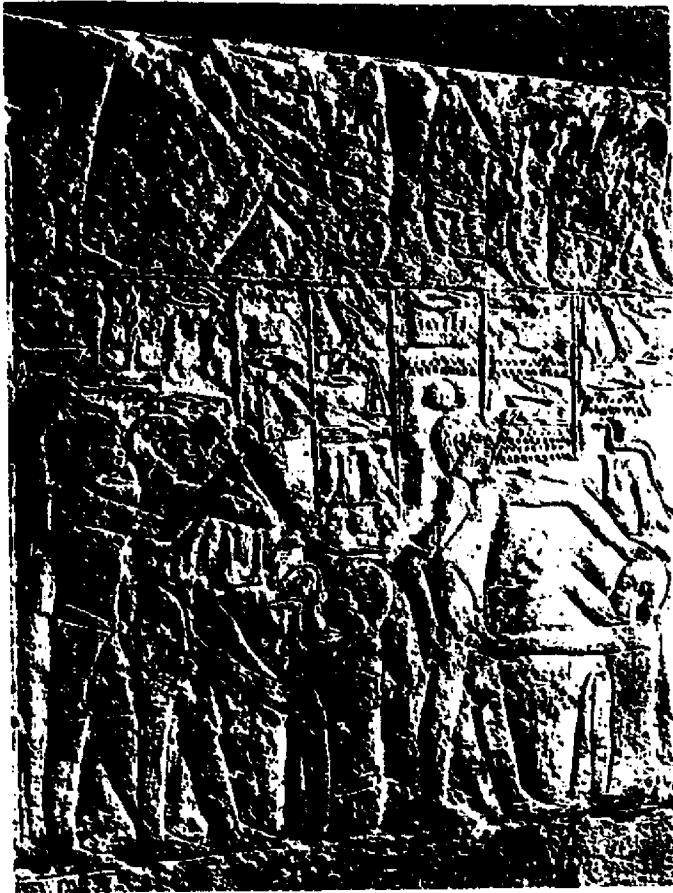


Service and Sanctity: **Rethinking the Ancient Near-Eastern** **Origins of Israelite Circumcision**

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Preface & Acknowledgements

If you are reading this thesis, let me first thank you for doing so, then let me ask that you stop reading. It is my intention to continue with my work on this project, and it is quite possible that I have revised and updated important elements of this thesis. Therefore, before reading further, I ask that you conduct a search of books and periodicals to see if a more current edition exists. If you wish to contact me directly, I may be reached at neal@schustersite.com.

This thesis represents what I hope will be the beginning of a larger work exploring the origins and meanings of Israelite circumcision throughout the ages. During my five years working for the Berit Mila Program of Reform Judaism, I continually found that I disagreed or was dissatisfied with much of the scholarly work that had been done on the subject of berit mila, particularly on the subject of its origins and earliest meanings. This thesis has been opportunity for me to say my piece. While I insist that my research is ongoing, I am, overall, satisfied with my work. Although there are elements of this thesis that already need revising, I believe that I have brought something new to the table, so to speak. And, to be frank, I think that I am right – but, if the evidence and the argument is convincing, I am always ready to change my mind.

I wish to thank a number of people: firstly, I wish to thank Rabbi Reuven Firestone, Ph.D., my teacher and my friend, for pushing me as well as encouraging me in my work. His insistence upon thoroughness and excellence was to my benefit. I owe deep debt of gratitude to the staff of the Frances-Henry Library at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles; in particular to Sheryl Stahl, whose patience and perseverance in filling my daunting number of inter-library loan requests made this venture possible. Thanks to Rabbi Lewis Barth, Ph.D. for creating the Berit Mila Program, and for handing it over to my care. It has been one of the great pleasures of my time at HUC-JIR. Above all, my deepest gratitude and love to my wife, Tamara, and our daughters, Eliana and Ayelet who have had to endure my late-late-night work hours and my sometimes overwhelming fatigue during the day, as well as the general stress of my having to complete this thesis. Thus, I will say the words that will be sweeter to my wife's ears than anything else I could say: "I am done with my thesis."

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Section 1.

Introduction

1. Long before the ancient Hebrews adopted the practice of circumcision, the procedure was well known in Ancient Egypt. In light of the abundant evidence to this effect, it was long assumed that the Hebrew rite emerged as a result of Egyptian cultural influences upon the Israelites. As far back as the 5th Century B.C.E., Herodotus ascribed its origin in Israel – and, in fact, among nearly all peoples – to Egyptian influence.¹ This “view prevailed among modern scholars until recently,”² when the conventional wisdom was challenged by the discovery, in the 1920s, of a cache of cast metal figurines – dating from the late 4th millennium – on the Plains of Antioch in Syria. Three of the figures were semi-nude males, each clearly represented as being circumcised. Because of the close association between this region and the family of the biblical patriarch, Abraham, the discovery led to the speculation that circumcision came into currency among the ancient Hebrews through the influences of their ostensibly Syrian/Aramean kinsfolk.³
2. However, a shared practice is not evidence of origins, particularly when there is a span of millennia between the periods in question. The simple fact that both the ancient Egyptians and the Syrians practiced circumcision does not, in and of itself, tell us how it came to be an Israelite rite, and it certainly does not give us any indication of what meaning the practice may have held for its ancient practitioners. If we are to evaluate

¹ Herodotus, *Historiae* II.107. Translation by George Rawlinson available at <http://www.herodotuswebsite.co.uk/Text/book2b.htm>. Herodotus did question whether the Ethiopians had also learned the practice from the Egyptians, or if the reverse had been the case.

² Hall, Robert G., “Circumcision” Vol. 1, in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p. 1025

³ Although the discovery was made in the 1920s, this theory was first put forth by Jack M. Sasson in “Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” *JBL* 85 (1966), pp. 473-476.

existing hypotheses – and formulate plausible new ones – regarding the origins and meaning of Israelite circumcision, then we must carefully examine and analyze the evidence of its practice. We must consider: who among the peoples of the ancient near-east practiced circumcision? When did they adopt the practice? At what age did they circumcise? What implements did they use? What did their circumcision look like? Is there any indication as to what meaning it held for them? Is there reason to believe that there was a cultural transfer whereby the Egyptian or Syrian practice of circumcision influenced that of the ancient Israelites? We must add to this investigation a deep exploration of the biblical texts relating to circumcision; mining the texts for clues that, when combined with the clues from the archaeological and historical records of the ancient near east, may help us to understand the origins of Israelite circumcision.

3. As is the nature of all such enterprises, any conclusions that may be offered are entirely speculative. Evidence will be considered, arguments made, and suggestions proposed. Although hypotheses may be offered with varying degrees of confidence, the evidence is always equivocal; certainty cannot even be considered a reasonable objective. Theories must always stand ready to retire in the face of new evidence or more reasonable interpretations. This disclaimer notwithstanding, the weight of the evidence in this matter gives us reasonable license to advance certain explanations over others. Thus, it is with due caution and confidence that I embark upon this investigation.

Section 2.

Circumcision Among the Ancient Egyptians

4. Our investigation begins with the abundant record of circumcision among the ancient Egyptians, the evidence of which dates back as far as the early 4th Millennium B.C.E. Bodies exhumed from the prehistoric cemetery at Naga-ed-Der show clear evidence of circumcision. Although the bodies were not mummified prior to burial, “their unembalmed remains [are] extraordinarily well preserved by the hot desert sands.”⁴
5. The earliest visual depictions of circumcision are to be found on two carved stone victory palettes known as the Battlefield Palette,⁵ and the Narmer Palette. The earlier of



the two, the Battlefield Palette, comes from the late Gerzian era of the Predynastic period and can be dated between 3200 and 3100 B.C.E. It depicts numerous nude, male prisoners being devoured by a lion and vultures – “symbols of Nilotic power.”⁶ The prisoners wear plaited beards and appear to have thick, curly hair and broad, flat noses. All are

represented as having a dorsal-slit on their foreskins – a type of partial circumcision in which the foreskin remains, but hangs open around the glans of the penis. The only other



⁴ Bailey, Evoke, “Circumcision in Ancient Egypt,” BACE 7 (1996), p. 15

⁵ Sometimes called the “Two Gazelles Palette”

⁶ Sasson, “Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” p. 473

discernable figure in the palette is a robed figure – only the bottom half is visible – who appears to be leading one of the prisoners whose hands are bound behind his back

6. The second of the two palettes, the Narmer Palette, dates between 3090 and 3060 B.C.E. and depicts what is widely regarded as the victory of the southern King Narmer (also known as the Scorpion King), over an enemy force. At the bottom of the palette, on both sides, are depictions of nude, vanquished men. At least one of them clearly bears the same dorsal-slit as the figures on the Battlefield Palette. There is no reason to suppose that the dorsal-slit was inflicted upon the defeated combatants by the victorious Egyptians. Neither of the palettes depicts such an action, and the dorsal-slit of the prisoners on the Battlefield Palette can be clearly seen at all stages



of their depicted fate. If the victors wished to do violence to the genitals of their foes, full castration would have been much easier than the multi-step process of circumcision of any type. Nor would there be any purpose to marking the prisoners with such a procedure since they were to be killed, not enslaved.

7. The identity of these defeated warriors with their dorsal-slit circumcisions is uncertain. Based on their physiognomy – curly, dark hair; broad, flat noses; thick lips - they may have been “Black” or “Negro” Africans. (This type of dorsal-slit circumcision is still practiced by the Masai tribe in the general region of the Nile headwaters.⁷) In spite of their features, the palettes are generally regarded to be depictions of victories of

⁷ Jonckheere, Frans, “La Circonsion des Anciens Egyptiens,” *Centaurus* 1 (1951), pp. 224-225.

southern (upper) Egyptians over northern (lower) Egyptians. In particular, the Narmer Palette is presumed to represent the victory of King Narmer (a southerner also known as the Scorpion King) over his northern enemies; a victory that resulted in the unification of Egypt and marking the end of the Pre-dynastic period and the beginning of the First Dynasty (ca. 3100 B.C.E.).⁸ However, this explanation is not universally accepted. It may represent the re-conquest "of a local chieftain of the two banks of the Edfu region against Nubian intruders,"⁹ or, the foes may have been Libyan intruders from the west.¹⁰ Whatever the case may be, the similarity of the physical characteristics, as well as the commonality of the dorsal-slit circumcision strongly suggests that the vanquished foes represented in the palettes may be of similar non-Egyptian origin.

8. Evidence of ancient Egyptian circumcision based upon mummified remains spans across the dynastic periods. One Old Kingdom tomb, from ca. 2500 B.C.E., contained a mummified penis, which "belonged to an unknown hereditary prince in King Sneferu's time,"¹¹ and the mummy of Sneferu's son, Renefer, was also circumcised.¹² From the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040-1780 B.C.E.), we have the circumcised mummy of Karenin,¹³ and from the New Kingdom (ca. 1570-1070 B.C.E.) come the circumcised, mummified remains of the Pharaohs: Amenhotep II,¹⁴ his co-regent, Thutmose IV,¹⁵ Ramses IV,¹⁶ and also the circumcised remains of the prince Sipaari.¹⁷

⁸ Dating for both of the palettes varies. I have used dates suggested in by Francesco Raffaele (Ph.D. candidate at Napoli IOU University) in personal correspondence. He also points out that there are alternate theories about the timing of the unification of Egypt.

⁹ As argued by W.A. Fairservis, Jr. in an article in JARCE 28, 1991. Summary citation provided by F. Raffaele.

¹⁰ As suggested by WS Smith in a 1965 BSFE article, again, according to Raffaele.

¹¹ Bailey, "Circumcision in Ancient Egypt," p. 16.

¹² Smith, G. Elliot, *The Royal Mummies* (London:Kegan Paul International, 1991), p. 75.

¹³ Smith and Dawson, *Egyptian Mummies* (London:Kegan Paul International, 1991), p. 80-81.

¹⁴ Smith, *The Royal Mummies*, p. 37. (Amenhotep II — ca. 1427-1392 B.C.E.).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44. (Thutmose IV — ca. 1419-1386 B.C.E.).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90. (Ramses IV — ca. 1153-47 B.C.E.). Bailey adds Ramses V to the list, citing Smith, p. 90. This appears to be an error, as Smith makes no mention of whether or not Ramses V was circumcised.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

9. The 5th and 6th dynasties of the Old Kingdom¹⁸ yielded a wealth of visual depictions of ancient Egyptian circumcision. The walls of the tombs of a royal servant named Ti,¹⁹ (ca. 2446-2426 B.C.E.) and of a Vizier named Ankhmahor (ca. 2345-2333 B.C.E.) depict sculptors' workshops in which the nude, male figures being sculpted are clearly circumcised. Both tombs also depict scenes in which circumcised workers are dealing with animals. The "clap-net" scene from the tomb of Ankhmahor has circumcised workers removing birds from a set of clap-nets,²⁰ while one from the tomb of Ti shows a circumcised man birthing a calf and another circumcised man carrying a newborn calf. Other images depict nude, circumcised men harvesting netted fish, and hunting hippopotamuses²¹. In addition to these drawings, a number of statues from the period also depict subjects who are circumcised. One such statue features a high-level royal servant named Tjeti, standing nude, clearly revealing that he had been circumcised. There are "at least five [other such] statues of the period[:] Ensekha, Snefru-nefer, Kai-em-nefert, Meriara-ha-ishetef and Senedjem-ib-mehy."²²

10. What is perhaps one of the most famous depictions of circumcision from ancient Egypt comes from the door to the *mastaba* (tomb) of Ankhmahor.²³ The relief drawing - which is one of only two known images depicting the actual performance of circumcision in ancient Egypt - portrays two figures undergoing procedures. To the left, a *patient*²⁴ stands. His hands are restrained by a dark-haired or capped man standing behind him

¹⁸ The Old Kingdom lasted from ca. 3100 to 2160 B.C.E. The 5th and 6th Dynasties are dated as 2494-2345 B.C.E., and 2345-2181, respectively.

¹⁹ Alternately spelled, "Ty"

²⁰ Badawy, Alexander, *The Tomb of Nyhetep-Ptah at Giza and the Tomb of 'Ankhm 'ahor at Saqqara* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978), fig. 33, plate 41.

²¹ Baines, John, and Málek, Jaromír, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1980), pp. 192-193. (for concerned readers, both "hippopotamuses" and "hippopotami" are acceptable plural forms.)

²² Bailey, "Circumcision in Ancient Egypt," p. 21

²³ Badawy, *The Tomb of Nyhetep-Ptah at Giza and the Tomb of 'Ankhm 'ahor at Saqqara*, p. 19, fig. 27, plate 30. See below, note 74, on the need to rework my discussion of this image.

²⁴ I have italicized the word "patient" because, as will be explain below, circumcision in ancient Egypt was not considered a medical procedure. Nonetheless, Bailey uses the word in his article, and it does help to differentiate between the figures in the image.

while a squatting figure holds the *patient's* penis and applies an oval-shaped implement to it. To the right, a *patient* stands; his arms are not restrained. Rather, his right arm rests casually against his thigh, and his



(disproportionate) left arm rests on the head of the operator who squats before him, applying a long instrument, perhaps a flint-knife, to the tip of the patient's penis.

11. The hieroglyphic label of the scene is: 'circumcision, the ka-servant.' The ka-servants were a type of mortuary priest...

...some of whom also carried the title of *swmw* (doctor) were primarily involved in the funerary cult services for the *ka* [life-force] of the deceased, and may have also performed circumcision as part of their functions. Ankhmahor was neither a ka-servant nor a doctor, but a Hereditary Prince and Vizier, and one may wonder at the purpose in depicting such a scene for posterity.²⁵

12. On the left side, the ka-servant, tells the attendant, "Hold him tightly; do not let him go,"²⁶ and the attendant replies, "I will act to please you." To the right, the patient tells the priest, "Sever [it] really thoroughly," or "obliterate really thoroughly."²⁷ The operator replies, "I will do what pleases," or "I shall make (it) agreeable."²⁸

13. The relief is generally assumed to be depicting two different steps in the procedure of circumcision, but it is unclear whether the images are sequential panels of one man's circumcision, or the assembly-line style progression of two different men through the

²⁵ Bailey, "Circumcision in Ancient Egypt," p. 18.

²⁶ Except where indicated, I have used Bailey's rendering of the dialogue.

²⁷ Badawy, *The Tomb of Nyhetep-Ptah at Giza and the Tomb of 'Ankhm'ahor at Saqqara*, p. 19.

