

The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel

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INTRODUCTION

The biblical text first mentions circumcision in Genesis 17, and researchers recognize that the meaning of the rite is innocuous in that context.¹ The following study attempts to illumine the meaning of the rite of circumcision in Genesis 17, and consequently Israel's circumcision in light of the background of the ancient Near East (ANE), specifically the Egyptian background.² In general, this paper presupposes the theses, which John Walton has outlined succinctly.³ In particular, thesis two, "God often used existing institutions and converted them to his theological purposes," is useful when examining the issue of circumcision in the Old Testament (OT).⁴ Genesis 17 does not assume a polemical nature, but rather assumes that the reader is already familiar with the rite of circumcision. If modern readers have the same understanding, then they would also be able to ascertain the significance of the Israelite rite.⁵

In order to demonstrate this point, I first argue for the probability of the Egyptian background to understanding Israelite circumcision over other less

possible ANE backgrounds. Second, I present the evidence of circumcision in Egypt around the time of Abraham, including a description of the actual rite itself, the age of the subject of the rite, the subjects of the rite, and the meaning of the rite in Egypt. Third, I endeavor to synthesize the conclusions from Egypt's practice and significance with what the OT reveals about circumcision in Genesis 17. This article argues that circumcision in Egypt functions as an initiatory rite to the service of the king-priest, identifying the priesthood as *belonging* to and *devoted* to the king-priest, who was also *affiliated* with the deity, Rā, through the same rite. It is this meaning that transfers to Abraham and Israel and illuminates the meaning of circumcision in Israel's context.

THE PROBABILITY OF THE EGYPTIAN BACKGROUND

From the biblical account of Abraham's sojourning, there are only three possible places where one could locate Abraham's background for understanding circumcision: "Ur of the Chaldeans," his sojourning in the land of Canaan, and Egypt.⁶

Ur of the Chaldeans

Genesis 11:28 says that Abraham was from "Ur of the Chaldeans." Some discussion has occurred over where exactly this Ur was. Most modern Bible atlases locate Abraham's Ur of the Chaldeans in southeast Mesopotamia on the west side of the Euphrates River in modern day Iraq, and show that Abraham's journey north to Haran commenced there. Another proposal by Cyrus Gordon would place Ur of the Chaldeans at Ura, which would be located directly northeast of Haran in North Syria.⁷

This geographical detail is significant if one posits a background for Abraham's circumcision in which it is understood as a polemic against and a rejection of his former country's (southern Ur) practice of non-circumcision.⁸ If Abraham was not born in the East, then he probably never sojourned in a culture with a religion that did not practice circumcision, though one cannot be certain of the practice of peoples of the land of Canaan at this time (see below). Even if Abraham does come from the East (an area which did not practice circumcision), he still travels through North Syria on his way to Canaan, and might be introduced to the rite there.

Evidence of circumcision from three statues of warriors in North Syria dated around 2800 B.C. provides the earliest evidence of circumcision in the ANE to date.⁹ These statues represent the full amputation of the prepuce similar to the operation, which the Hebrews would adopt about a millennium later.¹⁰ Besides the evidence of these three statues, scholars have no more evidence of circumcision from this area. They do not know the significance of the rite or the proper subjects of it. Regarding the geographical origins of circumcision, Sasson argues tentatively, though probably rightly, that the rite of circumcision does originate in North Syria and travels south through Canaan to Egypt. He also seems to infer that Abraham would have received the rite from North Syria. Sasson's last inference remains only tentative for no scholar has ventured to argue exclusively for a North Syrian background for the circumcision of Abraham and Israel; rather, some propose the possibility of Abraham's acquaintance with the rite since Abraham arrives on the scene approximately a millennium after the date of the North Syrian evidence.¹¹

The Land of Canaan

Genesis 12:5–9 records Abraham's first sojourn through the land of Canaan as he moves towards the South. DeRouchie is the first to suggest that West Semites in Palestine practiced circumcision with the operation of the full removal of the prepuce.¹² He introduces this evidence as possible contrary evidence to his own proposal which claimed only Israel performed circumcision with full amputation of the prepuce.¹³ Since the Megiddo ivory dates after the time of Abraham and Israel's Exodus, even if DeRouchie's thirteenth century date is correct, and since this study does not depend on whether Israel's practice of full amputation of the prepuce is unique from the other nations, one may safely dismiss the Canaanite background to the circumcision of Abraham and Israel.¹⁴

