therefore dangerous to carry openly a circumcision knife, R. Eliezer permitted one to carry it on the Sabbath, concealed on his person, provided there were wit-¹¹ nesses to this. R. Simeon b. Lakish, quoting R. Judah Hanasi told of a case where R. Eliezer's view was followed and the circumcision knife was brought on the Sabbath. The Rabbis found this difficult to understand, for how could they abandon the ruling

of the Sages and follow R. Eliezer whose view represented a minority opinion, and who, moreover, was a follower of Beth Shammai.¹² Thus, here too, in the matter of the circumcision knife the Rabbis ruled against R. Eliezer's opinion, and held that if the knife had not been brought before the Sabbath, the circumcision¹³ was to be postponed.

The Scriptural basis for R. Eliezer's view that circumcision and all its preliminaries supersede the Sabbath was the verse, "And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Lev. 12:3) Now this verse cannot teach that circumcision alone supersedes the Sabbath, for that is a traditional law. Therefore its purpose is to teach that the preliminaries¹⁴ of circumcision may also override the Sabbath. The Rabbis disagreed with R. Eliezer in the matter of the preliminaries, but all held that circumcision itself superseded the Sabbath on the basis of Ulla's and R. Isaac's statement that it was a traditional law;¹⁵ i.e., it was received from Moses on Sinai.

The Rabbis experienced some difficulty in interpreting a passage in the Mishnah relating to the bathing of the child on the Sabbath.¹⁶ The Mishnah had stated, "They may bathe the child before or after the circumcision and sprinkle (warm water) over him by means of the hand but not by means of a vessel. R. Eleazar b. Azariah said: "They may bathe the child on the third day (of circumcision) if this falls on the Sabbath, for it is said, 'And it came to pass on the third day when they were sore.'" (Gen. 34:24)¹⁷

¹⁸ In the Gemara Rab Judah and Rabbah b. Abbahu on the one hand and Raba on the other hand differ in their interpretation of the Mishnah. Rab Judah and Rabbah b. Abbahu maintained that the Mishnah was teaching how the bathing should be done, namely: "They may bathe the child before and after the circumcision. How? By

sprinkling warm water over him by hand but not with a vessel." Raba however objected and pointed out that the Mishnah already states "They may bathe" and sprinkling is different from bathing. The Mishnah was teaching, he maintained, that the child may be bathed before or after the circumcision on the first day in the normal manner, but on the third day which falls on the Sabbath he is sprinkled with warm water by hand and not with a vessel; while on the other hand R. Eleazar b. Azariah held that the child may be bathed (not sprinkled) on the third day which falls on the Sabbath.

When R. Dimi came from Palestine he declared that the Halacha was in accordance with R. Eleazar; namely, that the child may be bathed on the third day, even if that day falls on the Sabbath.¹⁹ But, it was asked, did R. Eleazar have in mind the bathing of the whole body or only of the membrum, and furthermore, since bathing meant the use of warm water, did the water have to be heated on the eve of Sabbath, or if this had not been done, could it be heated on the Sabbath? When Rabin came he declared that the law was according to R. Eleazar both in respect of hot water heated on the Sabbath and hot water heated on the eve of Sabbath, whether for the bathing of the whole body, or only of the membrum; any case was permissible because the child's life was in danger.²⁰ But it was the rule to heat the water on the eve of Sabbath; and only when for some reason or other the water was not available on the Sabbath could it be heated then. However, a case was reported²¹ of a child who was to be circumcised on the Sabbath, and the warm water which had been prepared for him on the eve of Sabbath had been spilled. The matter was brought before Rabbah and he ordered that the warm water be taken from his own house. But when he was told that neither an Erub nor a Shittuf²² had been prepared,

he ordered that a Gentile be instructed to bring it for him. A similar case of a child whose warm water had been spilled was brought before Raba. He ordered that it be found out if the mother needed warm water, and if she did, that a Gentile be instructed that he heat some for her, and thereby indirectly for the child.²³ Thus in both cases, the water was not heated for the child directly, but was obtained for him through some round about method.

The matter of heating water on the Sabbath for an infant to be circumcised on that day was brought up again in Pesahim 69a. Rabbah, quoting R. Eliezer, declared that one may heat water on the Sabbath for a healthy child who was to be circumcised that day, in order to strengthen him for the circumcision. But for an unhealthy child one may not heat water or for that matter circumcise him. Raba countered with "Why, if he is healthy, does he need hot water to strengthen him?" "Rather," Raba continued, "all are regarded as invalids when it comes to circumcision, and in neither case, whether the child to be circumcised is strong or sickly, may water be heated for him on the Sabbath in order to strengthen him, for it is not fit for him to be circumcised if he must be strengthened for that purpose?"

Another preliminary to circumcision about which there seems to have been difference of opinion was the problem of whether the infant to be circumcised could be carried on a Sabbath or festival from the home to the synagogue, where the circumcision was generally performed.²⁴ In the Mishnah, Beth Shammai said that one may not carry out an infant on a festival, but Beth Hillel permitted it. Whether Beth Shammai's limitation was extended to the Sabbath is not indicated. The Gemara offers no discussion on the question.

tes to Chap. XVII.

1. M. Shab. 19:12; Cf. also ibid. 18:3. The same rules that applied to the Sabbath applied also to Festivals. See Shab. 134a top.