²⁸ Ibid.

steps of the process. There is also much speculation as to what is being depicted in the left part of the relief. It may be the application of some type of topical analgesic, perhaps the "Stone of Memphis" of Roman literature, thought to be a carbonate of lime which produces analgesia [sic] when rubbed on the skin."²⁹ The painful rubbing required for such an application would explain the need to restrain the patient, and its effectiveness would explain the relaxed stance of the patient on the right, while he is undergoing what appears to be the actual cut of the circumcision. While this explanation is generally accepted, there are some who argue that the order should be reversed, and that the image on the left depicts the painful application of an ointment after the cutting has been done, as depicted on the right side of the relief.³⁰ Some even argue that the image on the right side of the relief is not part of the circumcision at all:

Although [the standard] drawing [of the scene] shows the tip of the knife directly above the phallus, examination of the photograph and the wall itself shows that both the tip of the knife and the thumb of the man who performs the operation are behind it. The fact that the blade of the knife is turned towards the pubic region seems more consistent with shaving than with surgical incision. A scene in [a different tomb] shows a similar activity and carries the captions... "Shaving..."³¹

14. Another argument that relies on this scene holds that the angle at which the operators hold their implements is evidence (along with the images from the Narmer and Battlefield Palettes) that dorsal-slit circumcision was normative in ancient Egypt (see above, ¶5). However, the angle of the implements is not a genuine indication of the type of circumcision. With the single exception of an image of a semi-nude carpenter,³² all evidence of circumcised Egyptians indicates that they practiced true circumcision. While the Battlefield and Narmer Palettes do, without question, depict the dorsal-slit, the

²⁹ Bailey, "Circumcision in Ancient Egypt," p. 19.

³⁰ Bailey discusses (and refutes) this theory on p. 19.

³¹ Roth, Ann Macy, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1991), pp. 66-68.

³² Jonckheere, "La Circonsion des Anciens Egyptiens," p. 227.

subjects, as noted above, do not appear to be Egyptian. It is possible that they had settled in Egypt – perhaps in the Delta region – their physiognomy is markedly distinct from that of the Egyptian victors. Whether they are Africans, Libyans or of some other origin, their images should not be regarded as evidence of dorsal-slit circumcision among the ancient-Egyptians.

15. Another suggestion³³ regarding the Ankhmahor circumcision scene is that it is actually a depiction of emergency surgery to relieve a painful foreskin condition. Several conditions – each of which would be exacerbated by the sand and heat of the region – might warrant such emergency surgery, the most common being: balanitis, an infection of the foreskin; phimosis, a constriction of the opening in the foreskin making it impossible to retract; and acute paraphimosis, a severe condition in which a phimosed foreskin is retracted and becomes stuck in the coronal sulcus (the area just below the glans). Congenital defects, such as hypospadias or epispadias (in which the urethral opening is somewhere other than the tip of the penis) could have required circumcision in order to allow proper voiding of urine. Such defects can be genetic, and given the ancient Egyptian practice of royal sibling marriages, it is possible that a prevalence of such a condition among a particular royal family could have led to the adoption of routine circumcision.

16. While physiological problems of the foreskin may certainly have played a significant (if not definitive) role in the pre-historic advent of circumcision, there is no indication that it was an active consideration in the continuation of the practice. Circumcision in ancient Egypt was not regarded as a medical procedure: the considerable corpus of ancient Egyptian medical and surgical literature contains no descriptions of the

³³ See Spigelman, Mark, "The Circumcision Scene in the Tomb of Ankhmahor: The First Record of Emergency Surgery?" *BACE* 8 (1987), pp. 91-100.

techniques of circumcision. At most, there is only a brief prescription for treating one who suffers bleeding after circumcision, and it is contested as to whether or not that text actually refers to circumcision or not.

17. Rather than being in the purview of the surgeon, circumcision seems to have been the role of certain religious functionaries – if not priests themselves, then those closely associated with the priests. The circumcision scene from the tomb of Ankhmahor is labeled “circumcision, the ka-servant.”³⁴ Ka-servants were cultic functionaries, primarily involved in funerary services, and also, apparently, with the performance of circumcision. The connection between these two functions is corroborated by an inscription from “the Ninth Dynasty [also late Third Millennium] tomb of Mereri at Dendera. An Overseer of Priests, Count and Treasurer of the King of Lower Egypt, Mereri says: ‘I buried its old men; I circumcised its youths.’”³⁵ What is not clear from the inscription is whether the ka-servant is the one performing the circumcision or the one being circumcised.³⁶
18. Another well known example of ancient Egyptian circumcision comes from an inscription from a stele at Naga ed-Der (ca. 2160-2040 B.C.E.), describing the circumcision of a royal servant and priest named Uha:³⁷

An offering which the king and Anubis, Who is Upon His Mountain, He Who is in Ut, the Lord of the Holy Land, give: An invocation-offering to the Count, Seal-Bearer of the King of Rekhyt [Lower Egypt], Sole Companion, and Lector Priest, honored with the great god, the Lord of Heaven, Uha, who says: I was one beloved of his father, favored of his mother, whom his brothers and sisters loved. When I was circumcised, together with one hundred and twenty men, and one hundred and twenty women, there was none thereof who hit out, there was none thereof who was hit, there was none thereof who scratched; there was none thereof who was scratched. I was a commoner of repute, who lived on his own property, plowed with his own span

³⁴ Bailey, “Circumcision in Ancient Egypt,” p. 18

³⁵ Bailey, “Circumcision in Ancient Egypt,” p. 20.

³⁶ As suggested by Roth, p. 66

³⁷ Alternately, “Who”

of oxen, and sailed in his own ship, and not through that which I had found in the possession of my father, honored Uha.³⁸

19. This inscription is often viewed as an indication that circumcision was performed in late-adolescence as a rite of passage.³⁹ It is not clear, however, how old Uha was. After all, he describes his companions as men, not youths, and he was old enough to have acquired land and a ship through his own means. Although the inscription from the tomb of Mereri ("I buried its old men; I circumcised its youths"), supports the assertion that it was performed during adolescence, the evidence falls far short of supporting such unequivocal assertions that "in ancient Egypt, as in most tribal societies that practice the ritual, it served as a rite of passage, part of a ceremony whose themes include fertility, intergenerational continuity, and the transition from boyhood to social maturity."⁴⁰ While these meanings may inhere to the practice among aboriginal peoples, we should be extremely reticent - lack of supporting evidence - about projecting these meanings upon the ancient Egyptian practice.

20. The only extant depictions of uncircumcised males from ancient Egypt are numerous depictions of nude children. A relief from the 6th Dynasty (24th-22nd Cent. B.C.E.) tomb of Mereru-ka⁴¹ depicts nude boys engaged in sporting games. The boys are pre-adolescent and uncircumcised.⁴² Another relief drawing, the Donation Stele of Karnak, depicts the Pharaoh Ahmos (18th Dynasty, 1540-1515 B.C.E.), together with his young son, who is nude and uncircumcised. In addition to these two examples, there are many other depictions of uncircumcised preadolescent males. However, a fragmentary relief

³⁸ This text is published in numerous locations. Originally published in D. Dunham, *Naga-ed-Der Stelae of the First Intermediate Period* (London, 1917), pp. 102-104. Commonly found in Pritchard, James B., *ANE Texts in Relation to the Old Testament*, p. 326. The final clause of the passage is confusing. It is unclear whether or not Uha was the name of the speaker's father as well as the speaker himself.

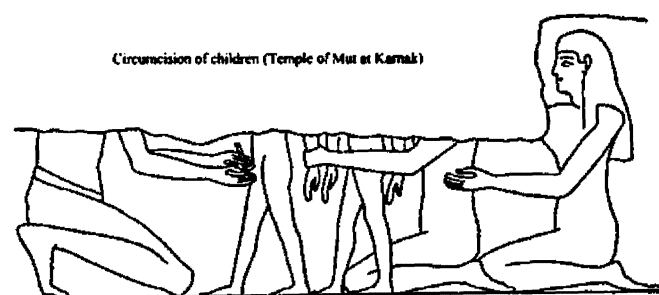
³⁹ Cf. Bailey, "Circumcision in Ancient Egypt," p. 20; Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 2, *inter alia*.

⁴⁰ Gollaher, David L., *Circumcision*, pp. 12-13

⁴¹ 2255-2246, B.C.E. Also called Merenra or Mernera

⁴² Pritchard, James B., *The Ancient Near East in Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 68, plate 217

found at the Temple of Mut at Karnak, dating from sometime in the 18th Dynasty (1540-1307 B.C.E.), actually depicts what appears to be two pre-adolescent children undergoing the process of circumcision. This may be an indication that in later dynasties circumcision was practiced at a younger age, but it is not entirely clear that this was the case. As noted above (§8) the mummy of the Royal Prince Sipaari, although only 5-6 years old, is circumcised. However, that of an approximately 11 year old boy (presumed to be the Royal



Prince Ouabkhusenou, although it is unclear, is uncircumcised.⁴³ Any number of scenarios may explain this discrepancy (perhaps Sipaari died as a result of his circumcision, and the risk was avoided with Ouabkhusenou), but the relevant fact remains that during the late-1st Millennium, Egyptians were performing circumcisions prior to adolescence.

21. Other references to the age of circumcision can be found in two inscriptions, though their meanings are uncertain. The first is from the Pharaoh Senusert I,⁴⁴ (ca. 1971-1926) who states: "As a child, when I had not yet lost my foreskin, he (Re-Ha-akhti, the sun god) appointed me lord of mankind."⁴⁵ In a slightly later inscription, the high official, Khnumhotep II, states that his father (Khnumhotep I, ca. 1929-1892, ruler of Beni Hasan,) "governed at a time when he had not yet lost his foreskin: he executed a royal

⁴³ Smith, *The Royal Mummies*, p. 40

⁴⁴ Alternately called Senwosret or Sesostris, or known by his throne name, Kheperkare. See Rice, Michael, *Who's Who in Ancient Egypt* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 185.

⁴⁵ Cited from "Circumcision in the Biblical Period," Stanley Gevirtz, in J. Lewis M. Barth, ed., *Barit Mita in the Reform Context* (Los Angeles: Barit Mita Board of Reform Judaism, 1990), p. 94. Gevirtz takes his citation from J. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. I (1906 edition), inscription 636 (On senusret, see <http://www.100egypt.net/featurestories/senusret1.htm>)

commission... as a child not yet circumcised.”⁴⁶ Before drawing conclusions from this material, it must be considered that alternate renderings of these inscriptions changes their meanings significantly. Bailey renders the inscription from Khnumhotep II as: “as a child when he loses his foreskin,’ i.e. ‘as a child at the time of his circumcision.’”⁴⁷ (If, indeed, Senusert ascended the throne before he was circumcised, it could have been a reason to lower the age of circumcision - in order to prevent a repeat of such a pre-circumcision kingship, but this is purely speculation.)

22. However one renders these inscriptions, they do offer a clear indication that there was a normative expectation that certain people would be circumcised. Nonetheless, it remains unclear as to whether or not it was universally practiced in ancient Egypt, or if it was limited to those of a certain class or position. In favor of the argument that it was universal is the high degree of diversity among circumcised individuals. The population set includes everyone from Pharaohs to slaves; from priests to laborers. There is very little physical, graphic or literary evidence of uncircumcised men in ancient Egypt. On the other hand, so much of the evidence relates to individuals of a certain class or position that the possibility remains that it was limited in practice. By its very nature, the evidence that is preserved – mummies, relief drawings, inscriptions and the like – was a part of the world of certain elites within ancient Egyptian culture. Even the circumcised “labourers, marsh and field workers, boat attendants, dwarfs and slaves”⁴⁸ who are depicted in tomb art may not qualify as genuine “commoners” because of their roles as

⁴⁶ Ibid. Khnumhotep I was the ruler of Beni Hasan (in Egypt). Khnumhotep II was appointed to the court of Senusert II (late 19th Cent. B.C.E.); later became the high steward and ultimately vizier. <http://members.aol.com/wgrojatzki/Khnumhotep.html>

⁴⁷ Bailey, “Circumcision in Ancient Egypt,” p. 20

⁴⁸ Bailey, “Circumcision in Ancient Egypt,” p. 23

servants for the upper castes. It is also possible that there were certain periods or regions in which it was more widely practiced than others

23. It remains unclear how widespread the Egyptian practice of circumcision was; it did, however, extend to at least one deity. The Papyrus of Ani (better known as the Book of the Dead) contains a reference to the circumcision of the ancient Egyptian creator-god, Re.⁴⁹ (The Papyrus dates from the 13th Century B.C.E., but it may derive from an inscription in the 3rd Millennium Pyramid Texts.⁵⁰) In a discussion of "gods who are in the presence [of Osiris]," the text asks, "Who are these gods?" It answers:

They are the drops of blood which came forth from the phallus of Ra when he went forth to perform his own mutilation. These drops of blood sprang into being under the forms of the gods Hu and Sa, who are in the bodyguard of Ra, and who accompany the god Tem daily and every day.⁵¹

24. Various depictions of the god Min are also sometimes held to be evidence of ancient Egyptian circumcision. The images of this ostensible fertility god range from the early dynastic period to the period of the New Kingdom. He is often shown in profile, standing with a very long, erect penis. Often his right arm is raised, holding what may be a weapon or a sign of copulation. While his left arm is usually not visible, one figurine has him grasping the base of his erect penis with his left hand. The glans of his penis is clearly visible, which has led some⁵² to view it as an indication of circumcision. However, the foreskin of an uncircumcised penis usually retracts during an erection, exposing the glans. For this reason, these images cannot be regarded as clear examples of circumcision.

⁴⁹ Also called also Ra or Re-Horakhty

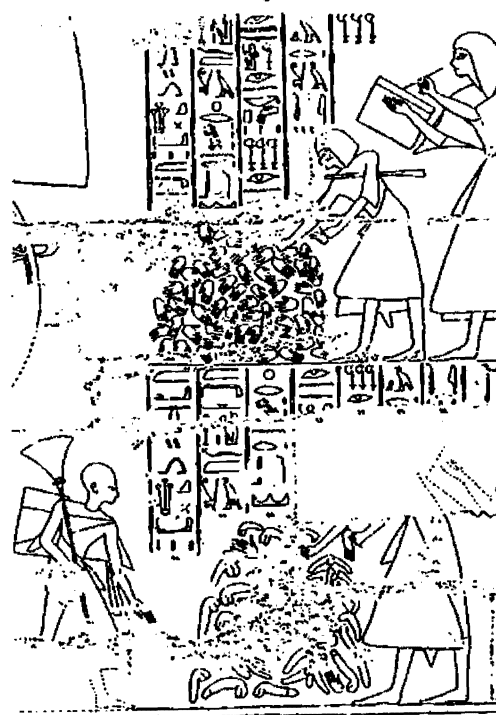
⁵⁰ Bailey, "Circumcision in Ancient Egypt," p. 26

⁵¹ Budge, E. A. Wallis, trans., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead (The Papyrus of Ani)* (New York: Dover, 1967), pp. 284-285. Available online at http://www.lysator.liu.se/~drokk/BoD/Papyrus_Ani.txt.

⁵² See Goedicke, Hans, "Min," *MDAIK* 58 (2002), pp. 247-255.

25. Whether or not circumcision was universal in ancient Egypt, the lack of circumcision does seem to have been viewed with considerable disdain or reproach. While it was a common custom for Egyptians (as well as others) to cut off the hand of a dead foe, as a means of counting the fallen, or, perhaps, as a trophy,⁵³ evidence suggests that when the foes were uncircumcised, the Egyptian victors would sever their genitals – “a phallus with a foreskin,”⁵⁴ – instead of or in addition to their hands. Graphic representation of this practice is found in a scene from Medinet Habu, depicting the presentation of severed hands and genitals – full penis and testicles – before Ramesses III.

Presentation of severed hands and genitals before Ramesses III



26. The particular scene rendered at Medinet Habu contains two sections. In the top section, a man deposits hands on the ground while a scribe, standing behind him, writes on a tablet. The lower image is very similar, except that male genitalia – full penis and testicles – are being deposited rather than hands, and some type of functionary is standing on the opposite side of the pile. The scene is said to depict the presentation of the trophies before Ramesses III following his victory over an alliance of Sea Peoples and Lybians. The inscription detailing the victory make clear that those “who had no foreskins [had their hands] carried off, (for) they had no [foreskins].” By contrast, “uncircumcised

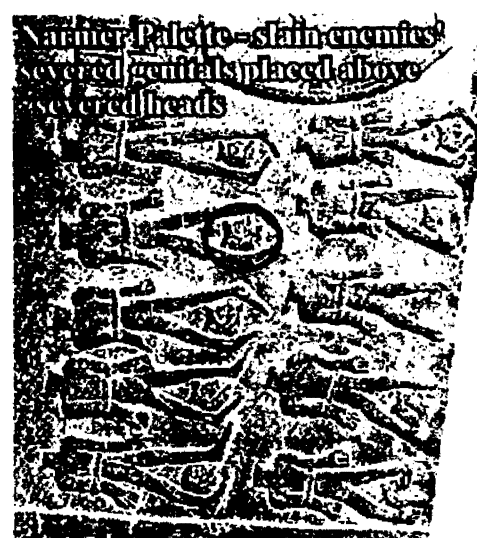
⁵³ Evidence of this practice is abundant. Among the many inscriptions, one from the time of Ramses II reflects the practice: “how pleasant it is when... your chariot is weighed down with hands” (Breasted, James, *Medinet Habu Reports: I. The Epigraphic Survey, 1920-1931* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), p. 24). One of the several visual depictions of the practice can be found in the same volume, fig. 15, between pp. 22 & 23.