Egypt

Genesis 12:10–20 transitions to Abraham's sojourn in Egypt causing Egypt to be considered a possible background for the circumcision of Abraham and Israel. However, not many scholars have explored this background.¹⁵ James' suggestion is based on a nomadic reconstruction of the national history of Israel, and his insight into the transfer of the rite of circumcision from Egypt to Israel will be examined in more detail below.

Evidence of circumcision in Egypt is attested prior to Abraham¹⁶ and contemporary with him (ca. XII dynasties=2134–1786 B.C.).¹⁷ Any proposed background of circumcision must be able to explain how the same rite given to Abraham around 2000 B.C. in Genesis 17 also passes to the nation of Israel approximately 400 years later (Exod 4:24–26, 12:44,48; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:2–9).¹⁸ The Egyptian background qualifies for this common milieu between Israel and her patriarchs. Another possibility is that the Aramean side of the family possessed the North Syrian tradition of circumcision and that Abram passed it down to his offspring along with the rest of the tradition of the promises.

Conclusion

Since one does not know the significance of circumcision in North Syria, it is impossible to draw comparisons between it and Abraham's circumcision except for the similar outward form of the full amputation of the prepuce. However, there are three reasons that make a North Syrian background improbable for Israel's circumcision. First, the temporal proximity of the Egyptian evidence of circumcision to the time of Abraham favors Egypt rather than the temporal remoteness of the evidence of circumcision from North Syria. The evidence from North Syria is too isolated to know certainly whether the rite was actually practiced during the time of Abraham, since we have no evidence of the rite in this location within a millennium of Abraham's life.

Second, if the rite travels from north to south, there is no way of knowing how it changed from culture to culture, if it even changed at all. If the rite of circumcision primitively was a fertility rite or a puberty rite related to marriage, as many scholars believe, then one may argue that Egypt did alter its meaning.¹⁹ One does not know whether the Egyptians altered the significance of circumcision or preserved the same significance as North Syria. The formal operation differed (see Egyptian operation below), but this does not necessarily indicate a change in significance.

Third, and most importantly, an Egyptian background logically accounts for both Abraham and Israel, since Israel comes exclusively from Egypt. The other alternative milieus for Abraham cannot account for Israel's Egyptian milieu.

EGYPTIAN CIRCUMCISION

Egyptology and ethnology provide evidence of circumcision from various periods of Egypt's history from the VI dynasty to the Roman period. Specialists have examined this evidence seeking answers to the following questions: circumcision technique, age of the subject, the subject of the rite, and the meaning of the rite. These aspects will be compared and contrasted with Israel's circumcision.

Circumcision Technique

Since the work of Frans Jonckheere, scholars have come to near universal agreement over Egyptian circumcision technique.²⁰ Describing the procedure, he says, "Thus we say that everything culminates to establish that, in Ancient Egypt, the surgical rite of circumcision consisted of an elementary maneuver: the liberation of the glans, obtained by making a facile dorsal splitting of the prepuce."²¹ Therefore Egyptian circumcision does not consist of the full amputation of the prepuce, as Hebrew circumcision does.

This difference primarily (other differences remain) has caused scholars to recoil from establishing a relationship between Egyptian and Hebrew circumcision. Sasson calls this difference a "problem,"²² which manifests itself in Joshua 5:2–9. Space does not permit a full exegesis of this text, but Sasson's conclusion invites some interaction. He interprets Israel's "second circumcision" in Joshua 5:2 as an "improvement" upon the prior incomplete Egyptian circumcision. He believes that Jonckheere's study provides warrant for this understanding. Also, he interprets 5:9 saying, "In this context, God's remark in verse 9 becomes clearer. When the deed was accomplished, he states: 'This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you'"²³ Sasson views the two circumcision techniques as incompatible, and therefore he seeks other contexts from which Israel might have received the rite.²⁴