2. In commenting on the expression in the Mishnah, "All the requirements of circumcision," the Gemara (Shab. 133b, top) states that this expression also includes the following: If one was performing a circumcision on the Sabbath, so long as he is engaged in the circumcision he may remove both the shreds of the foreskin that invalidate the circumcision, and those which do not. However, if one was engaged in circumcision on the Sabbath, and stopped, thinking that the operation was finished, he may return to remove the shreds which invalidate the circumcision, but not to remove the shreds which do not invalidate. (Since the latter do not make the circumcision invalid, the commandment of circumcision is regarded as having been carried out, and these shreds can be removed after the Sabbath. To return and remove them on the Sabbath would constitute a new action and hence would desecrate the day. On the other hand, if the shreds that invalidate are permitted to remain, the commandment of circumcision has not been fulfilled; therefore the circumciser may return to remove them, in order to fulfill the law of circumcision.)

R. Ashi ruled that if a circumciser came to perform a circumcision just before twilight on the Sabbath, and he was warned that he would not have time to complete the whole of the circumcision before the day ended, but he insisted that he did have time, and began the operation but was unable to remove the shreds that invalidate before the day ended, he was held punishable by **Kareth**, for under those conditions, he had no right even to start and the net result was that he merely made a wound. (Shab. 133b)

3. M. Shab. 19:1. The R. Eliezer referred to here is R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus.

4. Shab. 130a; Cf. also Yebamoth 14a

5. Shab. ibid

6. The reference is to the Hadrianic persecutions.

7. M. Shab. 19:1

8. Ibid 19:2. By wrapping it around his finger it becomes like a garment and is not like an object that is carried. The carrying of any object is forbidden on the Sabbath.

9. Bertinora comments: "There is no question about his being permitted to carry it from house to house in the same courtyard, even though they may not have made an Erub. But he may even carry it from courtyard to courtyard.

10. M. Shab. 19:1

11. Ibid. The witnesses were needed, Bertinora explains: "To testify that he was bringing the scalpel for a religious duty, so that others will not suspect him of carrying on the Sabbath an object that would be used for a secular purpose." The Gemara (Shab. 130a) raises the question of R. Eliezer's motive in ruling that the knife must be carried openly. Was it out of love for the precept (i.e. to show to people how important is circumcision that the Sabbath may be desecrated on its account), or was it because of suspicion (i.e. to remove from people's minds the suspicion that the carrier was going to use the knife for an illegal purpose)? The Rabbis held that R. Eliezer's ruling was for love of the precept, for if its purpose was to avoid suspicion he would have ruled that the knife be concealed. Moreover, the Mishnah says "In times of danger

he hides it on the testimony of witnesses"--in times of danger only, but not where there is no danger. The "danger" referred to here, according to Weiss (Dor II, p. 131 note 1) is not the Hadrianic persecution, but the persecution by Antiochus. For R. Judah says in the name of R. Eliezer (Shab. 130a) "It was the practice in times of danger to bring the knife hidden on the testimony of witnesses!" The expression "It was the practice", indicates that this was not a mere theoretical ruling, but an actual account of past happenings. And since R. Eliezer died before the Hadrianic wars, it must refer to the persecutions by Antiochus. (See also Soncino Talmud, Shabbath p. 650 note 1)

12. Shab. 130b. He did not belong to the more rigid and less popular school of Shammai, but he often followed their opinions.

13. Thus providing a case where a Rabbinical ordinance overrode the Pentateuchal law of circumcision.

14. Ibid 132b

15. Ibid.

16. M. Shab. 19:3; Cf. also ibid. 9:3.

17. Hence on the third day the child was still in danger and therefore he may be bathed even if that day is the Sabbath. Since it was necessary to use warm water, the water could be heated on the Sabbath. So Bertinora.

18. Shab. 134b

19. Ibid

20. Ibid

21. Erub. 67b.

22. The Erub is a fictitious enclosure which enables the tenants of different houses in the same courtyard to carry objects

from one house to the other on the Sabbath. The Shittuf is the fictitious enclosure extended to courtyards, that is, to permit objects to be carried from one courtyard to another on the Sabbath.

23. Erub. 38b. A woman in childbirth may have water heated for her by an Israelite during the first seven days after giving birth. This happened to be the eighth day, and thus an Israelite was forbidden to warm the water and a Gentile had to do it.

24. M. Bezah 1:5

XVIII. The Circumcision of Abnormal Children and the Sabbath

Although there was no question about permitting a normal child to be circumcised on the Sabbath ^{if} that was his proper time, there was some question about permitting the performance of the rite on the Sabbath in the case of an abnormal child. An androgynous, ¹ a "safek", ² a "tuntum", ³ a child who was extracted through the caesarean section, ⁴ a child born with two foreskins and a child born without a foreskin were all included in the category of abnormal children.

⁵ In the Mishnah the Tanna Kama had stated that in the case of an androgynous and "safek" the Sabbath could not be desecrated on their account, while R. Judah permitted the Sabbath day circumcision in the case of an androgynous. Moreover, R. Judah maintained that not only did the androgynous supersede the Sabbath, but there was the penalty of "kareth" in his case. ⁶ The Pentateuchal basis for R. Judah's view was the verse "Every male among you shall be circumcised." (Gen. 17:10) "Every" is ^{an} extension and teaches the inclusion of the androgynous who is part male. ⁷ The Pentateuchal basis for the Tanna Kama's exclusion of the androgynous was the verse "And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Lev. 12:3) The Sabbath was included in the term "day" ⁸ and ^{אשר} "his foreskin" taught that only one who is certain (i.e. who beyond any question is a male and subject to the obligation) may supersede the Sabbath. "His foreskin" would therefore exclude the androgynous since it is not certain that such a one is a male. ⁹ Similarly since ^{אשר} "His foreskin" meant one who is certain, a "safek" (lit. "One who is in doubt") ¹⁰ also may not supersede the Sabbath. A