⁵⁴ Bailey, “Circumcision in Ancient Egypt,” p. 23, Breasted translates as “uncircumcised phalli.” See Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), vol. 3, 587 & 588, *inter alia*.

phalli were carried off to the place where the king was making uncircumcised phalli...whose hands [were carried off]."⁵⁵ In other words, those who were uncircumcised had their genitals cut off as well as their hands. To As "the former being circumcised had their hands cut off as spoil while the latter being uncircumcised had their penises as well as their hands cut off."⁵⁶

27. This interpretation is not, however, unchallenged.⁵⁷ The captured combatants

depicted on the Narmer Palette - who bore a dorsal-slit circumcision - also had their genitalia cut off (as well as their heads), as can be seen in the row of corpses on the reverse of the palette. This argument can be countered with the assertion that the ancient Egyptians considered the dorsal-slit to be just as contemptuous as not being circumcised at all. The inscriptions from Medinet Habu do not make it clear what the reason was for cutting-off



the genitals. They are mentioned in connection with the administrative totals of foes killed, which may indicate that they served as a means for verifying the totals (by comparing the number of hands to the number of penises). Although the foreskin is mentioned, conflicting interpretations of the scene and the inscriptions call into question the assumption that the practice was limited to uncircumcised foes.

28. Even if the Egyptians did not reserve this practice for their uncircumcised foes, there is evidence clarifies their attitude toward the uncircumcised. An 8th Century B.C.E. stela

⁵⁵ Breasted, *Ancient Records*, vol. 3, 588.

⁵⁶ Spigelman, "The Circumcision Scene in the Tomb of Ankmahor," p. 93, citing E. Strouhal, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, (1992). See also, Breasted, *Ancient Records*, Vol. 4, 588.

⁵⁷ One of the problem is that, in the rendering that I have, several of the penises appear to be circumcised (that many do not appear so should preclude the suggestion that the foreskins were removed prior to presentation). It would be necessary to view a high resolution photograph of the relief (or the relief itself) in order to determine if this is the case.

commemorating the victory “of the Nubian king Piye⁵⁸ in the twenty-first year of his reign (728 B.C.E.) against a coalition of Delta princes.” When the vanquished princes came to surrender and declare their loyalty, “they could not enter the palace because they were uncircumcised and were eaters of fish, which is an abomination to the palace, but king Namart entered the palace because he was clean and did not eat fish.”⁵⁹

29. What do all of these examples and references to circumcision tell us about the nature of the practice in ancient Egypt? Of course, the exact nature of ancient near eastern circumcision is unknowable. Nonetheless, a pattern does seem to emerge from the archaeological record. In the early depictions of circumcision from Ancient Egypt – those of the two palettes – the circumcised figures are clearly in positions of defeat and subjugation. In the later examples there is a similar connection, not to subjugation, but to servitude, or, more accurately, service to a master of some sort.

30. Uha, whose narrative describes his participation in a group circumcision (see pg. 2, above), is described in the introduction to his narrative as “Count, Seal-Bearer of the King of Rekhyt, [in Lower Egypt], Sole Companion, and Lector Priest, honored with the great god, the Lord of Heaven.” Ti, whose tomb at Saqqara contains multiple depictions of circumcised men, was a high placed royal servant, “a hairdresser to the royalty during the early V Dynasty [2465-2323 B.C.E.], as well as controller of the farms and stock that belonged to the royal family”⁶⁰ (which may explain the image of a circumcised man delivering a calf).

⁵⁸ Alternately called Piy, Piankhy or by the throne name of Kashta

⁵⁹ Golpaz-Feller, P., “The Stela of King Piye: A Brief Consideration of ‘Clean’ and ‘Unclean’ in Ancient Egypt and the Bible,” *Révue Biblique* 102-4 (1995), p. 506

⁶⁰ From the website [Touregypt.net](http://www.touregypt.net), <http://www.touregypt.net/timostab.htm>.

31. Ankhmahor, whose tomb contains the famous circumcision scene, was the grand vizier during the reign of Teti (2323-2291 B.C.E.). Second only to Pharaoh, he was known as "the 'Overseer of the Great House' and 'First' under the king, ranking him among the most important men of his time."⁶¹

32. Tjeti, whose carved statue depicts him as circumcised, was also a high ranking royal servant:

"Tjeti probably lived during the time of King Pepy I [2289-2255 B.C.E.] and Merenre [2255-2246 B.C.E.]. He may have been part of a powerful provincial family who served the kings at Memphis but were buried at El Hawawish near Akhmim. As Seal-Bearer of the King of Lower Egypt, Tjeti would have exercised the powers of a governor in the South. Tjeti had several fine wooden statues carved, showing him at various stages of his life, from his slender and active youth to his sturdy middle age. The youthful statue shows him naked, as was the custom in the Sixth Dynasty, while the image of him in his maturity shows him wearing the long kilt associated with high office. As Seal-Bearer of the King of Lower Egypt, Tjeti would have exercised the powers of a governor in the South."⁶²

33. The evidence points to the possibility that circumcision in ancient Egypt was associated with being some sort of royal or cultic servant. Uha's narrative is prefaced by a description of his role as a royal servant. The young men being circumcised in the Ankhmahor tomb drawing are beardless and have the close-cropped hair of servants. Perhaps what is being depicted in both of these cases is a commissioning rite for royal servants. In the case of Ankhmahor, we might speculate that these servants were being commissioned specifically to be entombed (alive) with him for service in the afterlife. While Ankhmahor – second only to Pharaoh – held tremendous power in his time, his tomb was rather modest. In light of its modest scope, the relief may have been included to attest to his power and prestige by showing the numerous servants who had been commissioned for his funerary cult; providing him with ongoing care in the afterlife.

⁶¹ From website: The Ancient Egypt Site, <http://www.ancient-egypt.org/glossary/people/ankhmahor.html>

⁶² From the website of the Royal Ontario Museum, <http://www.rom.on.ca/egypt/case/society/who.html#T>

34. By contrast, the fact that Ti's tomb depicts the carving of servant statues, rather than the commissioning of live servants, could reflect his considerably lower status in comparison to Ankhmahor. While Ti was still high ranking and connected to the royal family, his power was insignificant compared to that of Ankhmahor. In spite of the fact that "his wife was related to the royal family [and] his children were referred to as royal descent, he was not given this title."⁶³ However the depiction of servant-statues being carved for his tomb would have attested to the fact that he was a person of some significance: enough to warrant statues which "acted as substitute servants to provide goods and services... in the afterlife."⁶⁴

35. In this light, when Khnumhotep II remarks that his father "executed a royal commission... as a child not yet circumcised," we may consider that perhaps he was not boasting of his youth, but of the fact that he entered into royal service without becoming circumcised. However, if we consider the alternate rendering of this text – "as a child at the time of circumcision" – and if this alternate reading may also be applied to the inscription of Senusert I (see above, ¶ 21), then these inscriptions place the circumcision precisely at the time when the subjects ascended to their respective positions of authority.

36. The inscription of Senusert I may pose another challenge: "As a child, [either before or at the time of circumcision], he (Re-Ha-akhti, the sun god) appointed me lord of mankind." If circumcision was related to high-level service, why would a pharaoh need to be circumcised? Is not the pharaoh "lord of mankind," and, thus, servant to no one?

⁶³ ⁶⁴ This particular citation is from the website [Touregypt.net](http://www.touregypt.net/timastab.htm), <http://www.touregypt.net/timastab.htm>. For more on Ti, see Rice, p. 206.

⁶⁴ From a summary of a paper given in 2001 by Ms. Karin Kroenke, PhD candidate in Egyptian Archaeology at UC Berkeley, entitled, "Living the Good Life in the Afterlife: Wooden Tomb Models and Servant Statues from the Site of Nag el Der in Egypt," available at <http://hometown.aol.com/behsed/kroenke.htm>

37. Several possible explanations suggest themselves. It is possible that male members of the royal court and household were circumcised – at some certain age – as a sign of fealty to the pharaoh. If this were the case, most pharaohs, if they came of age in the royal household before their ascension, would have been circumcised.
38. The language of this comment may also be telling.⁶⁵ Senusert I states that he was “appointed,” by Re, to be the “lord of mankind;” the analogue being that the pharaoh is to Re, what the provincial governors are to the pharaoh. In other words, as pharaoh, he was entering into the “royal service” of the supreme god, Re, and thus it would be appropriate for him to be circumcised. That both Senusert and Khnumhotep began their service without being circumcised may indicate that it was considered unacceptable to circumcise boys below a certain age. These competing norms may have led to a lowering of the age of circumcision as can be seen from the evidence of pre-adolescent circumcision dating from some 300 years after the era of Senusert and Khnumhotep (see above, ¶20).
39. It should also be considered that the god, Re, was himself circumcised (as mentioned above). Thus, the pharaoh’s own circumcision may have strengthened his identification with (or as) the deity.⁶⁶ Re, this self-circumcising god (see above), is seen as the creator god and the sun god. Although he is not entering in to service to anyone, it is worth noting that the result of his circumcision – the offspring, as it were, which spring forth from the blood of his circumcision – are two minor gods who enter into “royal” service to Re. Thus, once again there is a connection between circumcision and royal service. (The fact that these god-servants spring forth from the blood, may indicate that blood of

⁶⁵ Here I must rely on the translation.

⁶⁶ See “Was the Pharaoh Divine?” at <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/divinepharaoh.htm>

circumcision held some special significance or was viewed as having generative powers. There is, however, no other extant evidence to indicate this.)

40. A possible reason for circumcision to be a prerequisite or commissioning rite for high-level service may be deduced from the Piye Stela,⁶⁷ which makes an explicit connection between circumcision and purity. Un-circumcision (as well as fish-eating) is described as “an abomination to the palace.” By contrast, the one king who is allowed to enter may do so “because he was clean and did not eat fish.” In this instance, being circumcised is described as being “clean.” Setting aside the problem of fish-eating,⁶⁸ we find that un-circumcision barred one from entering the palace, which, “in Egypt..., was considered to be a holy site – virtually a temple, because the king was regarded as the representative of the gods on earth. Entry into the palace thus required the same kind of purification rites that preceded entry into a temple.”⁶⁹

41. The connection between circumcision and ritual purification returns us to one of the uncertainties in the inscription on the circumcision scene from the mastaba of Ankhmahor (see above, ¶ 17). It is generally presumed from the inscription, “circumcision, the ka priest,” that the ka priest is the person performing the procedure. However, as noted above, this is not clear. It may be that the scene is not a depiction of circumcision by the ka-priest, but circumcision of the ka-priest. Until recently, the scene had always been analyzed independent of its contextual setting within the tomb. However, an analysis of the surrounding images⁷⁰ places this scene in the likely context of a ceremony for initiating young men into the role of ka-priest. Egyptian priests were

⁶⁷ All citations from the Piye Stela are taken from Galpaz-Feller.

⁶⁸ Galpaz-Feller addresses the matter effectively in his article.

⁶⁹ Galpaz-Feller, “The Stela of King Piye,” p. 507

⁷⁰ By Roth, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 62-74.

famously obsessed with ritual purity – a condition inseparable from physical hygiene. Circumcision and shaving of the pubic region would be important aspects of maintaining such a state. As Herodotus observed, Egyptian priests “practice circumcision for the sake of cleanliness, considering it better to be cleanly than comely. The priests shave their whole body every other day, that no lice or other impure thing may adhere to them when they are engaged in the service of the gods.”⁷¹

42. If the notion that un-circumcision precludes a state of ritual purity may be projected backward to earlier Egyptian periods, then the reason for the connection between high-level service and circumcision becomes clear. If one’s service requires contact with royalty or religious functionaries (or, perhaps, contact with their food or property), circumcision would be a necessity in order to avoid ritual contamination. In burial, it would be important that one’s live- or statue-servants be circumcised in order to secure the ritual purity of the tomb from which the *ka* of the deceased would enter the afterlife.

43. Such an understanding of circumcision in ancient Egypt can help resolve the long confounding mystery of what classes among the Egyptians were circumcised. The sometimes conventional-wisdom that it was an elite practice is refuted by the numerous depictions of non-elites who are circumcised.⁷² Yet, there is also no indication that it was universally practiced. Understanding circumcision as a requirement of ritual purity, which could have affected those who were, even indirectly, royal or religious functionaries, explains why its practice cuts across so many strata of ancient Egyptian society.

⁷¹ Herodotus, *Historiae* II.37. <http://www.herodotuswebrite.co.uk/Text/Book2.htm>.

⁷² Including some that I have not mentioned (I need to work that point in earlier)

44. Based on the evidence at hand, there is a sound basis to identify the practice of circumcision among the ancient Egyptians as stemming from a concern for ritual purity, thus making it a prerequisite and, perhaps, a commissioning rite for those coming into royal or religious service in some capacity or another.⁷³ The age at which it was performed seems to have varied from early-adulthood or late adolescence, to as young as five years old, with the younger age possibly becoming the norm in later periods.

⁷³ The work of Ann Macy Roth, in *Egyptian Phyles of the Old Kingdom*, can contribute considerably to the further development of this theory. Unfortunately, I discovered her work only after completing the initial draft of this thesis. Had I discovered it earlier, I would have had an opportunity to more fully develop my argument in light of her work. As it is, it is encouraging that she arrived at a similar conclusion regarding the nature of circumcision in Ancient Egypt. Working independently (and at wildly different levels of sophistication in our analyses), we both determined that circumcision must have been, an initiatory or commissioning rite for entrance into a phyle, or a type of service guild.

Section 3.

Circumcision in Canaan and Phoenicia

45. At about the same time as the Narmer and the Battlefield Palettes were carved in Egypt (see above ¶5 ff.), six metal figurines were wrapped together in a cloth nearly a thousand miles to the northeast, on the Plains of Antioch.⁷⁴ Three of the figures – which date between 3200 and 2800 B.C.E. – are mostly-nude, male warriors; all clearly circumcised. According to the analysis of a urologist who examined the figurines, two of them are depicted as fully circumcised, with the glans fully exposed. In the third figure, the glans is only partially exposed, i.e., he is circumcised, but enough of the foreskin remains to cover the corona (i.e., the ridge at the base of the glans). This partial-exposure should not necessarily be taken as an indication that it was an intentional practice. If the figures are representative, then it is possible that the particular subject had too little skin removed during his circumcision; not an uncommon occurrence.

46. The figures do not, unfortunately, yield a wealth of information about the practice of circumcision in this region and time period other than attesting to its existence. It is worth noting that these figures seem to be presented as warriors. Each male figure bears a spear and what may be either a mace-type weapon, or a scepter. If it is a scepter, this could indicate that the weaponry had a ceremonial function, rather than a practical one. Additionally, each male figure seems to correspond to the three female figures with which they were cached. This ostensible pairing could support a speculative argument

⁷⁴ Braidwood, Robert J., and Braidwood, Linda S., *Excavations in the Plain of Antioch I: The Earlier Assemblages Phases A-J*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 300ff.

that circumcision was related to marriage rituals. However, there is no other evidence to support such a theory.

47. The Antioch figurines were, undeniably, an exciting and intriguing discovery. However, given the extreme limitations of the evidence, they do not support the suggestion that "circumcision traveled from the north to the south, and not the other way around."⁷⁵ After all, the circumcised bodies of Nag-ed-Der in Egypt pre-date the Antioch figurines by at least 700 years. Another key to this argument is the assertion that the robed figure in the Egyptian Battlefield Palette is wearing "garb which is [typical of] Western Asiatics,"⁷⁶ and should therefore be identified as a Syrian. However there is no evidence that the either the garb or the figure is Syrian, and, because he is acting as a captor to the circumcised victims, there is no reason to associate him with them or with circumcision. This evidence, as well as the fact that the figures in the Battlefield and Narmer Palettes bear dorsal-slits, while the Antioch figurines show true circumcision, forestalls any connection that might be made between the two sets of artifacts.

48. It is also significant that the figurines were found at phase G of the Planes of Antioch excavation. The preceding phase, Phase F (ca. 3200), "appears to have been ushered in by a new ethnic element, a people in possession of a technology superior to that of the people of the preceding phases."⁷⁷ Some of the noteworthy influences in phases F & G include Egyptian-style cultural artifacts – made locally, not in Egypt⁷⁸ – indicating lasting cultural migration, as opposed to simple trade. Given the upheaval resulting from the Egyptian wars of unification during that period, we might speculate that certain Egyptian

⁷⁵ Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," p. 476. This is the central thesis of Sasson's article. He does, however, offer it "cautiously."

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 473 n. 3

⁷⁷ Gevirtz, "Circumcision in the Biblical Period," p. 95

⁷⁸ Braidwood & Braidwood, *Excavations in the Plain of Antioch*, p. 516

elements fled the turmoil, perhaps arriving in the region of Syria, thus introducing a new ethnic and cultural element – possibly including some type of circumcision. As was noted above, naturally preserved remains from Nag-ed-Der indicate that full circumcision was, indeed, practiced by Egyptians in the 4th Millennium.

49. While we may speculate about Egyptian influences upon the Syrians of Antioch, the men depicted in the figurines were clearly not Egyptian. As can be seen from their physiognomic similarity to other Syrian figurines,⁷⁹ they were clearly Syrian. We might speculate that the novelty of circumcision among the Syrian natives occasioned the casting of commemorative metal figurines; however, any number of possible explanations could equally substitute. Without further evidence, there is little upon which to build a theory as to the nature of circumcision in the ancient Syrian context, nor do we have any indication as to how common or widespread the practice was in the region at that time.