Joshua 5:2–9, however, contains difficulties for interpretation. Bruce Waltke presents two interpretive options:

On the one hand, that portion of the united militia who were forty years and older may have had to be circumcised again because the Egyptian circumcision was an incomplete slit, unlike the Israelite complete circumcision. This interpretation best explains the emphasis on flint knives, which were plentiful in Palestine but

not in Egypt, and the reference to the reproach of Egypt (Josh 5:9). On the other hand, that older portion may have been reckoned as the first circumcision, and those under forty, who were not circumcised in the desert, the second. This interpretation best suits verses 4–7.²⁵

Waltke's second option is to be preferred. The discourse function of verses 4–7 (*waw* + non-verb) provides the background or the occasion for the second circumcision: all the ones who came out of Egypt were circumcised, but the ones born in the desert were *not circumcised*. The narrative resumes with verse 8 (*wayy^hhi*). The reproach of Egypt refers to the uncircumcision of the Israelites during the wilderness wandering, and is not necessarily a polemical statement against the incomplete Egyptian circumcision.²⁶ The problem was uncircumcision, not necessarily an incomplete circumcision.²⁷

The question still remains whether the difference of outward form between the Egyptian and Israelite operations is problematic for establishing the transfer of the rite from Egypt to Israel. Although a difference of operation existed, one may still maintain the probability of the transfer of the rite from Egypt to Israel, since the same basic rite of cutting the male's prepuce does not change. God did not use a rite, which included the cutting of the ear or hand and transfer that rite to a Hebrew male's prepuce. This transfer would be less probable to imagine. In this case God took an already existing Egyptian rite of the incomplete cutting of the male's prepuce, with which Israel would have been familiar, and modified the operation for his purposes.

Age of the Subject of the Rite

For a comparative study of this nature, ascertaining the age of the subject submitting to this rite is important, for this understanding will also aid in focusing on who the culture saw fit to receive the rite. We will first examine the Egyptian evidence, compare it to the generally accepted assumption of circumcision in all cultures, and finally compare it to the Hebrew situation.

The Egyptian evidence for age of the subject is difficult to ascertain with certainty. Ability to make precise calculations of age based on textual evidence eludes scholars, thus one can only make generalizations based on pictorial evidence. The evidence from mummies is irrelevant for this question. Only the plastic representations advance our knowledge at this point, and even this evidence may not be as conclusive as one might presume.²⁸

The evidence from Egypt points to an age range of 6–14,²⁹ causing scholars such as Jonckheere and Sasson to conclude that the rite may have two possible meanings: 1) a prenuptial or marriage rite, or 2) puberty rite or rite of passage into manhood.³⁰ Both of these scholars favor the second option, but the work of other scholars may bring more illumination to the work of Sasson and Jonckheere.

These conclusions pertaining to Egypt seem to agree with the generally accepted conclusion that those ancient civilizations which practiced circumcision, did so at either an age of entrance into manhood or at an age of entrance into marriage.³¹ In the case of other civilizations one must remain content with these general conclusions. There is, however, more evidence from Egypt that casts light on the rite in question.

According to the known evidence from the ANE, Israel is the only nation to circumcise all of its male infants on the eighth day.³² The significance of this contrast will be extracted, once the Egyptian significance of the rite is described.

The Subject of the Rite

A few scholars make a distinction between the question of subject and the question of age. The majority of scholars listed above collapse the age and subject questions drawing implications based on the age of the subject alone. For these scholars to conclude that circumcision in Egypt is a general marriage or puberty rite, they must also demonstrate that Egyptian males of all classes *generally* practiced circumcision, and show that circumcision was not *specifically a rule* for the royal and priestly classes. From the outset, it is interesting to note that Josephus recognizes the circumcision of Egyptian priests in Greco-Roman times. Furthermore, Aylward M. Blackwood notes, “By a law of Hadrian only priests might be circumcised. If a candidate proved his priestly descent and his freedom from blemish, permission was granted to circumcise. Until he had been circumcised, no person could exercise the priestly office.”³³ This question is crucial for this study, and it has also been a relevant question for Egyptologists and ethnologists. However, not all of these scholars have probed the depths of this question equally.³⁴