"safek" the rabbis said, was an infant born after eight months of pregnancy. Such a child was considered to be like a stone and was not expected to live. However, a child born after seven months of pregnancy was regarded as viable and the Sabbath could be desecrated on his account. If there was doubt about whether he was a seven or eight month's child, the Sabbath

was not superseded.¹¹ R. Adda b. Ahabah took up the discussion and maintained that the child should be circumcised on the Sabbath day at any rate, even though there is doubt about whether he is a seven or eight month's child. "In either case, whether he is viable or non-viable, he is to be circumcised; if he is viable, he is rightly circumcised; if not, one merely cuts flesh."¹²

Mar the son of Rabina and R. Nehuma b. Zechariah supported Adda b. Ahabah's view that the Sabbath could be superseded in the case of a "safek" and held that the teaching against desecrating the Sabbath in the case of a "safek" applied not to the circumcision itself, but to the preliminaries of circumcision.¹³

A "tuntum" was a child whose genitals at birth were hidden or undeveloped, and thus it was not known if such a one was a male or female. If after being operated upon the infant was found to be a male, could his circumcision take place on the Sabbath if that was the eighth day? The tuntum differed from the androgynous, in that he was definitely of one sex. R. Shezbi held that he may not be circumcised on the Sabbath if that was the eighth day because Scripture had said, "If a woman be delivered and bear a man-child...and in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Lev. 12:2,3) The term "day"

teaches that the Sabbath is superseded, but the verse also implies that the child must be a "man-child" at the time of his birth. Hence, since it is not known at the time of his birth whether he is a male or female, the circumcision of the "tuntum" does not supersede the Sabbath. Moreover, R. Sherahya maintained, his mother is not levitically defiled on account of his birth, for Scripture said "If a woman be delivered and bear a manchild then she shall be unclean seven days" (ibid) which implies that she is not levitically unclean unless he was a "man child" at the time of his birth.¹⁴ Moreover since she was not levitically defiled, and Scripture had stated "She shall be unclean seven days and in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised" (ibid) (implying that only where the mother has been defiled through confinement may the law of the eighth day be applied to the child), hence the tuntum may not be circumcised on the Sabbath if that is the eighth day, since his mother has not been defiled through confinement.¹⁵

An infant who was extracted through the caesarean section was likewise considered to be the child of a mother who had not been defiled through confinement, since Scripture had said, "If a woman...bear a man-child she shall be unclean seven days." (ibid)¹⁶ Since she did not actually bear her child she was not defiled through confinement and the problem was to determine whether the circumcision of her child superseded the Sabbath. R. Assi had maintained that the child of a woman who had not been defiled through confinement was not circumcised on the eighth day, but on the first day of birth.¹⁷ Against R. Assi's opinion it was pointed out that R. Huna had maintained that the circumcision

of a child extracted through the caesarean section overrode the Sabbath, while R. Hiyya b. Rab held that the Sabbath may not be desecrated on his account but he is certainly circumcised on the eighth day.¹⁸

Similarly R. Huna had declared that a child with two foreskins supersedes the Sabbath, while R. Hiyya b. Rab maintained that he does not supersede the Sabbath but is certainly circumcised on the eighth day. It was pointed out that in either case--the child who was extracted through the caesarean section and the child with two foreskins--the law of the Sabbath and the law of the eighth day were interdependent; that is, if an infant must be circumcised on the eighth day, and the eighth day falls on a Sabbath, he must be circumcised on the Sabbath. Hence the circumcision of a child extracted through the caesarean section and of one having two foreskins, supersede the Sabbath.¹⁹

Scripture had stated "And on the eighth day...his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Lev. 12:3) Hence, only the circumcision of a child who is certain, i.e., who definitely possesses a foreskin supersedes the Sabbath; a child who at birth appeared to be circumcised does not supersede the Sabbath.²⁰ Such a child was born to R. Adda b. Ahabah and his eighth day fell on the Sabbath. R. Adda took him to thirteen circumcisers and all refused to perform the operation on the Sabbath. Finally R. Adda performed the operation himself and mutilated the child privily. R. Adda's contention was that a child who at birth appeared to be circumcised was not actually circumcised; he merely had a suppressed foreskin.²¹ There seems to have been a difference of opinion between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel over this matter.

According to R. Eliezer Ha-Kappar, Beth Shammai maintained that the Sabbath may be desecrated in the case of a child who was born without a foreskin, while Beth Hillel held that it could not be desecrated. There was also some difference of opinion as to whether such a child should be circumcised at all, Beth Shammai maintaining that one must cause a few drops of covenant blood to flow from him, and Beth Hillel holding that this was unnecessary. However, it was argued that Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel did not disagree about taking a few drops of covenant blood from a child who was born circumcised, both maintaining that this was necessary since actually the child was not without a foreskin; in his case the foreskin was merely suppressed. What they did differ on was the case of a proselyte who was circumcised before his conversion, Beth Shammai maintaining that it was necessary to cause a flow of covenant blood, and Beth Hillel maintaining that it was not necessary. Hence, on the basis of this line of reasoning it was permitted to desecrate the Sabbath in the case of a child who at birth appeared to be without a foreskin, for actually the foreskin was merely suppressed, and therefore the operation consisted of pricking the membrum to cause a flow of covenant blood.

22

In only one principle of circumcision as it related to the Sabbath was there no disagreement whatsoever; that whenever a circumcision took place after the eighth day of birth, as in the case of a proselyte or slave, or an Israelite whose submission to the rite had been postponed, there could be no desecration of the Sabbath.

Notes to Chapter XVIII

1. Hermaphrodite

2. i.e., a child about which there is doubt. It was not known whether he was born after eight or nine months of pregnancy, and hence there was doubt about whether he could live. It was believed that a premature child, born after seven months of pregnancy could live. but not one born after eight months.

