

RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

By

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Chapter 5

Circumcision

The Covenant of Reproduction

Pages 33-38

2nd Revised ed. 2010

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The Covenant of Reproduction

Among a variety of laws jumbled together in the book of Leviticus, God informs us that fruit trees are not to be harvested of their first three crops. The fourth crop is dedicated to God, then the following years the fruit may be harvested for the planter (Lev 19:23-25). The first three crops are described in an odd and unique way. “You will consider foreskinned its having foreskin on its fruit (*‘araltem ‘orlato et piryō*; ערלתם ערלתו את פריו). Three years it will be foreskin items (*‘arelim*; ערלים) to you — do not eat.”

Foreskinned, usually translated “uncircumcised” (*‘arel*, ערל) refers literally to the natural state of the penis. The term is used figuratively to describe unconsecrated attitudes of the people (Lev 26:41) including ears which refuse to listen (Jer 6:10), but this figurative use presupposes the physical circumcision of physical Israelite males. However, in Leviticus 19 it is used as a synonym for ritually unclean, meaning off-limits, to describe trees whose fruit is not to be harvested. This is not exactly a figurative use, and there is one significant link. The fruit of a tree has one linguistic element in common with the penis. Both contain or produce *zera* ‘ (זרע; *Gen Rab.* 46.4) — the seed.¹ However, neither the tree nor its fruit receive an operation which might be called circumcision. Time alone turns the foreskinned fruit of the tree into fruit dedicated to God (for one year), then into fruit which the planter may keep. The term foreskin is merely another way of saying “unclean” in this law. And the use of “foreskin” in this law witnesses to the common usage of circumcision language in ancient Israel, and thus the importance of the practice.

Three Stories

Circumcision begins with Abraham in Genesis 17. As part of the covenant God tells Abraham to circumcise himself and the males of his household. In a typical laconic statement the text of Genesis tells us Abraham was 99 years old when he circumcised himself. The text mixes euphemism with explicitness, for Abraham “circumcised the flesh of their foreskin” (17:23). “Flesh” is a euphemism for penis, but foreskin (*‘orlah*) is the explicit term for that part

¹ Incidentally, *zera* ‘ is the operative term for the non-incest sexual laws of the previous chapter, 18:19-23. (Miller 2000b)

of the penis, and circumcise (*muwl*; מוּל) is the explicit verb for the operation of removing that part of the penis. Notably, though Ishmael had been born at this time and was circumcised, Isaac had not. Isaac, the heir of the covenant, was born under the covenant and circumcised on his eighth day (Gen 21:4). Isaac also had been sired by a circumcised father, and Ishmael had not (*GenRab.* 46.2). The heir of the covenant was not produced until the sign of the covenant had been given (Sarna 145-146), a sign on the male reproductive organ. Circumcision is very much about reproduction and dedicating the fruit of reproduction to the God of the covenant. Circumcision is also very patriarchal. Restricted to males, it emphasizes patrilineal inheritance (Bernat, pp 48-50).

According to Genesis Lot was no longer a part of Abraham's household when Abraham was circumcised. This implies that Lot was not circumcised, likewise implying that his two sons also would not have been circumcised. Possibly the book of Genesis is indicating that, among Israel's neighbors, the Midianites and other Ishmaelites practice circumcision but the Ammonites and Moabites — Lot's descendants — did not practice circumcision.

Another group of men were circumcised together in chapter 34. Shechem the son of Hamor seduced / raped Dinah the daughter of Jacob by Leah. He was so enamored of Dinah that he sought permission from her father to marry her. Her brothers objected that Shechem and his people were uncircumcised and were therefore unacceptable. But they did agree to the wedding if Shechem and his people circumcised themselves. Shechem and Hamor found this acceptable and commanded the circumcision of the men of the city.

But it was a ruse. Simeon and Levi had no intention of allowing their sister to marry these Canaanites, circumcised or not. They awaited the circumcision so that they could attack the city while the men were recovering from the operation. On the third day, "while they were still sore," the men of Shechem were slaughtered by Simeon and Levi. Circumcision for adults could be very disabling. Apparently circumcision fell out of practice in the 40-year wilderness period, for Joshua had his army circumcised by the Jordan, and as a result they had to wait there until they were healed before making war on the Canaanites (Josh 5:2-9).