Though the evidence is not wholly conclusive, and there are still unknown factors due to research complications,³⁵ some scholars maintain that circumcision was obligatory and reserved for priests and royalty and not obligatory for the lower classes.³⁶ The case is established on the grounds that even

though evidence of circumcision exists among members of the lower class during the Ancient Empire (III–VI Dynasties=2680–2180 B.C.),³⁷ it is probably not a general or obligatory practice in this class, since we have evidence of uncircumcised Egyptians from this time.³⁸ However, there is enough evidence to conclude that circumcision was obligatory for priestly and royal classes, for the evidence from these mummies and texts indicates that males of the royal-priestly courts submitted to circumcision from the time of the Ancient Kingdom.³⁹

Two pieces of textual evidence must be expositioned. The first is from the 1st Intermediate Period (2180–2040 B.C.), which is just prior to the time of Abraham. Jonckheere accidentally omitted this piece of evidence from his study, but Stracmans has examined it in detail. Naga-Ed-Dér contained 87 stelae, which Dows Dunham collected and examined. Of particular interest for this study, stele 84 mentions circumcision.⁴⁰ Besides the simple reference to circumcision in this text, there are other relevant facts for this study. Stracmans comments on both the picture and the text. The picture depicts Ouha standing in the appropriate or royal stance, but more importantly Ouha is “holding a scepter of consecration with one hand, and a rod of ceremony in the other.”⁴¹ Stracmans draws attention to other details in the text of the stele that both *ANET* and Dunham neglect: the speaker, Ouha, identifies himself among other appellations as the Chancellor of the King ... Lector-Priest.⁴² In this role, he most probably belonged to the royal clergy along with the majority of the young men of the palace. At this title, he had to be circumcised in his adolescence along with 120 of his fellows.⁴³ Stracmans interprets the scene as a boast at the memory of the initiation ceremony, which Ouha and 120 others had to endure so that they might enter into the service of the king-priest.

The second piece of evidence comes from the XII dynasty (ca. 2000 B.C.), which is contemporary to Abraham. Stracmans notes that although Jonckheere examined one of these three texts, he neglected its full implications for the subject and meaning of Egyptian circumcision.⁴⁴ The three texts have one common component: they refer to royal members of the palace. The second and third texts have a common component since they clearly refer to circumcision,⁴⁵ while the first text refers conspicuously to “when the knot was not yet loosed to me.”⁴⁶ The genre of these texts is biography or autobiography constructed in the royal stereotypical form.⁴⁷ These texts

do not refer to kings, but it is often the case that these themes and eulogies of the stelae of princes and rulers of the Court were borrowed from the stelae and royal monuments raised in honor of the kings.⁴⁸ As members of the king's court they would naturally undergo circumcision, since the king himself underwent circumcision.⁴⁹

We may make some preliminary conclusions concerning Egyptian circumcision. First, Egyptian technique differed from the Hebrew technique since the former was only an incision of the prepuce, while the latter fully amputated the prepuce. Second, the evidence indicates that Egyptian males were circumcised between 6–14 years old. Third, the evidence indicates that not all Egyptian males of the lower class underwent circumcision in the Ancient Kingdom, showing that the rite was not obligatory or general for this class. In contrast the evidence seems to indicate that circumcision was the rule for the king and his priests from the earliest times.⁵⁰ This last conclusion constitutes the final point of contrast with the rite in Israel, since circumcision was a general rite applied to *every* male Israelite (Gen 17:10). Though the subject of the rite differs between the cultures, it is the Egyptian circumcision of priests, which will illuminate the meaning of the right in the case of Israel.

Meaning of the Rite

Since Egyptian circumcision has more significance than a puberty rite or a marriage/fertility rite, one should seek to assign another meaning to Egyptian circumcision.⁵¹ Proponents of the puberty/marriage rite views have not sufficiently interacted with all of the available evidence from Egypt, and they have not provided satisfactory interpretations of the evidence. Neither do meanings of hygiene or medical procedure explain the evidence.⁵² Here we attempt to provide an alternative proposal, which establishes the special, obligatory, and ancient character of the circumcision of priests in Egypt.