3. A child whose sexual organs were undeveloped or concealed and it was not known whether he was a male or female.

4. One who had either two skins, one on top of the other, or two membra.

5. M. Shab. 19:3

6. Shab. 135a (top)

7. Shab. 136b-137a

8. See above p. 133

9. Shab. 134b (bot.), 135a (top)

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. 135a

12. Ibid. 136a. If the child is non-viable he will die anyway, whereas if he is viable the commandment of circumcision is fulfilled.

13. Ibid. Thus Mar and R. Nehumi interpret the Tanna Kama to mean that the circumcision of an androgynous and "safek" supersede the Sabbath, but the preliminaries of the circumcision in their case do not.

14. Baba Bathra 127a

15. See Shab. 135a

16. Shab. 135b (top)

17. Ibid 135a (bot). R. Assi probably had in mind the child of a female slave who had not been immersed, and thus since she was not subject to Jewish law, was not defiled through confinement. The same principle applied to a Gentile woman who gave birth to a child and on the following day became a proselyte to Judaism.

18. Ibid 135b (top)

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid 135a

21. Ibid

22. Ibid.

XIX. Postponement of Circumcision

Under only three conditions was indefinite postponement of circumcision permissible--if the child was ill, in which case the circumcision took place seven full days after his fever subsided,¹ or if the child's brothers had died because of the circumcision operation, or if the child's appearance was not normal.² Abaye, following his foster-mother's advice, declared that if an infant was too red it was a sign that the blood had not yet been absorbed in him, and it was necessary to wait until the blood had been absorbed in his limbs before circumcision could take place. Similarly if a child was too green, it was a sign that he was deficient in blood and it was necessary to wait until he became full-blooded.³

There was some difference of opinion with regard to postponement of circumcision on a child whose brothers had died because of the operation. According to R. Simeon b. Gamliel, if a mother circumcised her first three sons and they died, she must not circumcise the fourth. Rabbi, however, whose opinion prevailed and became the Halacha, declared that if a mother circumcised her first two sons and they died, she must not circumcise the third.⁴ "In the case of circumcision", the Rabbis declared, "one can well understand (why the operation is dangerous with some children and not with others), since the members of one family may bleed profusely, while those of another family may bleed little!"⁵ The recognition that hereditary deficiencies could endanger the life of a child, led to the extension of this principle even if it involved the children of sisters. In Sépphoris there were four sisters, three of whom had circumcised their children and they died. When R. Simeon b. Gamliel heard of this

he declared that the fourth sister should not circumcise her child.⁶ However, there is another account related of R. Johanan⁷ who did not follow the action of R. Simeon b. Gamliel. It happened that a woman came to R. Johanan while he was in the synagogue at Ma'on on the Day of Atonement which fell on a Sabbath, in that year. She told him that the children of two of her sisters had both died from circumcision, and her own child was to be circumcised that day. R. Johanan told her to go and circumcise him. Abaye rebuked R. Johanan for this, declaring that he had permitted a forbidden and dangerous act--forbidden because as the third child was not permitted to be circumcised, the operation constituted manual labor which is forbidden on the Sabbath, and all the more so on a Sabbath that was the Day of Atonement, and dangerous because the third child might have died as a result of the operation as did the other two. The rule regarding sisters as it was later embodied in the Shulchan Aruch, held as Abaye did, that if the children of two sisters died because of circumcision, the third sister must not have her child circumcised.⁸ In all such cases the circumcision was postponed until a time when it was felt certain that the individual was strong enough to undergo the operation without endangering his life. The Rabbis were probably unaware of the hereditary workings of a disease like hemophilia. Otherwise they would no doubt have guarded and legislated against circumcision of any male children in whom it was certain or suspected that this condition of profuse bleeding had been transmitted, and they would not have set up a principle whereby a hereditary deficiency in the family was proven only by the previous death of two children. For it was a Rabbinic axiom that the saving of life superseded everything.⁹

Nevertheless it was expected that one who had had his circumcision postponed for one of these reasons, was obligated to have himself circumcised when he attained his majority. Failure to comply meant that he was culpable of Kareth.¹⁰

Notes to Chapter XIX

1. Shab. 137a

2. Shab. 134a

3. Not only is it dangerous, but if were circumcised and he was not full-blooded, there would be no covenant blood flowing from the wound, and circumcision without the flow of covenant blood is invalid (Cf. Soncino Talmud, Shabbath, p675 note 6)

Similar to Abaye's statement is the account related by R. Nathan; "I once visited the sea towns and a woman came before me who had circumcised her first son and he had died, her second son and he had died, and the third son she brought to me. I saw that he was too red and so I said to her: Wait until his blood is absorbed. So she waited until his blood was absorbed and then circumcised him and he lived. On another occasion when I visited the province of Cappadocia, there was a woman who had borne three sons and they were circumcised and died. She circumcised the first and he died, the second and he died. The third she brought to me. I saw that his flesh was green, and when I examined him I could see no evidence of the covenant blood in him. I said to her: Wait until he is full-blooded, and then circumcise. She waited and then circumcised him and he lived, and they called him Nathan the Babylonian after my name." (Shab. 134a(bot.); Cf. also Tos. Shab. 15(16):8)

4. Tos. Shab. 15(16):8; Yebamoth 64b.

5. Yebamoth 64b

6. Tos. Shab. 15(16):8; Yebamoth 64b

7. Yebamoth 64b

8. Yoreh Deah, 263

9. In Shab. 132a R. Eliezer b. Azariah makes the interesting deduction that "if circumcision which involves only one of the limbs of man, supersedes the Sabbath, how much the more so should the saving of life (which involves the whole body) supersede the Sabbath." The Sabbath being the most stringent of all religious regulations, it naturally follows that the saving of life overrides all religious dictums.

