

Circumcision in the Biblical Period

Circumcision (the removal of the foreskin of the penis) was practiced as a religious ritual among many cultures of the Ancient Near East. In ancient Israel and in Judaism, circumcision was routinely performed on infants boys eight days after birth (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3; Luke 1:59; 2:21; Phil. 3:5), though circumstances might permit or require circumcisions be performed on adolescents (cf. Gen. 17:25) or even on grooms (cf. Gen. 34:14–24). The Hebrews attributed different aspects of the practice to divine injunctions made to Abraham (Gen. 17:9–27), to Joshua (Josh. 5:2–7), and to Israel (Lev. 12:1–5; cf. Exod. 12:44, 48). In one passage (Exod. 4:24–26), Zipporah, the wife of Moses, is credited with saving her husband's life by circumcising their son.

In Genesis 17:11, circumcision is said to serve as a “sign” of God's covenant with Israel; though this would remain the primary meaning, circumcision also acquired a figurative sense. Persons who are deemed “to have uncircumcised ears” are considered to be unreceptive, haughty, and proud (Jer. 6:10), while those who have an “uncircumcised heart” are considered to be stubborn (Lev. 26:41; Ezek. 44:7, 9; cf. Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Rom. 2:28–29).

During the Hellenistic period, circumcision became a central issue between assimilationists and nationalists. To avoid scorn (cf.

Horace, *Satires* I.v.95; ix.70; Martial, *Epigrams* vii, lxxii, 5, 6, etc.), some Hellenized Jews underwent painful surgery to restore the foreskin (1 Macc. 1:15; 1 Cor. 7:18; Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.5.1). Antiochus Epiphanes played into the hands of the more Hellenistic Jews by forbidding circumcision on pain of death (1 Macc. 1:48, 60). Later, during the Hasmonean period (second to mid-first centuries BCE), the tables were turned and the Jews who were now in power forced circumcision on others, including the Edomites and the Itureans (Josephus, *Jewish War* 13.9.1; 13.11.3). Still later, in the Roman period, the emperor Hadrian once again forbade circumcision, and this helped to trigger the Bar-Kochba revolt (132–35 CE).

In early Christianity, the merits of continuing circumcision were debated but the rite was ultimately determined unnecessary for those who were baptized into Christ (cf. Acts 15 and Rom. 2:29; Col. 2:11; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:15). Nevertheless, the church thought it important to remember that Jesus had been circumcised (Luke 2:21), and Paul, who referred to those who argued for the continuance of circumcision as “those who mutilate the flesh” (Phil. 3:2), could nevertheless speak positively of his circumcision as one whose righteousness under the law was blameless (Phil. 3:5–6). The apparent explanation for this anomaly is that Paul and other early Christians wanted to maintain that circumcision had been a valid (divinely mandated) practice in its time, but that the need for circumcision had been abrogated by Christ’s death and resurrection,

which initiated a new covenant with God (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:13). Paul also seizes on the figurative uses of circumcision in the Bible to speak of a circumcision that is of the spirit rather than of the flesh (Rom. 2:29; Phil. 3:3).