The work of Stracmans has already introduced the idea of initiation, which would mean that circumcision "aggregates the young circumcised to the service and to the cult of the reigning king."⁵³ One may perceive the evidence of the initiatory nature of circumcision in Egypt, if one is acquainted with the general characteristics of initiation rites.⁵⁴ Evidence of these characteristics in Egypt demonstrates that circumcision was indeed part of an initiatory rite in Ancient Egypt.⁵⁵ Stracmans' work on the Naga-Ed-Dér stele also

indicated the presence of “games” (the scratching and the clawing) at the time of circumcision.⁵⁶ Stracmans combines the evidence of this stele with the bas-relief of the British Museum and compared it to modern practice and concluded that Ancient Egyptian circumcision was part of an initiation ceremony, in particular an initiation into the royal clergy.

Although Stracmans, Foucart, James, and Blackwood recognize the initiatory nature of Egyptian circumcision, they must still provide more specific conclusions. What does it mean to enter the service of the king-priest, who also was circumcised? What did it mean for the king-priest to be circumcised? A reference to the circumcision of Rā himself is crucial at this juncture, for it clarifies the meaning of the circumcision of the Pharaoh himself.⁵⁷ When one understands the circumcision of Pharaoh as an imitation of Rā’s circumcision, it then may be understood as an identification sign of belonging or affiliation with the deity. The same meaning of affiliation would also apply to the royal clergy of the Pharaoh. As E. O. James comments on the transfer of the rite in Egypt to Israel, he also recognizes the initiatory meaning of the rite in Egypt:

If the original conception of circumcision [in Egypt] was that of deification, or union with a god, as in the consecration ceremony, the rite would readily become a covenant sign when once the divine kingship was abandoned in favor of the notion of a holy nation consecrated to Jahweh. If such installation was part of the original pattern of myth and ritual which influenced Hebrew religion in its formative period, it has undergone a process of disintegration in its fresh environment. This may have resulted from its transmission through the Canaanites, if Gilgal was an ancient sanctuary at which initiation ceremonies were performed.⁵⁸

James has correctly grasped the significance of circumcision in Egypt, but he provides objections to a full transfer of these ideas to the Israelite rite asserting that Canaan may have mediated the rite to Israel.

Conclusion

The conclusions of the above section have moved from more probable to less probable. The evidence certainly indicates that Egypt practiced an incomplete circumcision as opposed to Israel’s complete amputation of the prepuce. Furthermore, no evidence indicates that Egyptians circumcised their infants, but Egyptian males were circumcised around the age of adolescence

or younger (ca. 6–14 years of age).

The evidence for the subject of circumcision was found to be conflicting, and therefore an obstacle to certainty. Since there is evidence of circumcision outside of the royal-priestly classes (in the Ancient Kingdom), conclusions concerning the subject of the rite must remain tentative. However, there is evidence of uncircumcision among the lower classes, and circumcision among the royal-priestly class was the rule according to the textual and mummy evidence. Therefore, the rite was obligatory for all priests and kings, but not obligatory for the laity.

The assignment of meaning to circumcision proved to be the most challenging. Some scholars favored a puberty rite based on the age question alone (see Sasson and Jonckheere), while others considered it a rite of initiation into the cult, as a sign which identified one as specially devoted to the god for service. In the final analysis, the conclusion that accounted for the most evidence and was able to explain the circumcision of Rā and the circumcision of the royal court of the Pharaoh was that Egyptian circumcision functioned as *a specific, voluntary, and initiatory rite to identify and affiliate the subject with the deity and to signify devotion to the same deity*.

SYNTHESIS WITH ISRAEL'S CIRCUMCISION

Egyptologists and ethnologists have devoted significant time to the study of Egyptian circumcision, but generally they have presented their research irrespective of Israel's circumcision with the exception of an occasional passing comment.⁵⁹ With rare exception, biblical scholars have neglected to incorporate the insights of these scholars into their research.⁶⁰ Therefore, a thoroughgoing synthesis of the above conclusions with the Israelite practice still needs to be explored, considering particularly how Israel might have received and understood the modifications to the Egyptian rite of circumcision. We will first review the putative obstacles of the proposed transfer, and then we will examine the ways that Egyptian circumcision aids in understanding Israelite circumcision.

