

CIRCUMCISION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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FOR a long time, scholars have assumed a direct relationship between the Egyptian and West Semitic worlds in one matter of personal hygiene and, probably, of religious rites.¹ "Circumcision," stated Eduard Meyer, "was at home in Egypt from the earliest times, and from there it was adopted by the Israelites and by the Phoenicians."² However, the evidence that one gleans from the Egyptian sources suggests that such a strong statement should, at best, be subjected to further investigation. Indeed, to my mind, it is highly improbable.

The earliest Egyptian document to shed light on circumcision is a palette, now in the British Museum, from the predynastic, Late Gerzean, era.³ It shows bearded, circumcised captives being devoured by vultures and by a lion, presumably the symbols of Nilotic power. Those represented, it has been observed, were not Egyptians. Rather, they were strangers, enemies of the king who, in the guise of a proud lion, sought their extermination.⁴ Aside from an invocation from the Pyramid Texts, 660C, whose debatable interpretation may have referred to circumcision, the earliest written document witnessing the rite comes from the first intermediate period. Thus, a Naga-ed-Dēr stele begins with the pronouncement of one chieftain: "When I was circumcised, together with one hundred and twenty men. . ."⁵ This is reminiscent of Gen 17 23, where Abraham orders the rite to be performed on his retinue the same day as that of his own circumcision. In Egypt, no more than seven texts, from the age of the Pyramids to that of Piankhi, preserve mention of the ritual.⁶ Study of the plastic arts and of the remains of

¹ The cultural and religious significance of circumcision has been amply discussed. It seems doubtful that a satisfactory explanation can be arrived at. For a large and up-to-date bibliography see the recent article of Erich Isaac, "Circumcision as a Covenant Rite," *Anthropos*, 59 (1964), pp. 444-56. The excellent chapter of Père de Vaux's *Les institutions de l'Ancien Testament*, 1, §IV:4, should also be consulted.

² Eduard Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*³⁻⁷, II, 1, p. 559.

³ Jean Capart, *Primitive Art in Egypt*, fig. 179. It is important to note that the upper right-hand corner of the palette depicts the broken figure of a man dressed with a garb which is usually worn by Western Asiatics.

⁴ Observation of Frans Jonckheere in "La circoncision des anciens égyptiens," *Centaurus*, 1 (1951), p. 217.

⁵ *ANET*, p. 236. See further, Maurice Stracmans, "A propos d'un texte relatif à la circoncision égyptienne (1^{re} période intermédiaire)," *Mélanges Isidore Lévy* (1955), pp. 631-39.

⁶ Collected in Jonckheere, *Centaurus*, 1 (1951), pp. 212 ff. See an addition in M. Stracmans, "Encore un texte peu connue relatif à la circoncision des anciens égyptiens," *Archivo Internazionale di Etnografia e Preistoria*, 2 (1959), pp. 7-15.

mummified bodies contributes to our knowledge of the techniques by which the Egyptians attained their objectives. Thus one can note a basic difference between the Israelites and the Egyptians in the surgical process involved in circumcision. Whereas the Hebrews amputated the prepuce and thus exposed the corona of the penis, the Egyptian practice consisted of a dorsal incision upon the foreskin which liberated the glans penis.⁷ The Old Kingdom reliefs at Saqqara clearly demonstrate the results obtained by the Egyptian surgeon.⁸

Two passages from Joshua 5 are relevant to this problem. Vs. 2 consists of a command issued to Joshua: "Make for yourself knives of flint and circumcise *again* the children of Israel the *second time*." Some have thought that this passage has been altered by a later editor to harmonize it with other references in the Bible. But in the light of the foregoing, this can now be explained as an injunction for those who have accepted an Egyptian circumcision to "improve" on the ritual by undergoing a thorough removal of the foreskin. In this context, God's remark in vs. 9 becomes clearer. When the deed was accomplished, he states: "This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you."

Other fundamental variations in the performance of the rite are to be noticed. Hebrews, from the time of the first patriarch on, were enjoined to circumcise their male infants at the age of eight days. In Egypt, however, texts, sculptures, and mummies seem to support the conclusion that babies never underwent the operation; it was reserved for either a period of prenuptial ceremonies or, more likely, for initiation into the state of manhood.⁹ Still remaining to be decided is the question of whether circumcision among the Egyptians was voluntary or universally imposed; whether it was adopted by the common populace or reserved for a high caste which included the pharaoh, his priests, his courtiers, and his immediate servants.¹⁰

When, then, did the Hebrews adopt the practice of circumcision?

⁷ Jonckheere, *Centaurus*, 1 (1951), p. 228. In his book, *Essai sur la médecine égyptienne de l'époque pharaonique*, Gustave Lefèbre summarizes and, on the whole, accepts Jonckheere's conclusions, ch. 9, §5.

⁸ See the plates accompanying Jonckheere's article and *ANEP*, figure and comment No. 629.

⁹ A passage from the Book of the Dead speaks of the god Re's self-induced circumcision. The king of Egypt, as the son and the representation of this divinity, probably underwent the same operation as he entered manhood. This possibly self-imposed immolation may find a parallel in the experience of Abraham (Gen 17 24) and that of Bata in the Egyptian tale of the Two Brothers. Sesostri I is known to have remarked: "As a child, when I had not yet lost my foreskin . . ." (Stracmans, *AIEP*, pp. 8-9). Similarly Khnumhotpe, monarch of Beni-Hassan during the XII Dynasty, boasted that his father "governed at a time when he had not yet lost his prepuce" (Urk. VII:34). The rite appears thus to have been unconnected with accession to power, at least in Egypt.

