

History of Circumcision

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THE ORIGIN of circumcision is most ancient. The finding of circumcised men in the drawings of the Cave Dwellers¹⁶ dates this custom back at least to the Magdalenian period of the Paleolithic or Stone Age. This is also confirmed by the emphasis on the stone or flint knife in the circumcisional rites of the Jews, the Egyptians,²³ some Arab tribes, and such aboriginal people as the Australian aborigenes.

There are some who believe the Jews learned circumcision from the Egyptians during their Egyptian captivity,¹⁶ but this is unlikely, as Abraham's covenant with Jehovah¹¹ occurred prior to this. The belief held by some that the Egyptians learned this from the Jews¹ during this captivity is refuted by the finding of picturization of this operation on bas relief plaques in Egypt dating back to 2400 B.C.²¹ and also the finding of circumcised mummies dating back to at least 1614 B.C.¹⁶

The Egyptians and the Ethiopians at first limited circumcision to the priesthood,¹ whose members also shaved the entire body to denote purity. Circumcision spread from them to the aristocrats and nobility and then to the lower classes, until to be uncircumcised was to be considered unclean.

Circumcision with the Arabs probably started as a fertility or puberty rite. The Arabic word "Hatana" means both to circumcise and to marry, indicating the close analogy in their minds between this operation and reproduction. Female circumcision was done by the early Arabs but was soon discontinued. Circumcision was so common among the Arabs during Ishmael, the Prophet's time, that it was not mentioned in the Koran.¹⁶ It was not until later that the Arabs, who had considered this a physiologic act, gave it a religious significance. As Ishmael was circumcised at the age of thirteen, this age was arbitrarily chosen for religious circumcision. Many tribes still choose seven, fourteen, twenty-one, and twenty-eight days; while the Persian Arabs circumcise at three or four years of age. Jacob¹⁶ described a very sadistic brutal form of circumcision performed by certain Arabic tribes of Yemen in which the rite was

done to determine the youth's fitness for marriage.

Circumcision is first mentioned in the Bible in the covenant between Jehovah and Abraham.¹¹ The Lord promised to make Abraham the father of nations, to make him fruitful at the age of ninety-nine, to give to him and his seed the land of Canaan, to be their God, and to give Sarai, his ninety-year-old wife, a son, making her mother of nations. For this Abraham circumcised himself, his sons, and all the men of his household, slave or free. The date for this is given by authorities as from 1500 B.C. to 850 B.C.²²

Circumcision was not universally practiced by the Jews while they were captives in Egypt. Moses born during their period was uncircumcised. Jehovah was about to smite him down because he did not have this tribal mark,⁸ but he was saved when his wife, Zipporah or Cipora, quickly circumcised their son and threw the bloody foreskin at his feet, thus representing symbolic circumcision. The fact that circumcision was a tribal mark with the early Jews is also indicated when Jehovah forbade the eating of the Passover Feast by circumcised Jew or Gentile.⁹

Joshua again took up the covenant at Gilgal¹² when he circumcised, at the "hill of the foreskin," all the males that had been born in Egypt or in the wilderness. Circumcision was then practiced by the Jews with little change except during the reign of Antiochus IV who tried to prevent them from observing this custom. The eighth day of life was set as the proper time for circumcision when they reached Palestine. This was considered a tribal mark up to the time of the Babylonian exile. During and after this exile circumcision assumed religious importance.

Female circumcision has not been practiced by the Jews.¹⁵

The importance of the rite being performed on the eighth day of life is brought out by the fact that the rite is performed on this day even if it be the Jewish Sunday or even Atonement Day.² It is never performed prior to this day except in case of stillbirth or death prior to the eighth day, in which case a circumcision is performed to symbolize the fact that the child has been introduced into the Abrahamic group.²

Early Mosaic law employed a reasonably good surgical technique, using a flint knife. The rite is performed by a Mohel who may be, but usually is not, a rabbi. The early Mohels recognized blood dyscrasias in families and banned circumcision in

sons of mothers whose first son had bled profusely at circumcision. The child is always examined carefully by the Mohel to determine his ability to stand the operation. If there is evidence that the child could not stand the rite, the act may be postponed, and in the case of prematures the delay may be for a considerable time.²

The Jewish ritual circumcision, *Brith Milah*, is divided into three stages. The first is called *Milah*, which included the actual excision of the foreskin which usually is done with one stroke of a stone or flint knife. The second is called *Periah* which is the tearing of the inner lining away from the excised foreskin. The third is known as *Mezizah* which is the sucking of the bloody wound of the mutilated organ by the Mohel whose lips are wetted with wine. The dangers of this last stage have long been known, and it has been given up by all but the most orthodox. The use of wine during the rite may well be a symbol of this step, now almost extinct. The Mohel of recent years have spilled wine on the mutilated organ to prevent infection.