Putative Obstacles

I have already highlighted the differences between the two practices (technique, age, specific to priesthood), and have noted where scholars have viewed

these differences as problems or obstacles for the transfer between Egyptian and Israelite cultures. The underlying assumption of these scholars is probably that the rite must be an exact parallel in order to conclude with certainty that the Israelites obtained the rite from the Egyptians. However, one must consider the possibility that God modifies already existing structures and makes them productive in his own revelation to his people.⁶¹ For example, the difference of age could be interpreted as God revealing to every Israelite family through circumcision that the male child is already consecrated to God, and does not need to wait till adolescence for initiation through circumcision into the family of the priesthood, the kingdom of priests. On the eighth day, his initiation is complete. Furthermore, the difference of subjects of the rite would communicate to *every* Israelite male and his family that he is a priest to God and affiliated with the priesthood consecrated to Yahweh, whereas in Egypt, only *certain* males would have this type of relationship with the deity. Therefore the alleged obstacles of some scholars actually become the grounds for theologizing in the Israelite context.⁶²

One more possible objection remains for our proposal of the transfer of the rite of circumcision from Egypt to Israel. We have already alluded to James' objection to the transfer of *meaning*, even though James concludes that Egypt participates in Israel's obtaining of circumcision.⁶³ However, he then claims that the *meaning* changed in the transfer process. In particular, James argues that the notion of divine kingship was abandoned in favor of the notion of a holy nation consecrated to Yahweh,⁶⁴ but it is precisely at this point that James' reconstruction becomes unpersuasive. First, James assumes a nomadic stage in the history of Israel, where some Hebrew tribes may have received the rite of circumcision from the Canaanites without its significance for the king-priest of Egypt. As a related point, James also depends on source critical theory, which does not place circumcision in prominence until the post-exilic period. But some have suggested that P comes before D, and therefore P would be proximate to the monarchy.⁶⁵ Therefore, even if this theory is granted, circumcision and the divine kingship would be in sharp focus simultaneously. Second, the canonical shape of the text presents Israel as a son of God (Exod 4:22–23) after the pattern of Adam (Gen 1:26; Genesis 9), which indicates that Israel resumes the role of viceroy, which began with Adam and was upheld with Noah. James perceives correctly the role of Israel's monarchy in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2, but he does not note

that according to the canonical shape of the text the Davidic monarchy is instituted in order to accomplish God's plan for the nation (Exod 19:4–6). These sons of God are affiliated with the God of Israel as his representatives in a similar way that Pharaoh was affiliated with the deity.

Instead of parsing monarchy and circumcision as James deems necessary, the better synthesis will preserve these two notions side by side. This means that Israelite circumcision will still identify the nation of Israel as the king-priest, the son of Yahweh, consecrated to his service. As an identity sign, this sign would also function as a reminder of Israel's relationship to Yahweh according to Fox.

The alleged objections of (1) the difference between the external forms of circumcision and (2) the reconstructed transfer process are not persuasive enough to overturn the thesis that God revealed circumcision to Abraham and Israel through the Egyptian rite and significance, though he modified important aspects of it. In light of the Egyptian background, these modifications spotlight the theological significance of circumcision for Israel.⁶⁶

Israelite Circumcision in Light of Egypt

The Egyptian background of circumcision illuminates the OT text in at least three places in which Yahweh comes into covenant relationship with his servants. First, and most importantly, God adds the rite of circumcision to an already existing covenant relationship (cf. Gen 15:18, where the Hebrew verb *ברת* means to initiate a covenant).⁶⁷ What does circumcision contribute to this covenantal relationship? The answers to this question have rested between viewing Abraham's circumcision as a reminder to God to keep his promise of posterity⁶⁸ to a multi-valent meaning including malediction and consecration.⁶⁹

This study agrees with the latter of these conclusions. One cannot simply reduce Genesis 17 to fertility and progeny, since Genesis 17:1–2 reviews the relational-covenantal nature of the Abrahamic narrative. The covenant includes other notions such as nation, name, and blessing (Gen 12:1–3).⁷⁰ Second, Genesis 9:14–15 specifically indicates that the sign of the rainbow is to remind God, whereas Genesis 17 gives no such explicit indication.⁷¹ Third, Fox relies on the alleged original meaning of circumcision as fertility rite, which causes him to focus on progeny in this text.⁷² It should be clear that Fox cannot rely so confidently on this meaning of circumcision, since at least Egypt does not seem to admit of such significance.