¹⁰ Stracmans, *AIEP*, p. 12; for a different opinion see P. Wendland, *Archiv für Papyrusforschung*, 2 (1903), pp. 22-31.

As has often been remarked, passages in the Bible such as Josh 5 2 and Exod 4 25, in which flints are specifically called for in order to perform the operation, are indications that the ritual was prehistoric. A recently published volume permits one to speculate on the antiquity of the custom.¹¹

The ʿAmuq valley, sandwiched between the Amanus range and the desolate plateau of Upper Syria, was a fertile plain, well-watered and highly productive. It is not surprising to learn that neolithic man found it a favorable place for his early experiments in agriculture and urban dwelling. Investigation of a number of mounds led the Braidwoods to divide this civilization which spanned an era of twenty-five centuries (ca. 6000–2000 B.C.) into a sequence consisting of eleven phases, numbered *A* to *K*. The Early Bronze Phase *F* (ca. 3200 B.C.), equivalent to Mesopotamian Protoliterate and Egyptian Early Gerzean, appears to have seen the introduction of a new ethnic element into the society.¹² Quite a few changes are to be perceived in the material culture of this phase as compared with that of its predecessor, Phase *E*. The potter's wheel seems to have been introduced, producing a ware that was different from the one prevalent in the preceding level. A new flint industry emerged, manufacturing a type of blades known as "Canaanean." Mud-brick structures became well-attested in the coastal zone. Most important, a well-developed metal industry appeared, seemingly overnight. As a result, the following Phase *G* (ca. 2800 B.C.) could essentially be considered an improved continuation of the preceding era. Within it, the ʿAmuq attained a height in civilization unknown to previous generations, a culture which, in breadth of influence and in degree of technical achievement, was to lead the excavators of the region to call it an "age of incipient internationalism."¹³ This advanced level of craftsmanship attained by the Syrian artisan cannot be better illustrated than by the cache of six bronze figurines which was uncovered in the upper layers of Phase *G*. Three of these statuettes were of females, while the others were of males.¹⁴ It is with the latter, labeled *A*, *B*, and *C*, that we are concerned. Of various sizes, bearded, helmeted, and bearing spears and maces tightly gripped in the hands, these statues are the oldest examples of those cast by means of the *cire-perdue* process.

Among the many interesting details which render these figurines of artistic and historical merit, one feature stands out: each one of these warriors has been circumcised, the foreskin amputated in the manner

¹¹ Robert J. and Linda S. Braidwood, *Excavations in the Plain of Antioch*, 1 (OIP, 61), Chicago, 1960.

¹² G. Ernest Wright, "The Archaeology of Palestine," *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Doubleday, 1965), pp. 96–100.

¹³ Braidwood and Braidwood, *Excavations*, pp. 516–18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 301 ff.; fig. 240–246; plates 56–64. An easily accessible reproduction can be found in H. Frankfort, *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*² (Penguin, 1958), pl. 135B.

that was adopted, a millennium later, by the Hebrews. Dr. C. W. Vermuelen, a urologist of Billings Hospital, after examination of the figurines, reported:

In *A*, the corona of the penis being completely exposed, circumcision is undoubtedly represented. The same is true of *C*, in which the glans penis is remarkably accurate anatomically. Specimen *B* probably represents incomplete circumcision. In each of these specimens the penis is pendulous; if erection is actually represented, *B* may be uncircumcised, but in *A* and *C* circumcision is still quite certain.¹⁵

These indications seem suggestive enough, and until some new finds from other areas come to increase the present state of our knowledge, a few conclusions can be cautiously presented. Circumcision was known to the inhabitants of North Syria during the early third millennium B.C. The practice may have been introduced there by a group which entered, apparently peaceably, the ʿAmuq region sometime around 3200 B.C. (Phase *F*). Mixing with the old stock which lived in the area, this new group led to the flowering of a culture, Phase *G* of 2800 B.C., that became brilliant in its achievements. It is not impossible that its attainments were imitated west of the Euphrates. All the evidence which is now at our disposal suggests that the era thus created was a particularly rich one for the inhabitants of the Balikh and Khabur plains.¹⁶ In this manner, the residents of those areas, which were to see the growth of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, possibly became acquainted with the rite. The more civilized sections farther southeast, in Mesopotamia, however, did not accept it.

ʿAmuq *G* was also a phase corresponding to a time in which Egypt was ending its Gerzean period, and in which the early dynasts were fashioning a united empire. It was an age, also, in which circumcised Syrians were depicted as being eaten by proud embodiments of Egypt. One too, in which all sorts of Asiatic elements, predominantly from the coastal region, were influencing the arts and crafts of the Two Lands.¹⁷ The worship of Seth, a divinity probably of Syrian provenance, was well-established in the Delta and seriously contended with that of Horus. In such an atmosphere, it seems inescapable that some of the infiltrators' rituals became accepted and *adapted* by the ruling classes. As a last argument, it may be appropriate to point out that the Egyptian word for the term "foreskin," *qrn.t*, is beyond doubt a phonetic rendering of the Semitic *ḡrlt*, Hebrew *ʿorlāh*. This in itself may be an indication that the concept of circumcision traveled from the north to the south, and not the other way around.

¹⁵ Braidwood and Braidwood, *Excavations*, p. 303.

¹⁶ M. E. L. Mallowan, *Twenty-five Years of Mesopotamian Discoveries (1932-1956)*, pp. 16, 31, 42.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr. (Ägyptol. Abhandl., 5)*, ch. 2. See also H. J. Kantor, in *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology*, pp. 1-37.