50. One other significant artifact does provide us with further evidence that circumcision was practiced in the region. It is an ivory carving of what is presumed to be a victory scene, found in the excavation at Meggido (located in modern-day Israel). The scene depicts nude, male prisoners being led before an important figure seated on a throne.



Neither the seated figure nor the prisoners can be conclusively identified. Some have suggested that the seated figure may be Jabin, a Canaanite king, who dominated the

⁷⁹ See Pritchard, *Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pp 161 and 166

Israelites for a time during the period of the Judges.⁸⁰ Others have theorized that the figure is actually an *Egyptianized* King Solomon.⁸¹ Given the Egyptian styling of the chair/throne, there is ample reason to associate the figure with Egypt. If the dating by the excavator is correct – between 1350 and 1150 B.C.E. – then the suggestions of Jabin or Solomon would be anachronistic. . However, Egypt did wage repeated campaigns in the area during this period. It is possible that this scene may be a depiction of the particularly devastating campaign waged in the early 13th Century B.C.E. by Seti I against rebellious chieftains in Canaan.⁸²

51. Equally uncertain is the identity of the circumcised captives portrayed on the Megiddo Ivory. Their physiognomy and beard style are reasonably similar to those of the Antioch figurines, but the gap of 1500 to 2000 years between the two artifacts makes any conclusions we may draw on this evidence highly speculative. The depicted captives may very well be Syrians or Canaanites or Phoenicians of some sort, but they could also be of some proto-Israelite extraction. Whether the proto-Israelites were actually distinct from the Canaanites among whom they lived is a topic of contemporary debate among bible scholars.⁸³ Yet, whatever the case may be, the most that we may conclude from the evidence of the Megiddo ivory and the Antioch figurines is that circumcision was not unknown in the region of Syria and Canaan in the 4th through 2nd Millennia B.C.E. There is no indication from the archaeological record as to how widespread the practice was, and whether it was a normative practice among the peoples of the region.

⁸⁰ See Judges 4:1-3. This connection is suggested by Barry Bandstra, Ph.D. (Professor of Religion at Hope College in Holland, MI) on his website, at http://www.hope.edu/academic/religion/bandstra/RTOT/CH7/CH7_2B.HTM

⁸¹ See Peter James, *Centuries of Darkness*, (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1991), p. 200, cited at <http://www.specialtyinterests.net/alternote.html>.

⁸² See Aharoni, Y., Avi-Yonah, M., Rainey, A. F., and Safrai, Z., *The Macmillan Bible Atlas Completely Revised Third Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 38

⁸³ Neil Silberman and Israel Finkelstein, in *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2002), argue that the proto-Israelites were Canaanites. While their theory has been well received in the academic community, I am not so convinced that I am willing to do away with all circumspection on the matter.

52. The linguistic evidence from the region is equally unhelpful. An examination of four Ugaritic lexicons yielded no shared meanings of any of the roots associated with circumcision, including: מ-ר-ל, ע-ר-ל, ב-ר-ת, ב-ר-כ, and ח-ר-פ⁸⁴

53. The biblical texts, however, may provide us with some indication of which groups in the region did and did not practice circumcision. The most obvious case is that of the Philistines, who are referred to repeatedly as being uncircumcised (Jud. 14:3; I Sam. 14:6, 18:25-27, 31:4). In addition to the Philistines, we learn that the Hivites did not circumcise from the story of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 (Sh'chem's father is Hamor the Hivite).)

54. Only one biblical text seems to refer to circumcision among specific non-Israelite nations, Jeremiah 9:24-25

כד. הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים וְאִם יִהְיֶה וּפְקֻדָּתִי עַל־כָּל־מוֹל בְּעָרְלָהוּ;
כה. עַל־מִצְרַיִם וְעַל־יְהוּדָה וְעַל־אֲדוֹם וְעַל־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן וְעַל־מוֹאָב וְעַל
כָּל־קְצוּצֵי פֶאֶה הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּמִדְבָּר כִּי כָל־הַגּוֹיִם עָרְלִים וְכָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
עָרְלִי־לֵב;

25. Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised [in the foreskin or yet still have a foreskin].
26. Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert that cut the [edges or corners]; for all [the or these] nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

55. A serious ambiguity of meaning in each of these verses makes it unclear whether the texts is identifying these nations – Egypt, Edom, Amon and Moab – as being circumcised or as uncircumcised. As the above translation of verse 25 indicates, מול בְּעָרְלָה (*mul b'orlah*), can mean either, “circumcised in the foreskin,” or “circumcised, yet still having

⁸⁴ The four Ugaritic lexicons consulted were: Segert, Stanislov, *A Basic Grammar of the Ugaritic Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Gordon, Cyrus H., *Ugaritic Manual* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1955); Gordon, Cyrus H., *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1965); and, Gray, John, *The KRT Text in the Literature of Ras Shamra: A Social Myth of Ancient Canaan* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955).

a foreskin.” Equally enigmatic is the question of whether the uncircumcised nations mentioned in verse 26 refers to the nations that are listed, or to the rest of the nations that are not listed.

56. One novel attempt to resolve this problem has been to read verse 25 as a reference to the practice of dorsal-slit circumcision in which, indeed, the person is “circumcised,” yet retains their foreskin.⁸⁵ While the suggestion does resolve the ambiguity of the text, it is based on an erroneous assertion that this type-of partial-circumcision was normative in Egypt (see above, ¶14). In fact, the Egyptians practiced true, circumferential circumcision, and without their example as evidence, this explanation cannot be supported.

57. The fact that this list includes Egypt, a nation that was known to circumcise, is a strong indication that the text should be read as a list of nations that do circumcise “in the foreskin.” If this is the case, then the uncircumcised nations of the second clause of v. 26 - *כל־הגוֹיִם עֲרֻלִים* - *all of the nations are uncircumcised* - must refer to the nations that are not listed.

58. Such a reading puts a most interesting light on the evidence. We know, from the Antioch figurines and the Megiddo ivory, that circumcision was practiced in the region. The Antioch figurines place the oldest such evidence relatively close to the area from which the proto-Israelites emerged (whether we assume that the biblical patriarchs came from Haran, as the bible presents it, or that the proto-Israelites were Canaanites, both regions are close to Antioch, and, of course, Megiddo was in Canaan.) We also know, from biblical texts, that the Philistines and the Hivites – both non-Semitic peoples – did

⁸⁵ See Steiner, Richard, “Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom: Jeremiah (9:24-25) in the Light of Josephus and Jonckheere,” JBL 118:3 (1999), pp. 497-505.

not circumcise. In Jeremiah 9, we find what appears to be a list of nations that circumcised. With the exception of Egypt, those nations – Edom, Ammon, and Moab – were Semitic peoples who, according to the biblical genealogies, trace their ancestry back to the family of Abraham and, thus, the region of Haran (which, again, is relatively proximal to the site of the Antioch figurines). A final text to consider is Exodus 4:24-26, in which Moses' wife Tziporah circumcises her son (see below, ¶64 ff.). For all of its interpretive challenges, this passage clearly portrays this woman who is a Midianite – and therefore is a descendant of Abraham (Gen. 25:2) – as being very familiar with the practice and performance of circumcision.

59. While the evidence is far from a proverbial *smoking gun* (or, *still warm flint knife*, to fit the theme⁸⁶), it certainly is sufficient to suggest that circumcision was a somewhat normative practice in the biblical and pre-biblical periods, among certain Semitic peoples that shared a common ancestry and place of origin.

60. Yet, if this were the case, then why would the biblical figure, Abraham, not have been circumcised? The biblical text points us in the direction of an answer. Although the text first introduces Abram (as he was then called) while he is living with his family in Ur-kasdim, in Mesopotamia (Genesis 11), Genesis 12:1 describes Haran as his birthplace. The obvious solution to this seeming contradiction is that Abram was born in Haran, but his family migrated, temporarily, to Ur-kasdim. If Abram and his family had left Haran before he reached the age of circumcision, there is every reason to suppose that he would not have become circumcised in Ur-kasdim, where circumcision was not practiced (as can be seen from ancient Babylonian representations of uncircumcised men).⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Thanks to Reuven Firestone for this *ban mot* (or *mal mot*, depending on one's taste).

⁸⁷ See Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), fig. 154, *inter alia*.

61. The only other reference to circumcision in the area of Canaan and Phoenicia is a passage from the Histories of Herodotus. Writing in the 5th Century B.C.E., Herodotus identified “the Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine” as being among those peoples who practice circumcision. He states that they “themselves confess that they learnt the custom of the Egyptians.”⁸⁸ By the time of his writing, circumcision would have been a well-established Israelite practice, and the narrative accounts of Israel’s history in Egypt would have become a part of the redacted Torah, or would have at least held a mythic currency among Israel. It is entirely possible that Herodotus was referring to the people of Israel as Phoenicians and Syrians, either out of confusion or out of convention. (A later Greek writer, Theophrastus, clearly refers to Jews as Syrians.⁸⁹) It is also possible that, if Herodotus did indeed visit the area, he may have encountered Samaritans – a circumcising group that attached itself to the same origin story as the Israelites, yet whose membership in that people was disputed. Perhaps in his confusion of their identity, or perhaps because of their particular history, Herodotus simply decided to call them “Phoenicians and Syrians of Palestine.”
62. The question of circumcision in Canaan and Phoenicia remains open. Clearly it was practiced. The evidence from the excavation at the Plains of Antioch gives us reason to hypothesize that it was introduced to the area by Egyptian migrants (see above, ¶ 48); perhaps economic migrants or refugees. But there is enough evidence to suppose that its practice was limited to genealogically distinct groups in the region, and that among those groups were the people who were to become the Israelites. Unfortunately, however, the

⁸⁸ Herodotus, *Histories* II, 104. Translation by George Rawlinson, available online at <http://www.webexms.com/users/paik/lt/Herodotus/Histories/herodotus.html>

⁸⁹ Stern, Menahem, *Greek & Latin Authors on Jews & Judaism With Introductions: Translations & Commentary* (CITY: Lubrecht & Cramer Ltd, 1981), #4

evidence tells us nothing of how it was practice, or what meanings it may have held for its practitioners. While it may help to explain its origin among Israel, the mere fact that it was practiced does not begin to explain the rigorous conventions of Israelite circumcision. In order to understand what other influences may have played upon the formulation of those conventions, a careful examination of the biblical texts is required.

Section 4.

Circumcision in the Biblical Texts

63. A thorough examination of the biblical material reveals an interesting attitude, or focus of concern regarding circumcision. While the Torah clearly presents circumcision on the eighth day as an affirmative precept, the texts give the impression that even more important than obtaining the state of circumcision is avoiding the undesirable state of un-circumcision. The distinction may be two sides of a proverbial coin, but such distinctions are essential in seeking to understand the etiology of the practice, the particular formulations of the relevant texts and the potential meanings circumcision may have held for its practitioners in ancient Israel.⁹⁰
64. This undesirability, and even danger, of un-circumcision is dramatically illustrated in the enigmatic and brief tale of the "bridegroom of blood," found in Exodus 4:24-26

כד. ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשוהו יְהוָה ויבקש הַמִּיתוֹ:
כה. וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צָר וַתִּקְרָת אֶת־עָרְלַת בְּנָהּ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו
וַתֹּאמֶר בִּי חֲתָן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי
כו. וַיִּרְף מִפָּנָיו אֹז אֲמָרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת:

24. And it was on the way, where they spent the night, and YHVH attacked him and sought his death.
25. And Tziporah took a flint-knife and cut the foreskin of her son and touched it to his legs and said 'for you are a bridegroom of blood to me.'
26. And he released him, then she said, 'a bridegroom of blood by circumcision.'

⁹⁰ I wish to acknowledge, at the outset, the challenges to the historicity and chronology of the texts under examination. In my initial examination of the texts, I will consider them within the framework of the history and chronology that they present and within which they operate. I will, however, further on, reevaluate and reapply the evidence of the texts using alternate chronologies based on contemporary theories of the composition and redaction of the texts. I am, as such, approaching the text from two different perspectives: the text as it presents itself and the text as it may have come into being in its current form.

65. There are a number of pronominal ambiguities in this text that make it difficult to determine, at certain points, whether the text is referring to Moses or his son. Who is being attacked? Whose legs does Tzipora touch with the foreskin? Who is the *hatan damim*? In each case the pronouns allow for the possibility that it is either Moses or the son. What is clear is that circumcision, here, functions as an apotropaic device, staving off the potentially lethal night-attack. Moreover, the immediacy of Tziporah's reaction – seizing a flint knife and cutting off the foreskin of her son – gives the impression that the connection between the attack and the lack of circumcision was quite obvious to her. What that connection was, however, is not clear.

66. One compelling notion⁹¹ is that the use of the word *damim* (bloods), rather than *dam* (blood), in v. 26, indicates that Moses was attacked because of the bloodguilt that he bore as a result of killing the Egyptian taskmaster (ex. 2:12), and that the blood of his son's circumcision served as ritual expiation of the sin. Two other suggestions also consider the issue to be that of Moses' bloodguilt, but focus on the connection between circumcision and kinship. "If a man's in laws became his blood avengers at marriage or at the birth of his first child, then *hatan damim* might mean 'in-law protected by blood-vengeance' (cf. Akkadian *hatanu* 'defend')." ⁹² Alternately, the circumcision and designation may have been a means "to block the inheritance of guilt, specifically bloodguilt, from father to son." ⁹³

67. This range of explanations is, of course, based on understanding the meaning of *hatan* as bridegroom, or son-in-law (or some variation thereof). A further connection between the circumcision and the enigmatic designation of *hatan damim* may be seen in

⁹¹ Offered by William Propp, in *Anchor Bible, Exodus 1-18* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 234-237

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 238

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 238. Propp makes clear that this idea is offered as a speculation.

the fact that, in Arabic, the root *ch-t-n* means circumcision.⁹⁴ While this meaning certainly pertains, somehow, to the text, it does not make it any less enigmatic. It simply changes the designation, 'bridegroom of blood(s),' to a description: "circumcised [in/with] blood(s)." It even adds the further complication of an apparent redundancy in the use of both *chatan* and *mulot* (both of which mean circumcision) at the end of verse 26.

68. Thus, the meaning of *chatan* as circumcision does not replace the common rendering of bridegroom; rather, it nuances it, pointing to a connection between circumcision and the status of bridegroom/son-in-law. One suggestion is that, among peoples who practiced circumcision, a marriage without it may have been considered illicit. "The problem in [this passage] may be that Moses was uncircumcised and so illicitly married, for which reason Yahweh sought to kill him."⁹⁵

69. Two other biblical passages reflect this connection between circumcision and marriage: Genesis 34:14, explicitly states that Jacob's daughter, Dina, cannot be given as a wife to Shechem because he is uncircumcised; and in I Samuel 18:25-27, David pays 200 Philistine foreskins as the bride-price for Saul's daughter, Michal. These passages - combined with the dual meaning of *chatan* as son-in-law and circumcision - might be used to argue that ancient near-eastern circumcision, including Israelite circumcision, was a pre-nuptial rite, as is the case among some aboriginal tribes.⁹⁶ While circumcision may, indeed, be a pre-nuptial rite among some aboriginal tribes, this is not sound evidence that such was the case among any ancient near-easterners, including Israel.

⁹⁴ This was first pointed out in connection to this passage by Hans Kosmala in "The 'Bloody Husband,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 12-1 (1962), p. 27.

⁹⁵ Fox, Michael V., "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly 'Etologies,'" *Revue Biblique* 81 (1974), p. 592

⁹⁶ Beidelman, T. O., "Circumcision," Vol. 3, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) pp. 512-513.

70.

The passage from I Samuel provides little to no support for such an argument. On its surface, the provision of Philistine foreskins as a bride-price does not reflect the practice of self-circumcision as a pre-marital rite. It has been suggested,⁹⁷ that the substituting of enemy foreskins for that of oneself is a remnant of an earlier pre-nuptial circumcision rite. Such a suggestion is interesting but without supporting evidence. The struggles to interpret this passage suffer, it seems, from an excessive focus on the foreskin as being independent of the penis. Saul is, almost certainly, not suggesting that David circumcise 100 Philistines. In all likelihood, "Philistine foreskins" refers to the entire phallus, including the foreskin. As can be seen from the Egyptian practice (see above, ¶26 ff.) uncircumcised penises made particularly poignant trophies/body-count-aides for those who did circumcise. In this light, the passage may be more appropriately understood as a reflection of the conventions of counting fallen enemies, rather than an indication that circumcision was a pre-marital rite.

71.