Although others have concluded that circumcision means consecration, their conclusions may be further buttressed by these conclusions, since this study properly locates this meaning in the ANE at a time contemporary with Abraham and Israel. According to the Egyptian background already ascertained, circumcision functions as a sign of remembrance to Abraham and his offspring that they are affiliated with Yahweh or devoted to him, just as the king-priest and his clergy in Egypt were specially devoted to the deity. This conclusion about circumcision corresponds well with the already inaugurated covenant relationship of Genesis 15:18. The call to relationship and covenantal responsibility to God in Genesis 17:1–2 become signified in the rite of circumcision.

Second, just as the king-priest was the son of the god in Egypt, and was consecrated to him through circumcision,⁷³ Israel as the first born son of Yahweh (Exod 4:22–23) has undergone and will undergo circumcision (Josh 5:2–9) in order to be consecrated to his service.⁷⁴

Third, only the priests were obligated to be circumcised in Egypt, but in Israel *every* male was to be circumcised on the eighth day (Gen 17:12), signifying that Abraham's family consists of priests. Later in the story Israel is called a *kingdom of priests* and a holy nation (Exod 19:6). The phrase “holy nation” also means consecrated to God or belonging to God and would complement the meaning of kingdom of priests.⁷⁵ As a kingdom of priests, circumcision is the appropriate sign for the people of Israel, for it will remind every male Israelite that he is a priest, specially consecrated to Yahweh and his service.

Conclusion

We have argued that the most plausible background for understanding Abraham's and Israel's circumcision is Egypt. Egypt satisfies the common milieu criterion, necessary for their understanding of circumcision. Second, we argued that circumcision in Egypt means affiliation or identification with the deity and devotion to his service. The rite was obligatory for all priests to the deity, while the evidence suggests that circumcision was not forced upon the laity. Third, we argued that although formal differences existed between the Egyptian rite and the Israelite rite, these differences actually functioned as the grounds for significant theologizing in Israel. In Israel every male baby is consecrated or devoted to God at eight days old. The family of Abraham and Sarah were to be signified as the priesthood of Yahweh from birth.

Appendix: Extra-biblical Evidence of Circumcision⁷⁶

No.	Date	Location	Ancient Source	Subject of Circumcision	Modern Source
1	4 th Millennium BCE	Egypt	Palette	Enemies of Egypt (Western Asiatics?)	Sasson, 1966; Jonckheere, 1951
2	2800 BCE	'Amuq valley (North Syria)	3 Bronze Figurines	3 Warriors	Sasson, 1966
3	VI Dynasty (c. 2200 BCE)	Egypt (Saqqara)	Text + Plastique	12–14 year old (judging from plastique)	Jonckheere, 1951
4	First Intermediate Period (c. 2180–2040 BCE)	Egypt (Naga-ed-Dér)	Stele 84	Ouha, Lector-Priest	Stracmans, 1955
5	XII Dynasty (c. 2134–1786 BCE)	Egypt (Khoumhetep II of Beni-Hassan)	Stele	A prince of the King (underwent circumcision as a child)	Jonckheere, 1951; Stracmans, 1959
6	XII Dynasty (c. 2134–1786 BCE)	Egypt	Stele (preserved in Florence)	Sesostris I st (child)	Stracmans, 1959
7	XII Dynasty (c. 2134–1786 BCE)	Egypt (Heliopolis)	Stele (copy on leather from the New Kingdom)	Sesostris I st (child)	Stracmans, 1959
8	Beginning of New Empire (1552–1069 BCE)	Egypt	Book of the Dead (papyrus text)	Rā	Jonckheere, 1951
9	XIX Dynasty (c. 1552–1069 BCE)	Egypt (Ruins of Ramesses)	Text (ostracon)	?	Jonckheere, 1951
10	New Empire (c. 1552–1069 BCE)	Egypt (Karnak)	Plastique	6–8 year old	Jonckheere, 1951
11	c. 1500 BCE	Egypt	Ebers Papirus (88, 10–12)	?	Jonckheere, 1951
12	c. 13 th Century BCE	Megiddo	Ivory	Prisoners	DeRouchie, 2004
13	XXV Dynasty (c. 800 BCE)	Egypt	Stele (Piankhi)	King was “pure” in the sense of circumcised	Jonckheere, 1951