When Moses was on his way back to Egypt under the orders of God, he was attacked by God along the way, until his wife Zipporah circumcised their son (Ex 4:24-26), or so this story is usually understood. This is one of the oddest bits of text in the Bible and has often been discussed. It is common among scholars to treat the text as corrupt, either in redaction or

transmission (Wyatt, pp 414-417). Some scholars go so far as to remove Moses from the story, with reason. In the Hebrew only Zipporah is named. Male characters are identified by pronoun only. It is possible to read Moses as the one who is circumcised by Zipporah. After the exodus from Egypt, no Israelites were circumcised in the wilderness (Joshua 5:5-7), and it is possible that Moses likewise was not circumcised, possibly because of his early separation from his family. However, Zipporah seems to have been aware where the problem lay, and how would she know if she did not hear it from her husband? Perhaps the Midianites, being descended from Abraham and Keturah, practiced circumcision. The question remains how Zipporah knew what to do.

If Gershom is the one who is circumcised, why was he not yet circumcised? This is another unanswered question. Zipporah understood the problem, for she was the one who corrected the problem, and did so in an emergency situation. So Zipporah cut the foreskin of her son or husband. מַלְאָךְ is not used here, though foreskin (*'orlah*) is used.

Then she touched “his feet.” “Feet” is a euphemism for penis. Did she touch the “feet” of Gershom her son, or of Moses her husband? It was her son she just circumcised, but it is her husband she addresses when she says, “As a bridegroom of blood you are mine.” Because of Zipporah’s statement a standard phrase at circumcisions (*mulot*) was, “Bridegroom of blood.” Were marriages confirmed with the birth and circumcision of a son, making the father the mother’s “bridegroom of blood”? Were the sons “bridegrooms of blood” when they were circumcised on the eighth day? We have no clear answers on these customs.

Propp (233-238) reads this episode as providing sacrificial blood to expiate the murder which Moses committed in Egypt — the land which he was re-entering. Moses could not return to Egypt and do the work of God with the unabsolved murder standing against him. The term for blood, *damim*, suggests murder guilt, but the form of expiation and the use of human bloodshed to exact this expiation are problematic. This understanding of the story verges on human sacrifice, a reading which is not impossible, but somewhat speculative. A different clue may be found in Genesis 17 where circumcision begins. God tells Abraham that should any of his male descendants not be circumcised, that one would be cut off from the people (17:14), and this meeting on the road indicates the divine interest in the covenant and its sign. Thus far there is no sure explanation for this episode.

One more image may be part of this episode. On the wedding night the bride, who is

presumed to be a virgin, has her hymen broken by her new husband. As a result either her clothing or the bedding is stained with her blood. This bloodstain is often understood as the “tokens of her virginity” (בתוליים, *bethulim*; Deut 22:13-17), legal proof of her virginity. In the process the husband’s penis would become stained with the same blood. If we assume that Gershom is circumcised here, perhaps Zipporah was associating her husband’s bloodstained penis with their wedding night. The blood of their son is returned by the mother to the father as if they had returned the family to their wedding day.

Many years later the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria would explain circumcision as a declaration of humility in procreation (SpL 1.1-11). For Philo circumcision is a statement of dependence on God for the very important act of reproduction. Humble or not, circumcision in Genesis and the law texts is a statement of covenant, a declaration that the child and his family alike are dedicated to the service of God and the keeping of the divine covenant.

Circumcision of the Heart and Lips

In Jeremiah 4:4 and Deuteronomy 10:16 the people are called upon to perform a metaphorical circumcision, a circumcision of their heart. The uncircumcised heart is in its natural state, and is unclean and in need of an operation to make it fit for the divine presence (Jer 9:25-26; Ezk 44:7,9). In Deuteronomy 30:6 it is God who proclaims he will circumcise their heart, and in Leviticus 26:41 God will humble their uncircumcised heart. This appears to be a painful act of dedication to the covenant, as painful inwardly as physical circumcision would be outwardly.

In Exodus 6:12 Moses tells God that he has foreskinned lips. At no point does God offer to “circumcise” the lips of Moses. Instead the remedy is the use of Aaron as the spokesperson for Moses (7:1-2). The image is usually understood as a speech impediment (cf. Exodus 4:10) – an image somewhat distant from the other uses of foreskin or circumcision. Another image which could be used here is that of Isaiah 6:5 where the prophet says he has unclean lips, as do his people. However, no moral impediment seems to block the lips of Moses – an impediment which leaves the mouth of Aaron free to speak. One final image which might operate here is infertility or impotence. As an uncircumcised penis is believed to be not as fertile or potent as a circumcised one, so the lips of Moses are ineffective. This image seems more in line with the objection of Moses, the solution of God, and the parallel in Exodus 4. This requires an

understanding of circumcision which is related to fertility.