As for the other passages, Genesis 34 unquestionably portrays marriage to an uncircumcised man as unacceptable, and it is possible, though far from explicit, that Exodus 4:24-26 contains the same message. However, neither of these texts portrays pre-nuptial circumcision as a normative practice. The very fact that the all of the Shechemites participate in a mass-circumcision (Gen. 34:24) is clear evidence that it was not seen as a rite to be performed prior to marriage to a specific person. It does, however, point us in the direction of a helpful understanding of the connection between the meaning, son-in-law, of the word *hatan*, and circumcision. This shared meaning should not be seen as an indication that marriage was preceded by the rite of circumcision. Rather, it should be seen as an indication of what type of person is eligible to become a

⁹⁷ I am still searching for the citation of this argument.

son-in-law. That is to say: *who may become a chatan/son-in-law? Only one who is chatan/circumcised.*

72. Genesis 34:14 offers an indication of the attitude behind the restriction of marriage to circumcised men. In striking language, Genesis 34:14 refers to un-circumcision as a *cherpah*, something reproachful or disgraceful.⁹⁸ In this passage, Genesis 34:13-14, we find the "sons of Jacob" explaining to Shechem (who has already raped their sister, Dinah), son of Hamor, why they cannot give their sister to him in marriage:

ג. ויַעֲנוּ בְנֵי-יַעֲקֹב אֶת-שָׁכֶם וְאֶת-חָמוֹר אָבִיו בְּמִרְמָה נִידְּבָרוּ אֲשֶׁר טָמְא
אֶת דִּינָה אֲרוֹתָם:
יד. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיוּם לֹא נוּכָל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְתֵת אֶת-אֲרוֹתֵנוּ לְאִישׁ
אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ עֶרְלָה כִּי-חֲרָפָה הוּא לָנוּ:
טו. אֲדָּבָיִאת נָאֹת לָכֶם אִם תִּהְיוּ כָמוֹנוּ לְהַמְלִל לָכֶם כָּל-זָכָר:
טז. וְנָתַנוּ אֶת-בָּנֹתֵינוּ לָכֶם וְאֶת-בָּנֵיכֶם נִקְחָ-לָנוּ וְיִשְׁבְּנוּ אִתָּכֶם
וְהָיוּ לָעָם אֶחָד:
יז. וְאִם-לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ אֵלֵינוּ לְהַמְלוֹל וְלִקְחוּ אֶת-בָּנֹתֵינוּ וְהָלַכְנוּ:

13. The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah.
14. They said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to a man who has a foreskin; for it is a reproach to us."
15. Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male of you be circumcised.
16. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters to ourselves, and we will dwell with you and become one people.
17. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter, and we will be gone."

73. Although the brothers speak "deceitfully," the deceit has nothing to do with their explanation, but with their intention to use the post-circumcision infirmity of the

⁹⁸ The root, *ch-r-p* in Arabic means to distort, corrupt, or pervert. *Charf*=sharp edge, cutting edge of a sword or knife. (Thanks to R. Firestone for definition.) While this meaning of the root does appear 112 times in *Tanach*, only two of them are in the Torah: Genesis 34:14, and 30:24. The second verse is Rachel's reaction to the birth of Joseph: ותהר ותלד בן ותאמר אסף אלהים את-חרפתי. Oddly, the verse is often rendered as "...God has removed my reproach." The clear meaning is the opposite: "...God has added to my reproach." A simple explanation may be found in Rachel's seemingly strange explanation of the name Joseph, in the next verse: "...God has given me another son." Her additional reproach comes from the fact that Dan and Naftali, both born of Rachel's handmaid, on Rachel's knees (34:3-8) are, legally, her sons. She resorted to surrogacy because she thought she was infertile. In a characteristically pessimistic reaction, Rachel sees the fact that she now has a natural-born son - whose position will be inferior to those of her surrogate son - as an addition to her reproach.

Shechemites as an opportunity to kill all the males of the city (Gen. 34:25-29). The readiness with which their explanation was accepted indicates that the significance (let alone the practice) of circumcision was not a foreign concept to the Shechemites.

74. Furthermore, the passage clearly portrays the giving of a woman of Israel as a wife to an uncircumcised man as an unacceptable act, and a careful reading makes clear that it is not the act of giving that is reproachable; it is the foreskin itself. Consider the verse (34:14): "...we cannot do this thing, to give our sister to a man who has a foreskin, for it is a reproach to us." The final clause states: *ki cherpah hi*⁹⁹ *lanu*, using the 3rd person, singular pronoun, *hi*, to signify the object of reproach. There are only two possible referents for this pronoun: Dina, or foreskin (*orlah*). Since the presence of a foreskin is given as the objection to the marriage, and its removal is proposed as a solution to the objection, the pronoun must refer to the foreskin, not to Dinah. Contextual logic strengthens this reading. In the context of the verses, it would not make sense that it is referring to Dinah as the *cherpah*. Thus, it is not simply the marriage of an Israelite woman to an uncircumcised male that is so objectionable; it is the foreskin itself that is identified as the problem – the *cherpah*.

75. One other possibility that warrants acknowledgment is the possibility that the pronoun is not *hi*, as the Massoretic tradition points it, but, rather, *hu*, as the word is written, in which case the referent of the pronoun would be "a man (who has his foreskin)." This interpretation, too, supports the argument; if it is such a man that is a *cherpah*, it is his foreskin that makes him so.

76. Similarly, we find that, in Joshua 5:2-10, the removal of the foreskin is described as the removal of a reproach – specifically, the reproach of Egypt (*cherpat mitzraim*).

⁹⁹ According to Massoretic *nikkud* (pointing).

- ב. בעת ההיא אמר יהוה אל-יהושע עשה לך חרבות צרים
ושוב מל את בני-ישראל שנית:
ג. ויעש-לו יהושע חרבות צרים וימל את-בני ישראל אל-גבעת הערלות:
ד. וזה הדבר אשר-מל יהושע כל-העם היצא ממצרים הזכרים
כל אנשי המלחמה מתו במדבר בדרך בצאתם ממצרים:
ה. כי-מלים היו כל-העם היצאים וכל-העם הילדים במדבר
בדרך בצאתם ממצרים לא-מלו:
ו. כי ארבעים שנה הלכו בני-ישראל במדבר עד-תום כל-הגוי אנשי
המלחמה היצאים ממצרים אשר לא-שמעו בקול יהוה אשר נשבע
יהוה להם לבנותי הראותם את-הארץ אשר נשבע יהוה לאבותם
לתת לנו ארץ זבת חלב ודבש:
ז. ואת-בניהם חקים תחתם אתם מל יהושע כי-עגלים היו כי
לא-מלו אותם בדרך:
ח. ויהי כאשר-תמו כל-הגוי להמול וישבו תחתם במחנה עד חיותם:
ט. ויאמר יהוה אל-יהושע היום גלותי את-חרפת מצרים מעליכם
ויקרא שם המקום ההוא גלגל עד היום הזה:
י. ויחנו בני-ישראל בגלגל ויעשו את-הפסח בארבעה עשר יום
לחדש בערב בערבות יריחו:
יא. ויאכלו מעבור הארץ ממחרת הפסח מצות וקלוי בעצם היום הזה:

2. At that time the YHVH said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and again circumcise the people of Israel a second time."
3. So Joshua made flint knives, and circumcised the people of Israel at *Gibeath-haaraloth*.
4. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt.
5. Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people that were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised.
6. For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, till all the nation, the men of war that came forth out of Egypt, perished, because they did not hearken to the voice of the YHVH; to them the YHVH swore that he would not let them see the land which the YHVH had sworn to their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey.
7. So it was their children, whom he raised up in their stead, that Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way.
8. When the circumcising of all the nation was done, they remained in their places in the camp till they were healed.
9. And the YHVH said to Joshua, "This day I have banished/rolled away/exposed¹⁰⁰ the reproach [*cherpah*] of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called *Gilgal* to this day.

¹⁰⁰ See below, ¶181, for an explanation of this translation.

10. While the people of Israel were encamped in *Gilgal* they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho.

77. This peculiar phrase about the "reproach of Egypt" may point to an understanding of the most enigmatic element of this passage: the instruction to circumcise a "second time." One theory¹⁰¹ offers that the Israelites, while in Egypt and the wilderness, did not practice full circumcision, but the partial, dorsal-slit form of circumcision (see above, ¶ 5, for a description of this practice). If this were the case, it would explain the need to "circumcise a second time," in order to obtain the desired effects of full circumcision. Such an assertion assumes that this was either a mark of slavery imposed by Egyptians, or that it was simply the normative style of Egyptian circumcision that Israel adopted during their sojourn. However, (as discussed above,) neither of these assumptions is borne out by the evidence from the Egyptian records of their practice.¹⁰²
78. A far more likely explanation is that the "second circumcision" is not referring to the individual experience (as the dorsal-slit argument would have it), but, rather, to the national experience. In other words, the Joshua texts is most likely referring to a second occasion of mass-circumcision in the history of the People of Israel. As will be argued below, the texts offer reasons to suppose that the first such incident of mass-circumcision would have taken place prior to the first Passover, shortly before the exodus from Egypt.
79. Setting the question of the *first circumcision* aside for the moment, it should be considered that *cherpat mitzrayim* - the reproach of Egypt - may have been the imposition of a blanket restriction against circumcision by Israelites. Un-circumcision was

¹⁰¹ See Steiner, "Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom."

¹⁰² Unfortunately, the erroneous assertion that the dorsal-slit was the normative mode of Egyptian circumcision has been promulgated in a leapfrog fashion by numerous authors, including, Sasson, Steiner and others. For the most part, the error dates back to Jonckheere, 1951; an essay which has, by and large, been relied upon far too uncritically.

considered a *cherpah* by the Israelites (as seen in Genesis 34). Furthermore, the fact that it is the circumcision of the Israelites, in Joshua 5:8-9, which affects the removal of *cherpat mitzrayim*, makes it entirely clear that, in this case, the *cherpah* is the un-circumcision. Thus, we may read verse 9 as: "And YHVH said to Joshua, 'this day I have rolled away/exposed the un-circumcision of Egypt from you.'" The implication is that the Israelites did not circumcise while in Egypt, and, in spite of a mass-circumcision prior to the exodus, they reverted to the reproachful neglect of the practice in the wilderness, requiring the second circumcision recounted in Joshua 5.

80. If the circumcision at Gilgal was, in fact, full removal of the foreskin, then the place-name etiology (i.e., Gilgal = the place of "Rolling" away) is warranted: full circumcision would involve just such a "rolling." By contrast, the re-circumcision of a dorsal-slit would not require a physical rolling motion; the detached foreskin would simply fall off.

81. That this "second circumcision" was a full circumcision, involving the exposure of a previously unexposed glans, is also indicated by an anomaly between God's statement to Joshua in verse 9, and the explanation of the place-name. Without question, Gilgal means "rolling," or some variation thereof. The connection between that name and God's words to Joshua is based upon the text's own presentation of the word *galoti* (גלוּתִי) as meaning "I have rolled." While the author of the text clearly needed to connect the words in order to explain the name of the place, the connection is problematic. The appropriate Hebrew for "I have rolled" would be *galalti* (גַּלַּלְתִּי), or *gilgalti* (גִּלְגַּלְתִּי). In all likelihood, the verb rendered as *galoti*, is from the root *g-l-y/h*, meaning, on the one hand, to expose or reveal, and, alternately, to banish or exile. Both meanings fit the text well: circumcision exposes or reveals the glans, and circumcision banished from Israel the

reproach of Egypt. Thus, we might render the word, against the Masoretic tradition, as *giliti* (גִּלִּיתִי), with the *vav* acting as a *yud* (which is not uncommon, as can be seen in the case of Genesis 34:14. See above, ¶ 75). This allusion to exposing the glans is, once again, an indication that the Israelites were in need of full circumcision at Gilgal.

82. Yet, why would Israel have neglected circumcision in Egypt; particularly if it was such a common practice there? It is possible that they would have abandoned it of their own volition, however, it seems at least, if not far more likely, that the Egyptians would may have forbidden them from practicing circumcision. If circumcision in ancient Egypt was connected to cultic or royal service (as suggested above, in Section 2), then the Egyptians may well have wished to forbid the Israelites (who would have brought their practice of circumcision with them) from sharing this distinguishing (and religiously significant) practice. It must be acknowledged, however, that this is speculation, and that there is no clear evidence of such a ban.

83. However one resolves the enigmas of Joshua 5:2-10, the unacceptability of uncircumcision is clear – such a state is reproachful. Another certainty to emerge from the text is the connection between circumcision and the observance of the *pesach*.¹⁰³ The *pesach* of Joshua 5:10 was only the second ever observance of the commemorative *pesach* (*pesach dorot*). The first commemorative *pesach*, according to Numbers 9:1-5, took place on the first anniversary of the exodus from Egypt. The texts do not record another observance (by the circumcision-neglecting generation) until immediately after the mass-circumcision at Gilgal. This text is emphatic in connecting the circumcision at Gilgal to the *pesach* at Gilgal, not only by placing the two events sequentially, but by

¹⁰³ The *pesach*, (Passover), is the lamb which was to be slaughtered and eaten within a single dwelling during a single night (see Ex. 12). In this context, the term *pesach* refers specifically to the sacrificial lamb which was a part of the commemorative observance.

connecting the two even within a single verse: "And the Children of Israel camped at Gilgal and made the *pesach* on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho" (5:10). The name, Gilgal, as verse 9 informs us, signifies it as the place of circumcision, giving verse 10 the effective meaning of: *and the Children of Israel made the Passover at the place of circumcision*. Thus, the two events are presented as actually flowing into each other, as if they were not two separate events, but, rather, two aspects of a single ritual observance. That is to say, the reason for performing the mass circumcision at that particular time seems to have been in order to observe the *pesach* – an observance that could not be undertaken while the Israelite men were still in possession of their reproachful foreskins.

84. This essential connection between circumcision and *pesach* derives from Exodus 12:43-50, where the uncircumcised are forbidden from partaking in the offering (i.e., eating the lamb of the *pesach* offering):

מג. ויאמר יהוה אל-משה ואהרן זאת חקת הפסח כל-בן-נכר לא-יאכל בו.
 מד. וכל-עבד איש מקנות-כסף ומלתה אותו אז יאכל בו.
 מה. תושב ושיכיר לא-יאכל בו.
 מו. בבית אחד יאכל לא-תוציא מן-הבית מן-הבשר חוצה
 ועצם לא תשברו-בו.
 מז. כל-עדת ישראל יעשו אותו.
 מח. וכי-יגור אהדך גר ועשה פסח ליהוה המול לו כל-זכר ואז יקרב
 לעשתו וזהו קאזרח הארץ וכל-ערל לא-יאכל בו.
 מט. תזרח אחת יהיה לאזרח ולגר הגר בתוךכם.
 נ. ויעשו כל-בני ישראל כאשר צוה יהוה את-משה ואת-אהרן כן עשו.

43. And YHVH said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the statute of the Pesach: no son of a stranger may eat of it,
 44. And every male-servant, who is purchased with money, you shall circumcise him that he may eat of it.
 45. A foreigner and a hired servant shall not eat of it.
 46. In a single house it shall be eaten, do not take any of the meat out from the house, and do not break any of its bones.
 47. All of the congregation of Israel shall observe it.

48. And if a sojourner shall dwell with you and would observe the Pesach to YHVH, let him become circumcised, every male, and then he may draw near to observe it, and he shall be as a citizen of the land; but any who are uncircumcised shall not eat of it.
49. There shall be a single law for the citizen and for the sojourner among you.
50. And all of the Children of Israel did as Moses and as Aaron commanded them, so they did.

85. While the fact of the connection between circumcision and Passover may be clear, the reason for it is not. One possible reason for the connection may be derived from a comparison of the Exodus passage with a similar one found in Genesis 17:12-14

יב. ובן-שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים יְמוּל לָכֶם כָּל-זָכָר לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם וְלִיד בֵּית
וּמִקְנֵת-כֶּסֶף מִכָּל בֶּן-זָכָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא מֵאֲרָעָה הוּא:
יג. הַמּוּל יְמוּל וְלִיד בֵּיתָהּ וּמִקְנֵת כֶּסֶף וְהַיֵּתָה בְּרִיתִי בִּבְשָׁרְכֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם:
יד. וְעָרַל זָכָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא יְמוּל אֶת-בָּשָׁר עַרְלָתוֹ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ
הַהִוא מֵעַמִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי הַכָּפָר:

12. And the eight day old shall be circumcised to you, every male throughout the generations, born into the house or purchased with money from any of the sons of strangers whom he is not from your seed
13. You shall surely circumcise him who is born of your house or purchased with money, and my covenant shall be upon your flesh as an eternal covenant
14. And the uncircumcised male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin; this person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

86. Like the passage from Exodus 12, this passage prescribes circumcision for a range of males beyond biological kin. The injunction extends to all males born within a household, and even to males who enter the household as a *miknat-kesef* (a purchased slave). Similarly, in Exodus 12:44, purchased slaves are to be circumcised (and then allowed to participate in the *pesach*).