10. Pesahim 94b.

XX. Proselytes, Slaves and Aliens

The prevailing view was that in order for one to become a proper proselyte he had to be circumcised and perform ritual ablution. This was the view of R. Hiyya b. Abba stated in the name of R. Johanan. Nevertheless, R. Eliezer agreed in a Bar-aitha that if a proselyte had been circumcised but had not performed ritual ablution, he was a proper proselyte, while on the other hand R. Joshua argued that even if he had not been circumcised, but had performed ritual ablution, he was a proper proselyte.¹ The Sages, however, said that in either case he is not a proper proselyte until he has done both.

A man who desired to become a proselyte was first told of the many disadvantages and sufferings that came from being a Jew, and he was also informed on some of the major and minor commandments. If he still insisted on joining the Jewish fold, he was immediately circumcised. If any shreds which would render the circumcision invalid remained, he was circumcised a second time. Immediately after he was healed he went through ritual ablution, and after his ablution² he was deemed an Israelite in all respects.³ But although he was circumcised, if he failed to undergo ritual ablution, he was still regarded as a Gentile.⁴

It was reported that R. Hiyya b. Abba once visited the town of Gabla and there saw some Israelite women who had been made pregnant by heathens who had been circumcised but not immersed. He reported the matter to R. Johanan, and the latter told him to return to Gabla and declare to these women that their children⁵ were illegitimate.

On the other hand, it was held that a heathen who had undergone ritual ablution and had denounced idolatry was declared a "ger toshab" ("a proselyte of the gate"). He was given a year in which to be circumcised, at which time he was declared a full proselyte. But in the opinion of R. Johanan, a ger toshab who allowed twelve months to pass by without being circumcised, "was to be regarded as a heretic among idolators."⁶

There was a difference of opinion between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel with respect to a proselyte who had been circumcised before his conversion. Beth Shammai held that a few drops of covenant blood had to be taken from him, while Beth Hillel declared this to be unnecessary.⁷

Scripture had stated, "He that is born in thy house and he that is bought with money needs must be circumcised." (Gen. 17:13) This injunction was naturally taken to refer to slaves. Male slaves as ~~apule~~ ^{rule} were circumcised immediately after they had been bought. Although they were permitted to eat of the Passover offering on the basis of Exod. 12:43, they were not, if they had been bought from heathens, given the status of full Israelites. Like women and children they held an intermediate position in respect of the commandments, being compelled to observe all negative commandments, and certain positive commandments, that were not determined by the element of time, such as reciting the "shema", tefillin, etc.

If a slave who had been bought from heathens did not wish to become circumcised, he was, in the opinion of some Rabbis, to be resold immediately to heathens. Some of the Rabbis differed with respect to this. It was pointed out that in a certain town in Palestine, where ^{if} slaves who had been purchased by Israelites from heathens refused to be circumcised, they were retained by their mas-

ters for twelve months, and if they still refused circumcision,⁸ were then resold to heathens. R. Ishmael and R. Akiba differed on this question, the former holding that an uncircumcised slave could be retained, the latter holding that he could not be retained⁹ even for a day.

On the legal status of slaves, as it was effected by circumcision, Tos. Abodah Zorah 3:11 gives the following: "If one bought uncircumcised slaves from Gentiles and circumcised them, but did not immerse them, and similarly if one owned children of female slaves that were not immersed, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, their treading place is unclean. What about their wine? In the case of an adult it is forbidden (i.e., if an adult slave who was either uncircumcised or had not been immersed touched the wine, its usage was forbidden to Israelites); but in the case of minors, it is permitted. And who is an adult? Anyone who remembers or mentions idolatry and serves it. R. Jose said: 'The legal status of Israelite slaves even though circumcised, is that of Canaanites, that is, if the owner admits that they are the children of female slaves who had not been immersed. The legal status of circumcised slaves of priests is that of the Cutheans. If uncircumcised they are as Gentiles; that is, if their owner admits that they are the children of Canaanite female slaves. The legal status of slaves of Gentiles, even if circumcised, is that of Gentiles.'"

Scripture had stated: "Every man's slave that is bought for money, thou shalt circumcise him, then shall he eat thereof." (i.e. the Passover--Exod. 12:43) Does this mean, the Rabbis asked, that a slave may be circumcised by force? Rab maintained that

the verse implied this; but the son of a freeman, he added, may not be circumcised by force. To this Ulla replied: "As you admittedly may not circumcise by force the son of a freeman, so may you not circumcise by force the slave of a man."¹⁰ The same verse was applied to each that a master who did not circumcise his slave was forbidden to eat of the Passover, just as the slave was forbidden to eat of it. Scripture had stated: "Thou shalt circumcise him (i.e., the slave) then he shall eat thereof." Who, it was asked, is meant by "he shall eat thereof", the slave or the master? If it refers to the slave, Scripture says elsewhere (Exod. 12:48): "No uncircumcised person may eat thereof" which includes the uncircumcised slave. Hence it must refer to the master; i.e., if he had slaves whom he did not circumcise, he himself is debarred from eating of the Passover offering.¹¹

R. Ishmael, however, maintained that failure to circumcise one's slaves¹² did not debar one from eating of the Passover offering.

The general rule was that a slave bought with money was to be circumcised on the first day he became the property of his master. But in Gen. 17 appear two verses relating to the circumcision of slaves that seem to be in conflict with each other. Verse 12 reads: "And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you...he that is born in the house or bought with money of any foreigner, that is not of thy seed", implying that slaves whether bought with money or born in the master's house were to be circumcised on the eighth day; i.e., on the eighth day after birth or on the eighth day after purchase. On the other hand, verse 13 reads: "He that is born in thy house and he that is bought with money must needs be circumcised." Since

no day is specified in the latter, the implication is that slaves whether bought with money, or born in the house must be circumcised on the first day; i.e., on the day of birth or on the day of purchase.