New Testament Circumcision

The Gospel of Luke is clear that Jesus was circumcised, as was John the Baptist before him (1:59; 2:21), but in the New Testament we find circumcision has come to an end. In Acts 15 the question is answered definitively, circumcision is not necessary for gentile male converts to join the church. Though they are held to the law of Noah (Genesis 9:3-7), gentile Christians are not held to the circumcision of Abraham and his descendants. Even Paul, who described gentile Christians as adopted and grafted into the family of Abraham (Gal 3:29) argues forcefully against the physical circumcision which marked the male descendants of Abraham (Gal 5:2-12).

Troy Martin has argued strongly for understanding circumcision as the primary topic of the famous text, Galatians 3:28. Male Jews must be circumcised, male Greeks are not. Male slaves of Jews must be circumcised, male resident aliens need not be. Only males can be circumcised, females cannot be. Circumcision is indeed a major topic throughout the epistle to the Galatians, but Martin's construction of this text does not preclude more traditional readings of this text, that within the church a variety of dividing lines are erased, between ethnic and social classes and between the genders. Unfortunately, Martin does argue that his understanding precludes other readings of this important text.

Circumcision is tied to inheritance (Bernat, pp 48-50), and inheritance is a masculine function. And the inheritance of Abraham is at issue in Galatians 3:28-29. The circumcised Jew is an heir of Abraham, but the uncircumcised Greek or gentile is not. The free man can inherit, but slaves do not. Men inherit and may be circumcised. Women, who cannot be circumcised, also do not inherit. Rather their inheritance is that of their husbands. But Christ is the ultimate heir of Abraham, and those who are in Christ inherit through him, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. In Christ the distinctions vanish, for the inheritance is already secured by Christ.

The end of covenantal circumcision in the New Testament carries multiple consequences. Circumcision is the sign of a covenant of reproduction, but the New Testament removed reproduction as a sexual value. So, the end of circumcision is a part of the demise of reproductive values. Circumcision is also male specific, and as a reproductive sign it is patriarchal. The removal of circumcision is related to the end of patriarchal authority and gender

roles in the church as well. Thus the end of circumcision plays a distinct role in the meaning of Galatians 3:28. Conversion and entry into the church now has no gender distinction and, for men, no distinction between Jew and gentile. Thus the gentile woman now has full and equal status in the church with the Jewish man.

Paul once mentions the practice of reversing a circumcision surgically. Known as epispasm, some physicians in Greco-Roman times performed procedures aimed at producing an artificial foreskin on circumcised customers. In Greek and Roman culture, where nudity was normal in sports and in public bathhouses, an exposed head of the penis was considered obscene – naked in a way that the foreskinned penis is not — so a circumcised penis was therefore an obscenity. Some of those who were circumcised sought to erase their obscenity and clear their way into proper Greek or Roman society. Jews were not the only circumcised people in the Roman Empire, and were not the sole customers for the procedure.

Paul uses the term in 1 Corinthians 7:18; those who were circumcised were advised not to undergo epispasm (επισπασθω). Likewise those not circumcised were advised to not become circumcised. Mention of epispasm is rare in Jewish literature from the period. 1 Maccabees 1:15 mentions the procedure in connection with a new gymnasium in Jerusalem, but does not use a cognate of epispasm. Instead it says, “they made themselves foreskins (ακροβυστιας).” It is possible that the practice of epispasm was really quite rare. The procedure is difficult and painful and would require an extremely strong desire on the part of the client. Surprisingly the practice did not seem to merit strong rhetorical use in Jewish writings. One might assume that even rare cases of epispasm would produce reams of polemical literature condemning the practice and mentioning it in other contexts. But it seems most Jewish writers resisted the urge to condemn epispasm.

With the loss of physical circumcision in the church, so also the metaphor of circumcision falls out of use in the New Testament. The metaphor occurs only in Romans 2:28-29 and Colossians 2:11-13. In Colossians this spiritual circumcision is linked with physical baptism as describing the transition from unbeliever to believer. In the New Testament procreation is no longer an issue in the church, and physical descent from Abraham likewise is no longer an issue. It is understandable that circumcision likewise would be discarded from the practices of the new community of faith.