Sauer¹⁹ reported fatal bronchopneumonia in a child following ritual circumcision by a Mohel in a hospital. Reuben¹⁸ reported forty-one cases of tuberculosis, some with lesion of the penis suggestive of the tubercular chancre of the primary tuberculosis complex, where the Mohel concerned was later proven to have positive sputum. Webster²⁰ reported a case of tuberculosis traced to circumcision in a Gentile following non-ritualistic circumcision.

Kiser¹⁷ stated that circumcision has not been required of proselytes of the Jewish faith since 1892, and that since then it has been chiefly a hygienic measure. Despite this, the term "arelim" or "uncircumcised" is still a word of reproach to a Jew, carrying the implication of being unclean. In modern times the operation is often performed by a physician, but a rabbi is always present to conduct the ritual.

The Phoenicians spread the custom of circumcision which they learned from the Egyptians in their travels through the known world of their time. The Greeks and others who came to Alexandria, Egypt, to study also carried this custom home with them. Circumcision was considered a hygienic measure by these people.

The question whether ritual circumcision automatically led to salvation or whether it was more important to follow the laws of Moses in spirit is

mentioned in the Old Testament in the references to circumcision of the heart.¹⁷

Circumcision as a hygienic measure was known to the people of the Mediterranean world when St. Paul and the other disciples began to spread the teachings of Jesus to these people. The dissension over whether these people should follow the laws of Moses in ritual, as marked by circumcision, or in spirit by good living, led to the parting of Paul and Barnabas. St. Paul³ was not against circumcision, as he caused to be circumcised Timothy, whose father was non-Jewish.⁴

In his epistles to the Romans,¹⁴ to the Corinthians,⁶ the Galatians,¹⁰ the Phillipians,¹³ and the Colossians,⁵ St. Paul taught them that spiritual circumcision or circumcision of the heart was the way to salvation, and not ritual circumcision; that following the word of God and Jesus was the important thing; that circumcision as given to Abraham was the seal of faith, and that Abraham was the father of the faithful, not the circumcised; and that God's blessing would fall on the circumcised or uncircumcised alike if they would be pure of heart. From these teachings early Christians did not adopt circumcision as a religious rite, although some of the higher classes still continued it as a hygienic measure. Some actually avoided circumcision, wishing to be set apart from the Jewish race, as anti-Semitism was even then prevalent.

Circumcision was well known to the Aztecs.²³ From the Aztecs this custom spread to the Incas and also to the various Indian tribes of South and North America. With these people it was a fertility or puberty rite, but may well have also been a form of symbolic sacrifice in place of human sacrifice which they practiced.

Circumcision as practiced by those who came under Semitic influence consisted of excision of the foreskin only. With the primitive tribes of Asia, Africa, North and South America, Australia, and Oceania, circumcision includes any of the various mutilating operations of the male and female genitalia. These include such brutal forms as subincision or whistlecocking, as still practiced by the Australian aborigenes, and others not in the scope of this article. Circumcision with these people could not have started as a hygienic measure. The origin must have been as a fertility rite, a puberty rite, a copy of the female defloration rite, or a form of phallic or Istar worship.¹⁶

In certain African tribes¹⁵ a man was considered

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incapable of generation unless circumcised. In others it was a form of personal adornment or convenience, and in others it was a sign of reincarnation. In some of these tribal circumcisional ceremonies the boys were dressed as girls and the girls as boys during the rites which were often prolonged. In the Congo, drugs were used at times during the ceremonies.

The Samoans considered circumcision as a fertility rite, throwing the excised portions of the foreskin to the water lilies, their staple food.¹⁵

From a study of the type of circumcision used by primitive tribes it is possible to reconstruct with some accuracy the paths these tribes took many years ago as they migrated from area to area. This is indicated by the tracing of migration of the Australian aborigines from the Burmese peninsula to Malaya, Sumatra, Java, New Guinea, Cape York and then over Australia by the finding of the custom of subincision or whistlecocking in many of these areas today.

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