87. The status of the *miknat-kesef* – who, if circumcised, may partake of the *pesach* - slave stands in contrast to the status of the *ben -nechar* (the foreign-born, lit. the son of a foreigner), who may not eat of the *pesach* (Ex. 12:43). Also excluded are the *toshav* (migrant, or temporary resident), and the *sachir* (the wage-laborer). The *ger* (the

sojourner, or permanent resident-alien), however, may participate in the *pesach* once he is circumcised.¹⁰⁴

88. It may appear, at first, that there are contradictions in this taxonomy of exclusion and inclusion. The consistent requirement of circumcision is clear, but is not the *ger*, by definition, also a *ben-nechar*? The text acknowledges and resolves this contradiction in two ways: firstly, by providing the *ger* who circumcises with a new and distinct status, essentially making him a naturalized citizen of the land (Ex. 12:48); and, secondly, by recognizing - with the reiterating final clause of verse 48 - that not all resident-alien will circumcise. Additionally, the text points to a qualitative difference between the *ger* and the *ben-nachar*. The text speaks of the *ger* who "dwelling among" Israel and is desirous of participating in the *pesach*. By contrast, we may presume, the *ben-nachar* is a foreigner who dwells apart from and is not integrated with Israel. (It is worth noting, as well, that although Genesis 17:12 makes mention of the foreign-born, it does not instruct his circumcision; rather it instructs the circumcision of those purchased from the foreign-born.) The same contrast holds between the other classes of individuals discussed in the text, purchased slaves and wage-laborers. Unlike the wage-laborer, the purchased slave is an integrated, essentially permanent part of the household.¹⁰⁵

89. Circumcision emerges, therefore, as a practice that is reserved for and required of all permanent members of the community. Whether membership in the community occurs through birth, acquisition, or voluntary participation, circumcision is a central aspect of that membership (for males). The consequence for failure to establish or ratify

¹⁰⁴ As an aside For the non-Hebrew speaker, the classifications of people in this section are: *miknat-kesef* (a purchased slave), *ben-nechar* (the foreign-born, lit. the son of a foreigner), the *toshav* (migrant, or temporary resident), the *sachir* (the wage-laborer), The *ger* (the sojourner, or permanent resident-alien)

¹⁰⁵ See Dexter E. Callender, Jr., "Servants of God(s) and Servants of Kings in Israel and the Ancient Near East," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 77-78

membership through circumcision is the most serious consequence available short of death: *karet* (exile or a kind of excommunication or excision from the community). The text reads *nikhreta hanefesh ha-hi me-ameha* – that person shall be cut off from his people (not from his God, but from his people). The failure to cut the sign of membership into one's flesh leads to the consequence of being cut off from one's people, or, to phrase it differently, neglecting the excision of the foreskin leads to excision from the community.

90. The connection between circumcision and membership make it a particularly appropriate prerequisite for participation in the *pesach*. *Pesach*, unlike the other two pilgrimage festivals, *Sukkot* and *Shavuot*, is highly particularistic. At most, *Sukkot* and *Shavuot* have only weak historical/particularistic elements, being primarily harvest festivals that are universal in nature. By contrast, *Pesach* is the quintessential particularistic festival commemorating the seminal event of national identity formation. The overwhelming focus of the festival is the creation of and membership in the People of Israel. In the case of this national festival of self-definition, there could be no participation by those who were not a part of the nation or who had not permanently connected themselves to the community through the physical act of circumcision.

91. And yet, the extension of circumcision to non-lineal members (i.e., non-biological) within the community seems contrary to the focus on fertility and lineal kinship that is so pronounced in Genesis 17:1-10

א. ויהי אברהם בן-תשעים שנה ותשע שנים נראה יהוה אל-אברהם ויאמר
אליו אני-אל שדי התחלד לפני והנה תמים:
ב. ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך וארבה אותך במאד מאד:
ג. ויפל אברהם על-פניו וידבר אתו אלהים לאמר:
ד. אני הנה בריתי אתך והיית לאב המון גוים:
ה. ולא יקרא עוד את-שםך אברהם והיה שםך אברהם כי אב-המון

גוים ונתתיה:
 ו. והפנתי אתך בממד מאד ונתתיה לגוים ומלכים ממד נא:
 ז. והקמתי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריך לדורותם לברית
 עולם להיות לך לאלהים ולזרעך אחריך:
 ח. ונתתי לך ולזרעך אחריך את ארץ מגרד את כל ארץ פנעו לארצות
 עולם וחייתי להם לאלהים:
 ט. ויאמר אלהים אל אברהם ואתה את בריתי תשמר אתה וזרעך
 אחריך לדורותם:
 י. זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריך המול לכם כל זכר:

1. And when Abram was ninety nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be perfect.
2. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.
3. And Abram fell on his face; and God talked with him, saying,
4. As for me, behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.
5. Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made you.
6. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you.
7. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you, and to your seed after you.
8. And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land where you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.
9. And God said to Abraham, You shall keep my covenant therefore, you, and your seed after you in their generations.
10. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you; every male child among you shall be circumcised.

92. This section's refrain of the promise of great increase in peoplehood and being the father of many nations is coupled with an equally repetitive focus on fertility and biological kinship, i.e., "seed." This aspect of the text has been used to argue that circumcision was, at its core, a fertility rite, and that it also served as a sign or a means of establishing the biological kinship of one's progeny.¹⁰⁶ However, the fact that both

¹⁰⁶ See Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.162-173; and Hoffman, Lawrence A., *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 38-41.

Genesis 17:12-13, and Exodus 12:44-48 prescribe circumcision (and extend membership within the community) for those who are not biological kin seriously contradicts this theory. The Israelites certainly would not have wanted to increase the fertility of the resident-aliens among them, nor, given such a focus on biological kinship, would they have wanted to risk the confusion of kin with slaves and resident-aliens.

93. An explanation for this seeming contradiction begins to emerge when we consider the central role played by the Priestly Source (hereafter referred to as "P")¹⁰⁷ in formulating the majority (though certainly not all) of the biblical texts relating to circumcision. For the priests, the conventions of ritual purity were of paramount importance; failure to maintain ritual purity would render a priest unfit for service. There can be little doubt that the priestly obsession with the conventions of ritual purity was a defining factor in the priestly attitude toward and insistence upon circumcision.

94. The most explicit biblical connection between circumcision and ritual purity is found in Isaiah 52:1

א. עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי לְבָשִׁי עֲנֹךְ צִיּוֹן לְבָשִׁי בְּגָדֵי תִפְאָרֶתְךָ יִירוּשָׁלַם עִיר הַקֹּדֶשׁ
כִּי לֹא יוֹסִיף יְבֹא-בָךְ עוֹד עָרֵל וְטָמֵא:

1. Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for [he] shall no more come into you again uncircumcised and unclean.

95. The connection may also be seen extra-biblically. The Arabic root *t-h-r* connotes purity, but sometimes, in the active form, this purifying includes circumcision ("ṭahhāra waldahu," - "he purified his son through circumcision").¹⁰⁸ Similarly, in ancient Egypt, the

¹⁰⁷ General references to P (the Priestly Source) should be considered to include any priestly contributor to the texts, including, importantly, the priestly redactor(s). Thus, my use of the term "P" should be construed as broadly as possible unless specified otherwise.

¹⁰⁸ Thanks to Reuven Firestone for clarification. See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863), p. 1887, col. 1.

uncleanliness of the foreskin rendered one unfit to enter a palace or a temple (see above, ¶40).

96. In addition to this evidence, there is a simple, physiological reason to identify ritual purity as one of the central concerns behind the absolute unacceptability of possessing a foreskin. One of the most characteristic features of an uncircumcised penis is the smegma that builds up between the foreskin and the glans penis. This thick, cheesy and pungent substance, which accumulates continuously, sometimes building up to a degree such that it emerges from the tip of the foreskin, would likely have been categorized by the Priestly source as a *zav* (a running issue). The “flesh” from which a *zav* flows (see Lev. 15:2-3) is generally regarded as referring to the genitals. However, because it is not explicit, and because, smegma does not, strictly speaking, flow, as the word *zav* implies,¹⁰⁹ it could be argued that smegma would not fit into the category. It clearly does not fit into the category of *tzara'at*, a condition of the skin itself. One could argue that it would have been categorized as something other than a *zav*, but, because of circumcision, there was no need to address the matter in the purity codes.

97. However smegma would have been categorized, it would, undoubtedly, have been an impurity bearing the same implications as that of a *zav*, which renders its bearer *tameh* - impure - for seven days. Such certainty can be derived from the fact that smegma - unlike a seminal emission, which only renders one impure until evening (Lev. 15:16) - is an involuntary issue, and “there... seems to be [in the purity codes] an association between controllability and power to contaminate.”¹¹⁰ In this regard, smegma is far more

¹⁰⁹ The root ז-ר-ב, or ב-ז-ב (both constructed from the bi-lateral root, ז-ב) is generally used to connote flowing or running, and is the word used to describe the flowing of milk and honey that is to be found in the land (Ex.3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3)

¹¹⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, p. 187

comparable to menstrual discharge than to semen. Whereas the impurity resulting from a controlled discharge (such as a seminal emission) is communicable to only a single degree (i.e., only to the person or object with which the subject comes into direct contact), the impurity resulting from an uncontrollable discharge (such as menstruation or a running issue), is communicable to a second degree. That is to say, the impurity is not only communicated by direct contact, but by coming into contact with any object with which the impure subject has come into contact. Furthermore, whereas the impurity of a controlled discharge lasts only until evening, the impurity of an uncontrolled discharge – along with its high degree of contagiousness – lasts for a full seven days, abating only on the eighth day.¹¹¹

98. Thus, however the priestly codifier might have categorized one whose foreskin was harboring smegma, such a person would have borne a highly communicable type of ritual impurity, which would have been a threat to the ritual functioning of the community. Unlike menstruation, which is temporary and predictable, an uncircumcised penis produces (and contains) smegma constantly and in spite of the most fastidious hygienic regimen. As a result, an uncircumcised male is, by definition ritually impure and his impurity is highly communicable. With this in mind, it is understandable why Genesis 17:12-13 is so clear that every male of the household must be circumcised. Even if a person, such as a male slave, is not participating in the ritual life of the household, he has the potential to render all other members of the house ritually impure, and, thus, unfit to conduct or participate in the religious life of the household. For this reason – the extreme communicability of the impurity of un-circumcision – it was essential to the Priestly source that circumcision be universally and fastidiously observed among all of Israel.

¹¹¹ The abatement on the 8th day is, as I suggest below (see ¶150) directly related to assigning *berit mila* to the 8th day of life.

99. One might argue that the texts contradict this theory. After all, according to Joshua 5, the Israelites did not circumcise in the wilderness, yet, according to the Torah, they conducted their ritual life unhindered by such impurity. Operating within the narrative and chronology presented by the texts (a limitation that will be set aside below), there are a number of possible responses. This may simply be an un-reconcilable contradiction, which would explain the silence of the Torah on the failure of the people to circumcise in the wilderness. It is also possible that the centralization of sacrifice in the wilderness enabled the priests (who, having been of the generation of the exodus would have been circumcised) to maintain greater safeguards against contact with uncircumcised Israelites. With the decentralization of sacrifice that followed the entry into the land, such safeguards would have been more difficult to maintain, thus circumcision would need to become a universal Israelite practice.

100. Although the concern for ritual purity played a central role in the priestly conventions of circumcision, *P* did not explicitly present it as such. Instead, it seems to have cast circumcision within a theological framework having a broader relevance to those Israelites who were not so concerned with the strictures of ritual purity. Yet, recognizing the underlying concern of *P* is essential to understanding the theological framework and constructs of meaning within which *P* (and, specifically, the Priestly Redactor – *R*) ultimately placed the practice of Israelite circumcision.

101. Consider God's enigmatic introductory instruction to Abraham in Genesis 17:1

והיה לפני ה' תמים - Walk before me and be *tamim*

102. *Tamim*, may be rendered as "perfect," or "blameless," and is often understood as relating to one's moral or spiritual state. Alternatively, it is sometimes rendered as

"whole," which conforms to a Midrashic explanation that man's form is actually incomplete until he has been circumcised.¹¹² However, the most common usage of the word, particularly in the Priestly texts, is to describe an animal that is fit for ritual use. Thus, without obviating the other meanings of the word, we might understand it as including an instruction for Abraham to become ritually fit; in order to do so, he had to become circumcised. After becoming fit for divine service (by becoming circumcised), Abraham enters a significant new phase of his relationship with God. Only after circumcision does God begin to fulfill the repeated promises of land and progeny.¹¹³ It is also immediately after the circumcision that God regards Abraham as a partner worthy of consultation (or notification) in the matter of Sodom and Gemorrah (Gen. 18:17). And, of course, it is in the same matter that Abraham enters into his remarkable bargaining episode with God. Even without these last two examples, the fact that Abraham must be circumcised prior to the conception of Isaac is enough to firmly establish the connection between circumcision and becoming fit for divine service. Abraham's role, after all, was not simply to establish a covenant with God, but to pass on that covenant. In this regard, the divine service executed by Abraham was the act of having a child to carry on the covenant. Ishmael was not fit for this role, in part for reasons of kinship but from the perspective of the Priestly Source, because he had not yet become fit for divine service and ratified the covenant through circumcision.

103. One might object to this argument by noting that, prior to the circumcision, in Genesis 15, not only does God enact a covenant with (then) Abram, but Abram also conducts a sacrifice for which his foreskin would have made him unfit.

¹¹² Bereshit Rabbah, 46:1, 4

¹¹³ On the matter of land: there is the removal of Sodom, a significant military power; the grant and the covenant made with Avimelech (Gen. 20:15 and 21:22-34); and the land purchase in Hebron (Gen 23).

ט. ויאמר אליו קחה לי עגלה משלשית ועז משלשית ואיל משלש ותר וגזל:
 י. ויקח לו את כל אלה ויבית אתם בתוך ויתן איש בותר לקראת רעהו
 ואת הצפור לא בתר:
 יא. ויך העיט על הפגרים וישב אתם אבנם:
 יב. ויהי השמש לבוא ותרדמה נפלה על אבנם והנה אימה חשכה
 גדלה נפלת עליה:
 יג. ויאמר לאבנם ידע תדע כי יגר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם
 ועבדים וענו אתם ארבע מאות שנה:
 יד. וגם את הגוי אשר יעבדו דן אנכי ואחריו יצאו ברכש גדול:
 טו. ואתה תבוא אל אבותיך בשלום תקבר בשיבה טובה:
 טז. ודור רביעי ישבו בה כי לא שלם עון האמרי עד הנה:
 יז. ויהי השמש באה ונלקטה הנה והנה תנור עשן ולפיד אש
 אשר עבר בין הגזרים האלה:
 יח. ביום ההוא כרת יהנה את אבנם ברית לאמר לזרעך נתתי
 את הארץ הזאת מנהר מצרים עד הנהר הגדל נהר פרת:

9. [God] said to [Abram], "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."
10. And he brought him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.
11. And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.
12. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him.
13. Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years;
14. But I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.
15. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.
16. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."
17. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.
18. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

104. In fact, however, Abram does not conduct an actual sacrifice; he simply cuts the animals in half and lays them out in an arrangement (15:10). When fire does eventually *come into play*, so to speak, it is not from Abraham, but from a supernatural source (15:17). Furthermore, unlike in a sacrifice, the fire (or, more appropriately, the furnace – *tanur*) does not consume the animals; it merely passes between the divided carcasses.

Finally, the covenant that is established in this chapter is markedly one sided - God is the only party promising anything. In contrast language of partnership that is found in the covenant of Genesis 17, where it is emphasized repeatedly that the covenant is between God and Abraham (and his progeny), this covenant seems quite unilateral. Even the use of the direct object, *et*, in 15:18 makes it seem as though God is establishing this covenant not with Abram, but to Abraham. While it is true that *et* sometimes serves as a multi-functional preposition (presumably in place of *im*, in this case), its use here adds to the sense that this is not an expression of partnership.

105. Following ancient near-eastern parallels,¹¹⁴ we might suppose that the passing of the furnace between the animals served as a ratification of the covenant that is established here, by God. However, there are several reasons to reject any notion that the occurrence was a ratification of the covenant. Firstly, the furnace that passes between the carcasses is not identified as or representative of God. Furthermore, the text places the verse about the establishment of the covenant after the ritual. If the ritual was to ratify the covenant, then we could reasonably expect the statement of the covenant to precede the ritual as is the case in chapter 17. The text also is careful to demarcate the ritual from the statement of covenant by opening verse 15:18 with the disjunctive clause "On that day." There is no conjunctive *vav*, and no indication that the covenant is connected to the ritual. However one renders the phrase, the unilateralism stands in sharp contrast to the. In essence, the covenant of Genesis 15:18 appears as a contract that has been written but not signed and notarized. Its most significant function seems to be as an elaborate means of placating the increasingly skeptical Abram (15:8).

¹¹⁴ For examples, see, *inter alia*, Lendquist, John M., "Temple Covenant, and Law in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament," in Avraham Gileadi ed., *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 293-305.

106. Thus, in Genesis 15, we find a non-sacrifice, and the unilateral establishment of an un-ratified covenant. It is not until chapter 17, when Abram is transformed, in name, in body, and in status, that he becomes *tamim*, and enters fully in to divine service.