The rabbis attempted to resolve this apparent conflict by pointing out four distinctions.¹³ If one buys a female slave and she undergoes ritual ablution, and then conceives in her master's house, her child becomes a slave born in the house who is circumcised on the eighth day.¹⁴ If she does not undergo ritual ablution her child becomes a slave born in the house who is circumcised on the first day for the mother is not yet a Jewess and her child is therefore not like a Jewish-born infant. If one buys a pregnant female slave and she gives birth in the master's house after having undergone ritual ablution, her child becomes a slave bought with money who is circumcised on the eighth day, for since his foetus was already formed when his mother was bought, he was bought together with her, and since she became subject to Jewish law before he was born, he becomes like a Jewish-born child. If one buys a female slave together with her infant son, the child is a slave bought with money who is not born in the master's house and his circumcision takes place on the day he is bought; i.e. the first day. There was another distinction¹⁵ in the case of a pregnant female slave who was bought by one master, while her as yet unborn child was bought by another. If the mother undergoes ritual ablution before giving birth, is the child circumcised on the first or eighth day? It was held that the child becomes a slave bought with money who is circumcised on the eighth day, for since the child's master does not own the

mother he is not like a Jewish-born infant even though the mother may have formerly belonged to a Jew. On the other hand it was held that such a child is like a Jewish-born infant and is circumcised on the eighth day.¹⁶ In the case where one buys a female slave on the condition that she will not be subjected to the ritual bath, naturally her child is not like a Jewish-born infant and he is circumcised on the first day.¹⁷

One of the questions raised by the rabbis¹⁸ was whether the commandment of circumcision was intended for the other nations or only for Israel. Scripture had twice stated: "Thou shalt keep my covenant."¹⁹ It was suggested that the first gave the commandment of circumcision to Israelites, and the second to the Noachites (i.e., to the other nations who are all descended from Noah). Against this it was pointed out that God had stated specifically to Abraham: "Thou shalt keep my covenant, thou and thy seed after thee in their generations," (Gen 17:9) meaning that Abraham and his descendants were to keep it, but no others. If so, it was argued, circumcision should also be incumbent upon the seed of Ismael! In answer to this, it was pointed out that Scripture had said: "For in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen. 17:12); i.e., "thy seed after thee" refers to Isaac and his descendants. If so, it was again argued, then circumcision should also be incumbent upon the children of Esau, who are also the seed of Isaac! Against this argument it was stated that the verse did not refer to all the seed of Isaac, but only to Israel.

The question was also raised regarding the six sons whom Keturah bore to Abraham.²⁰ Since they and their descendants were also the seed of Abraham, would not circumcision be incumbent upon them? In answer to this it was argued that the covenant

extended only to Abraham's own sons and not to their descendants.

Thus circumcision is limited to Israel alone.

Notes to Chapter XX

1. Yebamoth 46a. R. Eliezer's argument was based on the view that the Israelites who left Egypt, although circumcised, nevertheless had not performed ritual ablution, and yet were permitted to receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai; i.e., to be initiated into Judaism. R. Joshua's argument was based on the view that the women who left Egypt could not have been circumcised, and yet were permitted to enter Judaism by virtue of their having undergone ritual ablution.

2. Rabbi was of the opinion that just as Israel entered into the covenant by three rites, circumcision (Gen. 17:1f), immersion (Exod. 19:3), and sacrificial atonement (Exod. 24:5-8) so also must proselytes enter by the very same rites. This was his interpretation of Num. 15:14, "And if a stranger will sojourn with you....as ye do, so shall he do." (Sifri, Shalah 108)

3. Yebamoth 47a (bot)

4. Abodah Zorah 59a

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid. 65a

7. Sifra Tazria chap. 1; Tos. Shab. 15(16):9

8. Yebamoth 48b

9. Ibid. 47a. In Mekilta Pisha chap. 15, the statement is made in the name of R. Ishmael, "We find that one is permitted to keep uncircumcised slaves, for it is written, 'And the son of thy handmaid and the stranger may be refreshed'" (Exod. 23:12). To this R. Eliezer replied: "One is not permitted to keep uncircumcised slaves, for Scripture says, 'Thou shalt circumcise him'" (Exod. 12:43). "If so, he was asked, "Why then does Scripture

say: 'And the son of thy handmaid and the stranger may be refreshed'?" He replied, "For this reason: suppose his master brought him Friday towards evening and there was not sufficient time to circumcise him before it became dark. Therefore Scripture says, 'And the son of thy handmaid may be refreshed'". (i.e., the uncircumcised slave may be "refreshed" or retained only until the Sabbath ends but if he still remains uncircumcised he may be retained no longer, for the whole verse reads, "Six days shalt thou do thy work but on the seventh day shalt thou rest,...that the son of thy handmaid and the stranger may be refreshed")