107. The connection between *tamim* and circumcision is also useful in understanding the uses of metaphorical un-circumcision in the bible. Un-circumcision appears as a metaphorical description of lips (Ex. 6:12, 30), ears (Jer. 6:10), hearts (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4, 9:25; and Ezek. 44:7, 9), and fruit trees (Lev. 19:23). Although it is generally regarded as such, metaphoric un-circumcision does not indicate that the organ in question is not functioning properly.¹¹⁵ Organs that are uncircumcised – whether literally or metaphorically – function just fine. Abraham's literally uncircumcised penis is capable of fulfilling its procreative function in the case of Ishmael (Gen. 16). Moses' metaphorically uncircumcised lips do not impede his direct communication with the Hebrew slaves in Exodus 2:13, nor with Pharaoh or any other person. Uncircumcised ears are not deaf; uncircumcised hearts are not stones; and uncircumcised fruit is entirely edible. Metaphorical (as well as literal) uncircumcision is not a matter of proper functioning; rather it is a matter of the purpose for which the thing functions. Uncircumcised organs can function in a physiological sense, but they cannot function in the sacred or spiritual sense. Thus, uncircumcised ears are not deaf, but they cannot hear the truth of God. Uncircumcised hearts are not stones, but they cannot feel the zeal of dedication to God's purposes. Uncircumcised lips are not mute or stuttering, but they cannot effectively deliver the message of God. Just as Abraham literal circumcision enabled him to become *tamim* - a state which, for animals, indicates eligibility for use in

¹¹⁵ Gevirtz, "Circumcision in the Biblical Period," p. 100, *inter alia*.

the service of God - so too does metaphorical circumcision make its object ready and fit for service of God.

108. This principle is clearly at work in Leviticus 19:23-25, in the regulation known as *orlat eitzim* (lit. the foreskin of the trees), which proscribes the use of the first three year's produce from fruit trees:

כג. וְכִי־תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ וְטַעַמְתֶּם כָּל־עֵץ מֵאֲכָל נֶעְרַלְתֶּם עֲרַלְתּוֹ אֶת־פְּרִיֹו

שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים יִהְיֶה לָכֶם עֲרָלִים לֹא יֵאָכֵל:

כד. וּבִשְׁנָה הַרְבִּיעִית יִהְיֶה כָּל־פְּרִיֹו קֹדֶשׁ חִלּוּלִים לַיהוָה:

כה. וּבִשְׁנָה הַחֲמִישִׁית וְהָאֲכָלוּ אֶת־פְּרִיֹו לְהוֹסִיף לָכֶם תְּבוּאָתוֹ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

23. When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall reckon its foreskin as foreskin; its fruit of three years; it shall be foreskins to you, do not eat it.

24. And in the fourth year all their fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD.

25. But in the fifth year you may eat of their fruit, that they may yield more richly for you: I am the LORD your God.

109. This text is usually read metaphorically, with the "[t]he fruit tree in the first three years [being] regarded as a male infant during his first eight days, i.e., as unconsecrated."¹¹⁶ The argument has been made, however, that the metaphor should be read in the opposite direction.¹¹⁷ As the argument goes, the text is not using male circumcision as a metaphor for the circumcision of fruit trees. Rather, it is using the sound horticultural practice of "circumcising," i.e., pruning, young fruit trees in order to increase their subsequent yield, as a metaphor for circumcising male Israelites in order to increase their subsequent yield:

[This] symbolic equation of an uncircumcised male and a young fruit tree rests on two, and possibly three, associations. The fruit of a juvenile tree is proscribed like the foreskin of the male organ. Furthermore, a male who is uncircumcised and not part of the covenantal community is infertile like an immature fruit tree. Finally, this symbolic equation may draw part of its plausibility from an analogy between circumcision and pruning. Cutting away the foreskin is like pruning a fruit tree. Both acts of cutting remove unwanted excess and both increase the desired yield.

¹¹⁶ Hertz, J. H., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London:Soncino, 1968) p 503, citing A. Dillman.

¹¹⁷ See Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, p. 149-154

One might say that when Israelites circumcise their male children, they are pruning the fruit trees of God.¹¹⁸

110. This construct, which is based largely on comparisons with *primitive* ritual circumcision practices, suggests that Israelite circumcision is to be viewed primarily as a fertility rite, intended to bring about the covenantal promise of fecundity found in Genesis 17:2, 5 and 16. While both texts do contain undeniable promises of fertility, the premise upon which this analysis is built suffers from a fundamental error. The construct is based upon the premise that this text is an instruction to circumcision, i.e., prune, young fruit trees (a practice that will increase their subsequent yield), and that this instruction serves as the model for circumcising male children (in order to increase their subsequent yield).
111. The essential problem with this construct is that Leviticus 19:23-25 does not instruct the circumcision of fruit trees during their first three years. Rather, it is a proscription of the yield of fruit trees during their first three years. This proscribed fruit is metaphorically identified as "foreskin of the trees." The word for circumcision, *mem-vav-lamed*, is notably absent from the passage. By contrast, the word for foreskin, *orlah*, appears three times in verse 23, with the forceful instruction: "don't eat it." The concern of the priestly author of this passage is not the positive act of circumcision; rather, it is the proscription of foreskins; even when they are metaphorical.
112. One might argue that circumcising/pruning such trees would be the logical way of dealing with them, thus bringing circumcision into the construct even though it does not appear in the text. This is true, but entirely incidental to the force of the text. The text, situated in the middle of the Holiness Code is not concerned with horticultural advice, but

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p 152

with establishing modes of behavior that establish and protect the level of sanctity in the community.

113. It is this aspect of the text – its role in creating a “holy” community - which connects it to the notion that the foreskin is an obstruction to achieving a “spiritual”/ritual state that is appropriate for entering into divine service. The connection is unmistakable in light of verse 24, which designates the yield of the fourth year (of the fruit tree) as “an offering of praise to God.” For *P*, first fruits belong to God – whether they come from the field (Lev. 23:10) or from living beings (Ex. 13:2). But things that are given as offerings to God must also be *tamim*, which, in the context of offerings, means without blemish. During its first three years a fruit tree will, indeed, bear fruit, but what fruit it does bear “during this period, it is often defective.”¹¹⁹ Not only is the yield of juvenile fruit trees small, but the fruit itself is often small, and sometimes takes on an abnormal shape, rendering it unfit for the “offering of praise to God.” But, by removing the foreskin of the tree – *orlat eitzim* – the subsequent yield becomes *tamim* (as did Abraham following the removal of his foreskin) and fit for divine service. Thus, once again, the presence of a metaphoric foreskin does not indicate a failure to function, but, rather, an inability to function sacredly.

114. This distinction, between simply functioning, on the one hand, and functioning in the service of God seems to be the theological centerpiece of *P*’s biblical construct of circumcision. *P* is motivated by an urgent need to expunge all foreskins from the religious community, whether they are real or metaphorical, and whether they belong to biological members of the community or to integrated foreigners. The foreskin poses a serious danger to the system of ritual purity, and by consequence, to the ability of the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p 150

priests to fulfill their priestly functions. But in the broader theological sense, the presence of a foreskin impedes one's ability to serve God. By removing it, a male Israelite is able to achieve a state of physical and metaphysical readiness for such service – the readiness of being *tamim*. For animals, such a state indicates readiness to become an offering to God. For Israelites, becoming *tamim* indicates a readiness to enter into divine service and covenantal partnership with the God.

Section 5.

P and non-P: Circumcision for One and All

115. In the end, the Priestly Redactor had the privilege to foreground its particular construct of circumcision. But no mistake should be made; its construct of circumcision is not the only one to be found in the biblical texts. The non-priestly circumcision texts certainly comprise a smaller and less-formulaic (in that they are non didactic, and often consist of passing references to circumcision or un-circumcision) set of texts than those of *P*. Nonetheless, these texts provide some important clues as to the nature and role of circumcision among non-priestly elements of Israel.
116. Most of the non-*P* circumcision texts are to be found in Deuteronomistic sources. For the Deuteronomistic Historian (DH), the word "uncircumcised"¹²⁰ is an epithet or an insult to be used in reference to Philistines.¹²¹ The foreskin is, for DH, essentially the defining feature of the Philistines. This makes them a particularly powerful trophy (or body-counting device) when they are required of David as a bride-price for Saul's daughter, Michal (I Sam. 18).
117. In addition to this use, Deuteronomy and Jeremiah make use of the metaphor of uncircumcised hearts (Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4, 9:25) and ears (Jer. 6:10). Of course, there are priestly texts that also make use of circumcision as a metaphor (as discussed above, ¶105 ff.): Exodus 6:12 and 30 speaks of uncircumcised lips; Leviticus 19:23-25 speaks of uncircumcised fruit trees; and Leviticus 26:41 and Ezekiel 44:7 and 9 speak of

¹²⁰ The word for uncircumcised is the same as the word for foreskin. Thus, it might be more accurately rendered "*foreskined*," as in "having a foreskin."

¹²¹ See Jud. 14:3, 15:18; I Sam. 14:6, 17:26, 36, 31:4; II Sam. 1:20, 3:14.

uncircumcised hearts. However, metaphoric un-circumcision in *P* texts differs in a subtle way from similar uses in *D* texts. While both sources speak of metaphoric foreskins, it is only *D* that speaks of circumcising such foreskins. The verb, כָּרַח, to circumcise, is featured prominently in the *D* texts; making clear that the proper way to deal with something that is uncircumcised, is to circumcise it. By contrast, the same verb is notably absent from those *P* texts that speak of metaphoric un-circumcision). For *D*, the focus is on the importance of the positive action of circumcising. But for *P*, the focus is on the problem presented by the presence of a foreskin. The most dramatic example of this difference is in Leviticus 26:41, where the solution to uncircumcised hearts is not to circumcise them, but to humble them (יִכַּנּוּ - *yi-ka-na*).

118. The only *D* text featuring metaphoric uncircumcision that does not contain some form of the verb *to circumcise*, is the single instance of "uncircumcised ears" (Jer. 6:10). The passage does, however, make use of the word *cherpah*, reproach. As discussed above (§72), this word is used in Genesis 34 to refer, specifically, to the foreskin or to one who has a foreskin.

119. This, of course, leads to the question of the source of the circumcision story found in Genesis 34. As noted in the earlier discussion of that chapter, the word *cherpah* appears in only one other place in Torah, yet it enjoys considerable currency throughout other biblical texts. This may be an indication that the word did not come into currency until the late-biblical period. However, a thorough examination of the relevant texts would be required to evaluate such a hypothesis. The negative portrayal of Levy, from whose tribe the priesthood is derived, in chapter 34 makes it clear that the text is non-*P*. While the

chapter is generally regarded as belonging to the *J* (Jawistic or Yahwistic) Source,¹²² it also strongly reflects certain concerns of the Deuteronomist. If its general assignment to *J* is correct, it may be that *D*, at some point, also set its hand to it. The aspects that point to *D* include the concern over exclusive possession of the land, as well as the strong polemic against intermarrying with or forming covenants with the inhabitants of the land.¹²³ This polemic against intermarrying with "the uncircumcised" is also found in *D*'s story of Samson (Jud. 14:3), where Samson's parents discourage him from taking "a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines." It is also a theme in the so-called "bridegroom of blood" episode (Ex. 4:24-26) as discussed earlier (see. p. X).

120. What emerges from these texts is that circumcision, for non-*P* (which may consist of *D*, alone, or *D* together with *J*), is an important means of demarcating between acceptable lines of connection, and those that are not acceptable. The "other" is defined through his un-circumcision, as in the case of the Philistines, as well as identified through it, as in the case of the Shechemites.
121. Unfortunately, the sparse evidence from the non-*P* texts severely limits our understanding of non-*P*'s views of circumcision. However, there can be no doubt that a strong circumcision tradition existed among Israel apart from and prior to the priestly tradition. In light of this other tradition, the Priestly Redactor (*R*) must have faced a considerable challenge of incorporating the existing tradition, but recasting it to fit its own ideology of circumcision. By looking at the places where the hand of *R* is most evident, we may glean further clues as to what the non-*P* tradition may have looked like.

¹²² Speiser, E. A., *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 267

¹²³ See, in particular, Deut. 7:2-3

122. As discussed above, there is a conflict between the focus on fertility and lineal kinship, found in Gen. 17:2-10, and the extension of circumcision to all males, even non-kin, within the household found in vv. 11-14. This conflict is an important sign that this chapter is not the exclusive work of the *P*. The fact that it is presumed to be so¹²⁴ is indicative of the extreme care and skill that *R* applied to this section.

123. Yet, with recognition of the different circumcision traditions, the work of *R* becomes somewhat more visible. The task of the redactor was not merely to advance its particular ideology or version of the texts. *R* had to incorporate and integrate disparate traditions, satisfying their indomitable place in the popular imagination, yet, controlling them and shaping them into theologically and ideologically acceptable forms. One striking sign of *R*'s effort in this regard is found in the opening verses of Gen. 17, where three different names of God appear in short order: *YHVH*, *El-Shaddai*, and *Elohim*. The only other place in Torah where this occurs is in Exodus 6:2-3, another text that powerfully defined God's covenantal relationship with the Children of Israel and the promise of land that is a part of that relationship. In both of these sections, *R* seems to be making an very blunt effort to make clear that the respective texts are speaking to all of the disparate factions within Israel, making clear that, no matter how they refer to their God, that God is one and the same and speaking to all of Israel.

124. Taking the concerns of *P*, *R* and non-*P* into consideration, I would suggest the following division of Genesis 17:1-14 --

- ➔ 17:1 is entirely the hand of *R*. It offers the reader the divine names of both *YHVH* and *El-Shaddai*. Even more tellingly, it also frames the instruction to circumcise as a means of becoming *tamim* – a distinctly priestly concern, which may have become strongly associated with circumcision during the period of the Priestly Redactor

¹²⁴ Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, p. 126, offers the broad claim: "This entire chapter is from the hand of *P*."

→ 17:2-9 is from an earlier non-*P* tradition, and is marked by a focus on fruitfulness (i.e., biological kinship) and the promise of inheriting the land. Non-*P* clearly had a tradition of a divine covenant containing these promises, but this section does not refer to circumcision, leaving it unclear whether or not circumcision was an element of this covenant. It is also possible that this section may be broken down further, identifying specific strains of non-*P*. In particular, v. 3 may belong to a distinct tradition, possibly *E* (the Elohist), or even *R*.

→ 17:10-14 is from *R*. Verse 10 is a remarkable transitional verse that makes the seam between the two sections almost invisible. The beginning of the verse is an unnecessary repetition of verse 9, but it serves to blend the themes and language of non-*P* with the central themes of the *P* and *R*: the connection between circumcision and covenant, and the insistence upon circumcising all males within the household (as the verse ends with "circumcise to yourselves every male"). Verse 11 introduces the notion of circumcision as an 'ot – sign – of the covenant, which connects it to other priestly texts featuring "signs" of covenant.¹²⁵ Verses 12 and 13 articulate *P/R*'s concern for and insistence upon circumcising all males, even non-Israelites, culminating, in verse 14, with the dire consequences of *karet* for failing to do so.

א. ויהי אברהם בן תשעים שנה ותשע שנים נראה ויהי
אל אברהם ואמר אליו אלהי שדי חתמלך לפני נתינת תמים
ב. ואמנה בריתי ביני ובינך ואצפה אותך במאד מאד
ג. ויפל אברהם על פניו וידבר אתו אלהים לאמר
ד. אני הנה בריתי אתך והיית לאב המון גוים
ה. ולא יקרא עוד את שמך אברהם ויהי שמך אברהם כי
אברהם המון גוים ותתמיד
ו. והקרתי אותך במאד מאד ותתמיד לגוים ומלכים מקדש נצא
ז. ונקמתי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין נרצע אחרך לדורות לבית
עולם להיות לך לאלהים ולנרצע אחרך
ח. ונתתי לך ולנרצע אחרך את ארץ מגרד את כל ארץ כנען לאחוזת
עולם והייתי להם לאלהים
ט. ואמר אלהים אל אברהם ואמנה את בריתי תשמר אותך ונרצע
אחרך לדורות
י. ואת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין נרצע אחרך המול
לכם כל זכר
יא. וממלכם את בשר ערלתכם והיית לאות ברית ביני וביניכם
יב. ובשר שמנת נמים מול לכם כל זכר לדורותיכם ליד בית
ומקנת כסף מכל בן זכר אשר לא מגרד הוא
יג. המול מול ליד ביתך ומקנת כסף והייתה בריתי בבשרכם
לבית עולם
יד. וציר זכר אשר לא מול את בשר ערלתו ונקרתה הנפש
ההוא מעמיה את בריתי חפר

1. And when Abram was ninety nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be perfect.
2. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.
3. And Abram fell on his face; and God talked with him, saying,
4. As for me, behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.
5. Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made you.
6. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you.
7. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you, and to your seed after you.
8. And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land where you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.
9. And God said to Abraham, You shall keep my covenant therefore, you, and your seed after you in their generations.
10. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you; every male child among you shall be circumcised.
11. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.
12. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,
13. Both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.
14. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

¹²⁵ See Fox, Michael V., "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly 'Of Etiologies,'" for a fascinating analysis of these texts.