10. Yebamoth 48a; Yerushalmi Yebamoth 8:1

11. Mekilta Pisha chap. 15; Midrash Hagadol Shemoth 24

12. Mekilta ibid.

13. Shab. 135b

14. The child's mother by undergoing ritual ablution has become like a Jewess and subject to all the laws incumbent upon Jewesses. Thus on the basis of Lev. 12:2-3 she becomes defiled through birth and a child whose mother has been defiled through confinement is circumcised on the eighth day. But if the mother did not take the ritual bath, she is not subject to the laws incumbent upon Jewesses and hence is not defiled through confinement, and her child is not circumcised on the eighth day but on the first day. Thus in Shab. 135a R. Assi makes the statement: "He whose mother is defiled through confinement must be circumcised at eight days, but he whose mother is not defiled through confinement is not circumcised on the eighth day because it is said: 'If a woman conceive seed and bear a man child, then she

shall be unclean seven days...and in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.'"(Lev.. 12:2-3) Included in the category of a woman who is not defiled through confinement is one whose child has been extracted through the caesarean section or a Gentile woman who becomes a proselyte the day after her child is born. Abaye took exception to R. Assi's statement and pointed out (ibid) that before the law was given at Sinai, the mothers were not defiled through confinement, and yet their children were circumcised on the eighth day. To this R. Assi replied that when the Torah was given a new law was decreed and the practice of former generations did not apply to the new law. Against this it is argued that there are cases where the mother is not defiled through confinement, and yet her child is circumcised on the eighth day. Such a case is a mother whose child has been extracted through the caesarean section. Both R. Huna and R. Hiyya b. Rab, although they differed on whether such a child could be circumcised on the Sabbath, nevertheless, agreed that his circumcision takes place on the eighth day.

15. Sab. 135b

16. Ibid. Genesis R. 46:11 likewise teaches, "If one buys the unborn child of a non-Jew's female slave, R. Johanan says, 'He is circumcised on the eighth day,' and R. Hama b. R. Joseph and Samuel also say, 'On the eighth day'". The Biblical basis here is Gen. 17:12

17. Sab. 135b

18. Sanh. 59b

19. Gen. 17:9 and Lev. 12:3

20. Gen. 25:1f

21. Except of course, the descendants of Isaac through Jacob.

XXI Circumcision and Leprosy

One of the problems of a purely theoretical nature that the Rabbis had to contend with in connection with circumcision, was the appearance of a "bahereth" or bright spot on the fore-¹skin. The "bahereth" or bright spot was a symptom of leprosy and Scripture had stated, "Take heed in the plague of leprosy" (Deut. 24:8) which the Rabbis interpreted as an injunction against cutting away a leprous bright spot. This injunction applied, of course, to a bright spot that might be discovered on any part of the body. The theoretical problem therefore became one of finding a Pentateuchal basis for excluding the foreskin from this² injunction. The Mishnah had already permitted a "bahereth" to be removed from the tip of the foreskin at circumcision. The Pentateuchal basis was found in the word "flesh"--"The flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised"--"flesh" is stated to intimate that the foreskin must be cut away even when a "bahereth" is there. The verse, "Take heed in the plague of leprosy" applies to the other leprous spots on the body, excluding the foreskin. Hence circumcision supersedes leprosy.

Another opinion, however, held that it can be inferred that circumcision supersedes leprosy from the fact that it supersedes the Sabbath. And since it supersedes the Sabbath which is stringent, how much the more so leprosy. Thus it is not necessary to have a Biblical verse. In answer to this it was argued: How do we know that the Sabbath is more stringent? Perhaps leprosy is more stringent since it supersedes the sacrificial service and the sacrificial service supersedes the Sabbath. Therefore, it was necessary for Scripture to state "flesh" to intimate that even

when a bright spot is on the flesh of the foreskin, it may be cut away. Therefore circumcision supersedes leprosy on the basis of a Biblical verse.

Still another opinion was presented; namely, that it can be inferred that circumcision supersedes leprosy because the injunction to circumcise is a positive command, while the injunction not to cut off a bright spot is a negative command;⁴ and when there are a positive and negative command in opposition to each other, the positive command supersedes the negative. An objection was raised to this line of reasoning. It was agreed that a positive command supersedes a negative command, but it was pointed out that Deut. 24:8, the basis for the injunction against cutting away a bright spot, has in it both a positive and a negative command--(the negative clause is: "Take heed in the plague of leprosy;" the positive: "that thou observe diligently")--and a positive command may only supersede a negative command by itself, and not when the negative command which it supersedes has a positive command attached to it also. Therefore, the argument continues, it was necessary for Scripture to state "flesh", intimating that the flesh of the foreskin may be circumcised even when a "bahaleth" is there.

Since the term "flesh" taught that circumcision superseded leprosy, it was agreed that it could be applied in the case of an adult who had a bright spot on the foreskin, and also in the case of an infant, for in the verses commanding circumcision to the adult and to the infant, the term "flesh" appears. Thus Gen. 17:14 (which the Rabbis interpreted as being the special verse commanding circumcision to an adult whose father had not had

him circumcised in childhood) reads, "And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people." Similarly with reference to the circumcision of an infant Scripture states, "And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Lev. 12:3) Thus in the case of both the adult and the infant, "flesh" is stated to indicate that a "bahereth" on the foreskin may be cut off in the rite of circumcision. But is there a Scriptural basis to teach the same regarding an as yet uncircumcised child of intermediate age (i.e., a child between eight days and thirteen years and a day, the age at which he attains his majority and reaches the status of an adult)? The verse which applies to the circumcision of a child of intermediate age is the general command "Every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen. 17:10). Now the term "flesh" does not appear here. How then can it be inferred that in his case, too, circumcision supersedes leprosy?

Abaye gave the answer by stating that it can be inferred from the other two (the adult and the infant) combined. It cannot be inferred from the verse applying to the adult alone, for there is a penalty of being "cut off from his people" in his case. And it cannot be inferred from the case of an eight day old infant, since in his case circumcision is at its proper time. However, the feature that is common to both the adult and the infant is that they must be circumcised and that they supersede leprosy, since in both verses the term "flesh" appears. Therefore all who must be circumcised supersede leprosy, regardless of whether it is an infant who is circumcised at the proper time, or a child of intermediate age and an adult who are not circumcised at the proper time.