125. The other important text to be considered is Joshua 5:2-10, where the Redactor clearly interposes its construct into an otherwise non-*P* text. This text can easily be mistaken as belonging to non-*P*, specifically *D*, because it appears within a larger, Deuteronomistic narrative, and, at first glance, may appear to be "part of a polemic regarding the need for physical circumcision before inheriting the land."¹²⁶

126. However, a careful reading of the text reveals that not only does it interrupt what would otherwise be a coherent and smooth narrative flow, but it also is not about land at all. The text itself, Josh. 5:2-10, contains no elements of reference to the land, and its placement after the dramatic crossing of the Jordan River, further refutes the claim. If a significant concern of the author was to establish that circumcision was a prerequisite to inheriting the land, such a message would have been considerably more effective having been situated before the entry into the land.

127. As discussed above (see ¶90), this text is, in large part, about the connection between circumcision and the observance of the Passover. A powerful tradition must have existed about mass-circumcision of Israelites at Gilgal, earning the place the colloquial name *givat aralot* (the hill of foreskins). The tradition of a mass-circumcision may have been based on a one-time event, but it is possible, if not likely, that it hints at the manner in which non-*P* practiced circumcision. That is to say, non-*P* may have conducted periodic mass-circumcisions for adult (or adolescent) Israelites. It is even possible that it was an annual observance, taking place at Gilgal, perhaps just before the observance of the Passover.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Hoffman, Lawrence A., *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 33

¹²⁷ As suggested by Propp, William H. C., "The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel," *HAR* 11 (1987), p. 362.

128. Whatever the details of such a tradition may have been, it would have been in tension with the alleged antiquity of the Israelite practice of newborn circumcision. Thus, *P* (and the Priestly Redactor in particular), had to reconcile the cultural memory of this event with the official history and practice of circumcision. The source reconciles this discrepancy by explaining that the generation of the exodus, although they themselves were circumcised, had failed to circumcise the generation of males that was born in the wilderness. The text casts its negative evaluation on this failure of duty by emphasizing that this generation that failed to circumcise is the very same generation that died in the wilderness, and that "YHVH swore would never see the [promised] land," because "they did not heed the voice of YHVH" (Josh. 5:6). From the presentation of the text, it even appears that the specific violation for which this generation was denied entry to the land was their failure to circumcise their sons. In this way, *R* is shaping its textual interpolation to speak to the specific concerns of its Deuteronomistic audience. It further engages in the same type of audience targeting through its uncharacteristic use of the term *cherpah*, which would have spoken to the non-*P* author of Genesis 34. By speaking in the language of non-*P*'s attitude toward circumcision, the Priestly Redactor strengthening likelihood that its reformulation of the tradition of Gilgal would be accepted by the non-priestly elements from which the older tradition derived.

Section 6.

*Penclusion**

129. In the end, we return to the question of the origins and meanings of Israelite circumcision. At this point in time, I would address this question with a scenario composed of what I would call *plausible speculative hypotheses*. As hypotheses they are ideas that have yet to be tested; to go so far as to call them "theories" may be premature.

130. To be sure, these hypotheses are based on the evidence (which I have) at hand, but the evidence at hand is extremely limited, and, furthermore, there may be extant evidence that I have not yet discovered, and there may be analyses that I have not yet encountered. As I pursue my investigation of Israelite circumcision beyond the time and scope of the current undertaking, I will make efforts to test these hypotheses – not in the interest of proving their accuracy, but in the honest interest of discovering what truth may be known as to whether or not they are accurate. I sincerely encourage anyone who is interested to diligently test my hypotheses, as well as any other theory or assertion I have made herein, and to apprise me of your findings so that I may *true the course* – so to speak - of my research. (I would also reiterate the request I made in the introduction that anyone reading this material should search for updated and revised versions of the same material.)

* This word is a neologism (or, if you will, a *Neologism*), using the Latin *paene*, meaning "almost," as in *penultimate*. My "panclusion" is a conclusion which is not quite at the end. OK, I'm just having some fun.

Section 7.

Plausible Speculative Hypotheses
and Some Remaining Mysteries

131. Circumcision in the ancient near-east most likely originated in Egypt, sometime prior to the year 4000 B.C.E. The reasons for its origin are unknown, but it certainly would have provided relief for acute medical conditions relating to the foreskin and for problems associated with congenital defects of the penis. *Black* or *Negroid* Africans also practiced a dorsal-slit type of circumcision, but there is no indication as to whether the two practices were related.
132. Some time around the turn of the 4th/3rd Millennium B.C.E., inhabitants of the Plains of Antioch (in Syria) experienced a sudden and significant cultural change, quite possibly due to Egyptian influence. From the period just after this cultural change we find evidence of circumcision among the people of the region. In light of the political upheaval in Egypt at the time – from the wars of unification – it is possible that some elements of Egyptian society fled Egypt, arriving in the region of Antioch, where numerous aspects of their culture were adopted, including circumcision.
133. Following this period, there is no evidence of circumcision for another 1500 years. The evidence from this later period indicates, however, that circumcision was practiced by some inhabitants of the area of Canaan and Phoenicia. In particular, it seems to have been practiced by certain Semitic peoples sharing a common ancestry and, as the text would have it, coming from or having, at some point lived in the area of Haran in north-

western Mesopotamia. Given Haran's proximity to the region of Antioch, the two groups would have been likely trading partners, possibly leading to cultural exchanges, including the practice of circumcision. Even if the proto-Israelites were not from Haran, but were Canaanites, as some scholars believe, they seem to have belonged to a distinguishable group within the larger population; distinguished, in no small part, by their practice of circumcision. However circumcision came to be adopted by these Semitic (or Canaanite) peoples, it was likely the result of a cultural transfer from the inhabitants of the Plains of Antioch (who were probably Phoenicians). They, in turn, had likely been influenced by migrant or refugee Egyptians.

134. For at least one of the Semitic groups, that which eventually became known as Israel, circumcision was an important aspect of defining lineal kinship, both narrowly (within a specific family) as well as more broadly demarcating with which groups marriage could still be considered endogamous. Circumcision may also have been held, by early Israel, as relating to their claim of divine selection and inheritance of the land also occupied by Canaanite groups and Philistines.

135. At some point, circumcision came to be of particular importance to the priestly segment among the Israelites. While certain aspects of their theology/ideology of circumcision may have developed at an earlier phase in their history, their construct of circumcision was dramatically altered and refined at a later time, probably during the Priestly redaction of the Torah.

136. The innovations of the Priestly Redactor's construct of circumcision point strongly in the direction of Egyptian influence. Over the intervening approximately 2500 years from the earliest evidence of Egyptian circumcision, their conventions of circumcisions

continued to develop. There are reasons to suggest that Egyptian circumcision was a prerequisite or a sign of high-level royal or cultic service. To the ancient Egyptian, cultic service and royal service were both ways of serving a deity. If circumcision was a key element of this, then it mirrors the central biblical text on circumcision - Genesis 17 - which portrays circumcision as a covenantal act in which Abraham enters into a type of service to God.

137. During the late-Dynastic period of Egypt, circumcision was most strongly associated with the priesthood and it was explicitly related to issues of hygiene and ritual purity. These same concerns are evident in the Priestly Redactor's construct of circumcision. Just as *R* required the circumcision of all males living among Israel, so too do we find evidence of circumcision being practiced by servants at all levels of society.

138. The similarities between the Priestly Redactors' conventions of circumcision and those of the contemporaneous Egyptian priesthood are strong enough to suggest that *R* was heavily influenced by the Egyptian practice. The question is: how and when did the influence take place?

139. This question opens up, of course, the much larger question of where and when the Priestly Source and the Priestly Redactor operated. This question is the source of much debate and there is little agreement in the matter. The crux of the debate focuses on whether *P* was written in the Land (i.e., in Judea), or in exile (i.e., in Babylon); and whether it was written before or after the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E.?

140. However, none of these options take into account the particular requirements of circumcision that are central to the Priestly construct. Therefore, I would like to propose a hypothesis which, if correct, would not only shed much light on the nature of the

Priestly material (including the Redactor), but it would satisfy the mystery of how and when the conventions of Egyptian circumcision were assimilated into the Israelite practice.

141. I would like to suggest a hypothesis; not a theory, but a hypothesis: "A tentative assumption made in order to draw out and test [the possibility]." ¹²⁸ I will outline the factors that suggest this hypothesis, but I wish to stress that the suggestion should not be considered an operative assumption until further research (which is beyond the scope of this project) has been done on the matter. With this disclaimer firmly stated, I will lay out the line of reasoning that leads to and flows from the hypothesis.

142. The writings of the Priestly source focus strongly on the concerns of the priestly community as set apart from the rest of Israel. It portrays the sacrificial cult as fully centralized, yet, it does not centralize it in Jerusalem. The location of the cultic operation does not seem to be of importance, but its administration is portrayed as controlled and centralized. If *P* were a pre-exilic, Judean source, we would expect to find an emphasis on centralized worship in Jerusalem. Even if *P* were a pre-Josianic-Reform effort to end the practice of sacrifice at provincial cultic sites, we would expect some emphasis on the location of the centralized cult (unless *P* imagined a kind of circuit-riding central priesthood), perhaps in Jerusalem, Shiloh or some other location.

143. In seeking out the Priestly source, we are looking for an author or community of Priests that was involved in the active administration of a centralized sacrificial cult within the approximate range of a century before or after the Babylonian exile. There is one location that fits this description and which, if it was the home of the Priestly source (or of a significant contributor to it), would resolve many mysteries, not the least of

¹²⁸ From the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of "hypothesis"

which is our question of the cultural transfer of circumcision between ancient Egypt and ancient Israel. That location is the island of Elephantine.

144. Located near Aswan, the island of Elephantine was home to an Israelite temple during the 6th and 5th Centuries B.C.E., possibly dating back to the late 7th Century. This temple, in which "sacrifices, including animal sacrifices, were offered,"¹²⁹ was built with the same dimensions and same cedar-wood roof as the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, toward which this temple was oriented.

145. The Jewish community at Elephantine may have been founded in the mid-7th Century as a military garrison sent by the Judean King Manasseh (696-641 B.C.E.) to "assist the Pharaoh Psammetichus I (664-610 B.C.E.) in his Nubian campaign and to join Psammetichus in throwing off the yoke of Assyria, then the world superpower. Egypt gained independence, but Manasseh's revolt failed; the Jewish (sic) soldiers, however, remained in Egypt."¹³⁰ With Judea remaining under Assyrian suzerainty, independent Egypt would have been a well suited refuge for those fleeing Manasseh's bloody and repressive regime. A group of Levitical priests, loyal to the oppressed cult of YHWH, fled to Elephantine during this period, where it was given permission to build a temple. The priest may have been "inspired by Isaiah's prophecy that on the day the Lord smites Egypt, 'there shall be an altar to the Lord inside the land of Egypt and a pillar [that is, a cultic site] to the Lord at its border.'"¹³¹

146. The temple at Elephantine stood as an active site of Levitical cultic worship until it "was destroyed in 410 B.C.E. by Egyptian priests of the ram-god Khnum and their allies

¹²⁹ Porten, Bezafel, "Did the Ark Stop at Elephantine?" BAR 21-3 (1995), p. 55

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 61

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 56, see also p. 61

in connivance with the local Persian governor."¹³² Thus, during a period of more than two hundred years, beginning prior to the Josianic reforms, and lasting until the beginning of the Second Temple Period, a group of Levitical priests administered a centralized cult, outside of Jerusalem, set apart from the population of Judea.

147. Although Isolated from Judea, the Elephantine "Jewish"¹³³ community did interact with the surrounding Egyptian population, as can be seen, in particular, from many of the names that they used.¹³⁴ Elephantine was cultic center for Egyptians as well as Yahwists, and was densely populated with temples: the population of the island itself must have contained numerous Egyptian priests. Given this set of circumstances, there is every reason to imagine that the Levitical priests began to assimilate elements of the Egyptian practice and ethos of circumcision, layering it on top of what may have been an existing but less regulated Israelite practice; eventually regulating its practice and providing it with a mythic etiology narrative (i.e., Genesis 17).

148. An important textual support for a connection between the priesthood, Egypt and circumcision can be found in Ezekiel. Ezekiel is explicitly identified as a priest (Ezek. 1:3), and the problems of identifying the time and location of the book's authorship are similar to those of the P source. In chapters 31 and 32, Ezekiel is told to warn Egypt that they will be destroyed and will "lie in the midst of the uncircumcised" (31:18). The two passages not only reflect a clear knowledge of the Egyptian practice, but also an understanding of the disgust with which they would regard being mingled in death with the uncircumcised. Is it possible that Ezekiel was connected or influenced, in some way, to the priestly community of Elephantine? Or, perhaps, these passages are polemics

¹³² Ibid., p. 63

¹³³ I recognize that the use of the term "Jewish" is anachronistic here, however, for the sake of clarity, I will make use of it.

¹³⁴ Silverman, Michael H., "The Religion of the Elephantine Jews — A New Approach," *PWCIJS* 6-1 (1973), pp. 377-388.

directed against the priestly community of Elephantine, whose continued operation outside of Jerusalem could very well have chagrined the "normative" priesthood in Jerusalem. Whatever the case may be, these passages suggest that the practice and ethos of Egyptian circumcision was well understood by priests of YHVH.

149. Later documents from Elephantine make it clear that the isolation of the community did not last, as the community became increasingly connected to the "Jewish" communities of both Judea and Babylonia.¹³⁵ If the priests of this community had, indeed, produced a corpus of texts, then it seems plausible that such texts may have served as a source of material for inclusion in Torah, the redaction of which was occurring during this time period.

150. There are, at least, two mysteries that remain. The first is the question of how Israelite circumcision came to be practiced on the 8th day. While there is some evidence that the Egyptians performed circumcision in childhood, there is no evidence suggesting that it was done in infancy. There can be no doubt that it is a Priestly convention. P makes consistent use of the number seven, and, in particular, of seven days plus one, i.e., the eighth day. One example of this, the requirement that an animal cannot be sacrificed until its 8th day of life (Lev. 22:27), seems to be a significant parallel to the convention of 8th day circumcision. One strong possibility is that circumcision was set for the 8th day of a boy's life because it would be the first day on which he would no longer be able to communicate his mother's ritual impurity that resulted from her giving birth (Lev. 12:2). Another suggestion¹³⁶ is that it was to prevent a child who did not live long after birth from suffering an unpleasant fate reserved for those who died uncircumcised (something

¹³⁵ See Silverman, "The Religion of the Elephantine Jews — A New Approach."

¹³⁶ See Propp, William H. C., "The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel."

that is intimated in Ezek. 31:18 and 32:24). It is also possible that this convention came from priests living in Babylonia. Because circumcision was not practiced in Babylonia, the community of exiled priest may have been concerned that the practice would be abandoned if it were postponed beyond infancy (when the procedure is much easier, and carries a far a lower likelihood of complications as compared to non-infant circumcision.). It is also possible that the change was not made out of simple concern for the practice, but in reaction to its actual abandonment by Judaite youths living in Babylonia. At present, the only certainty is that 8th day circumcision is a Priestly convention, but it is not clear why this convention was adopted.

151. The other mystery that remains is the passage from Exodus 4 – the “Bridegroom of Blood.” While it is generally assigned to the J Source, “no one knows for sure how old it is or, for that matter, what it is even about.”¹³⁷ -- [. If this text is portraying infant circumcision, then it may be connected to the first mystery (of the 8th day); as an etiology text of some sort. But this text is also connected to the killing of the first-born in Egypt, and also to the blood of the Paschal lamb that prevented the killing of the first-born among Israel. Just before the passage, God instructs Moses to threaten Pharaoh with the killing of the first-born. And, when Tziporah touches the bloody foreskin to the legs of (either Moses or her son), it parallels placing the blood of the Pesach on the doorposts of houses. Both actions involve blood in three places (two legs and penis/two doorposts and lintel), and both actions serve to prevent death at the hand of a deity that attacks in the night. Many explanations have been offered for this text, yet, as much as the explanations help to explain the passage, it remains stubbornly enigmatic.

¹³⁷ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, p. 32.

152. Setting the mysteries aside, for the moment, there can be little doubt that the biblical convention of circumcision is the product of (at least) two Israelite traditions of circumcision. In one tradition, that of non-*P* (most likely consisting of *J* and later *DH*), circumcision was a matter of kinship and affiliation. In the other tradition, that of *P* and *R*, circumcision was rooted in a deep concern for matters of ritual purity, and was connected to our roles as covenantal servants of God. Because the two traditions were synthesized by the priestly redactor (*R*), the ethos of the priestly tradition is far more prevalent in the text. This ethos shares enough in common with that of Egyptian circumcision that we can state with confidence that the (more ancient) Egyptian tradition had a significant influence on the (much younger) Priestly tradition. I have proposed the hypothesis that this influence may have occurred on the island of Elephantine, during the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.E. Though it is offered cautiously, the hypothesis is plausible enough to warrant serious investigation. Not only would it shed much light on some of the debates of source criticism, it would also answer the questions of how Israelite circumcision came to rest in its final configuration, which, like Egyptian circumcision, focused, at its core, on the essential conventions of service and sanctity.

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Abbreviations

BACE	Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology
BAR	Biblical Archaeology Review
HAR	Hebrew Annual Review
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
MDAIR	<i>Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo</i>
PWCJS	Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies

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