Notes to Chapter XXI

1. The full discussion of this subject is carried on in Shab. 132b, 133a. Other references are M. Negaim 7:5; Y. Nedarim 3:9; Bezah 8b.

2. Negaim 7:5

3. Lev. 12:3

4. Deut. 24:8 "Take heed in the plague of leprosy." The expression "Take heed" is taken to be negative.

XXII. Conclusion

The many references to circumcision from the various Jewish sources that have been cited here, indicate conclusively the primary religious character and significance of this ancient law and practice. One may conclude unhesitatingly that there is no significance to circumcision other than a purely religious one. The practice of this ancient rite has always marked some form of relationship with the deity. It seems never to have been a purely ethnic practice. Certainly it was an act whereby the individual was initiated into the group, but of greater importance was the belief that it made for a bond between the group as a whole and the deity, and hence between the individual and the deity.

Whatever the import of circumcision in the pre-exilic Biblical era, whether as a pre-marital condition, or as a rite that grew out of an earlier redemptionary form of child sacrifice, or as a ceremony that had a close connection with the annual Passover celebration, in all the Biblical passages that suggest these conclusions, there is a clear-cut assumption that in the performance of the rite the will of the deity was being carried out.

By the time the post-exilic Priestly account in Genesis 17 was written down, the nature of the circumcision act as a mark of relationship between Israel and God had already been clearly formulated. It was the sign of a

divinely ordained covenant, a covenant which entailed the acceptance and worship of God by Israel, and in return, the divine promise that the seed of Abraham would be multiplied exceedingly and be elevated to greatness, and that the land of Canaan would be their everlasting possession. Added to this was the threat of divine punishment to any individual who neglected to undergo circumcision, on the ground that he had broken the covenant of God. There is every reason to believe that even at the time the Priestly document was penned, it was already established that circumcision was a sacramental act in the life of every male individual in the community and that the performance of this act insured the continuous covenant relationship between the community and its God.

The succeeding ages did not in any way alter this view, but merely embellished it with new content, emphasizing more elaborately the great importance of circumcision, especially in times when the rite was under attack or in a state of neglect, and regulating more specifically its practice and limitations. The author of the Book of Jubilees, living in a period when the Hellenic influence caused some Jews to regard circumcision with mockery, stresses the religious character of the rite, describing it as an "eternal ordinance, ordained and written on the heavenly tablets." The neglect of circumcision by anyone, according to this writer, meant that there was no sign on him that he was the Lord's. Because of its divine character, failure to comply with the law was sufficient ground for one to be slain and rooted out of the earth. The fantastic claim

made by the author of Jubilees that even the angels were circumcised, was but a zealous way of stating the great importance of the law and of God's great pleasure in its observance.

The action taken by some of the Hasmonean kings in forcibly circumcising neighboring peoples as a proselytizing act again proves the primary religious character of the rite, and speaks against any view which makes of circumcision a practice of an ethnic or racial character. The attitude toward slaves and proselytes who entered wilfully into the fold, gives the same proof.

The treatment given to the subject of circumcision by the Rabbis, both in Aggada and Halacha, flows logically from the Biblical law. The chief concern of the Rabbis was to obey and follow as literally as possible the Pentateuchal law, and to regulate it so as to make it most applicable along practical lines. Like all Pentateuchal laws, circumcision was to be scrupulously observed because of its divine origin. No other justification was needed. It was a Pentateuchal ordinance and that in itself was sufficient. When Christians and heretically minded Jews argued that there were righteous men before Abraham who were uncircumcised, the Rabbis in the Aggada countered with frequent play on the word 'al, that God's command alone was sufficient reason for upholding the practice and the law. Nevertheless, the Rabbis did attempt to look for the Divine purpose in legislating circumcision to Abraham and his descendants. This they found in the very passage where

the law was most explicitly stated, in the command to Abraham, "Walk before me and be thou perfect." Circumcision, the Rabbis concluded, was an act that made for bodily perfection, the foreskin being a blemish above all blemishes. It was God's intention that Abraham and his descendants become perfect. The Rabbis spared no words in praise of the practice, going so far as to state that but for it the world would not have been created, and making the claim that had Abraham not accepted the law, God would have destroyed the universe. The many Aggadic statements telling of the saving powers of circumcision, especially in the hereafter, are likewise attempts to stress the great importance of the law, and a method of encouraging its observance. But the many arguments that the Rabbis gave in support of circumcision, some of them reaching fantastic proportions, were but secondary to the fundamental principle that circumcision was a Pentateuchal ordinance whose origin was divine and hence obligatory on every Jew.

In the Halacha, the Rabbis for the most part attempt to clarify the law and to state its limitations. Occasionally, as in the case of Periah, where no direct Scriptural support could be found to uphold a practice or custom that had become a part of the institution of circumcision, they tried to find this support by the use of hermeneutic principles and by attributing hidden meanings to Scriptural words and phrases. In these respects the treatment given to circumcision in the Halacha was no different from that of

any other fundamental Jewish law or practice.

Much of the Halachic material is taken up with resolving seeming conflicts between the law of circumcision and some other Pentateuchal ordinance. Thus the case of a circumcision which falls on a Sabbath or Festival day, and the accompanying problems involving the preliminary acts in the circumcision, or the case of a child who is not normal, loom as the most important. In all these problems, many of which were of a purely theoretical nature, the primary concern of the Rabbis was to obey the Scriptural and oral law, and hence it was necessary for them to weigh and sift every allusion and inference and suggestion that Scripture or the oral law gave.

Thus, although the subject of circumcision in Judaism has many sides and facets, they are all but aspects of one fundamental idea, that circumcision is the sign of a divinely ordained covenant, and that its observance is a fulfillment of God's will.

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