¹ Michael V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in Light of the Priestly ‘ot Etiologies,” *RB* 81 (1974): 557. John Goldingay, “The Significance of Circumcision,” *JSOT* 88 (2000): 3.

² Cf. the Appendix listing the relevant evidence from Egypt and elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

³ John H. Walton, “Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies,” *Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 40–45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42. Though Walton provides circumcision as an example of this thesis, I do not accept his particular interpretation of Scripture’s use of circumcision in the ANE, and I will provide an alternative interpretation, which will still remain consistent with Walton’s point.

⁵ For a biblical-theological treatment of circumcision, cf. John D. Meade “Circumcision of the Heart in Leviticus and Deuteronomy: Divine Means for Resolving Curse and Bringing Blessing” *SBJT* (2014): 59–85; *Idem*, “Circumcision of the Flesh to Circumcision of the Heart: The Developing Typology of the

Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant" in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 127–158.

⁶ The writer was surprised at the omission of the possibility of an Egyptian background on the part of those scholars who considered this question. See Jason S. DeRouchie, "Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums: Theology, Rhetoric, and the Handling of Metaphor," *BBR* 14 (2004): 189 n. 25. DeRouchie is exemplary in this respect, since he considers Ur of the Chaldeans and Canaan, but he omits Egypt from discussion. Meredith G. Kline, "Oath and Ordeal Signs," *WTJ* 27 (1964–65): 115–39; Fox, "Sign of the Covenant," 557–96; Goldingay, "Significance of Circumcision," 3–18; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961).

⁷ Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *JNES* 17 (1958): 30–31. See also Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham of Ur," in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to G. R. Driver* (eds. D. W. Thomas and W. D. McHardy; Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 77–84. More recently Hershel Shanks has defended this proposal in Hershel Shanks, "Abraham's Ur: Is the Pope Going to the Wrong Place?" *BAR* 26/1 (Jan/Feb 2000): 16–19, 66–67. See Shank's map on page 19 for the contrast between the two proposed locations. Gordon handles the seeming linguistic discrepancy between the two names as an inter-Semitic difference. The *-a* in Ura may be long (Aramaic definite article "the City or Station," cf. LXX) or short in which case it would be indicating the oblique case of a diptotic place name. Either way, this ending is not part of the root and would be dropped in later Hebrew. This view accounts for some of the geographical problems with the southern Ur, such as the crossing of the Euphrates (e.g. Josh 24:2–3) and the mention of the Kesed (Kasdim; "Chaldeans") in Gen 22:22 shortly after Aram.

⁸ There is no evidence of circumcision in Eastern Semitic countries such as Assyria and Babylon. See Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966): 476. Also for this particular proposal of the significance of circumcision in Gen 17 and its deft refutation, see DeRouchie, "Circumcision," 189 n. 25.

⁹ Sasson, "Circumcision," 476.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 475–6.

¹¹ Along with Sasson, see DeRouchie, "Circumcision," 189 n. 25.

¹² DeRouchie has introduced a thirteenth century ivory plaque from Megiddo into the discussion. For the history of interpretation of this ivory see DeRouchie, "Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums," 188 n. 24. The picture represents two nude prisoners circumcised with the full amputation of the foreskin in a way similar to the Hebrew practice (cf. *ANEPE*, 332).

¹³ This evidence would not be the only problem to DeRouchie's proposal. DeRouchie does not seem conscious of the fact that he has appealed to North Syrian evidence (full amputation of the prepuce) possibly to establish Abraham's circumcision, but then proceeds to claim that only Israel from 2000 B.C. to roughly 125 AD practiced the rite in this way. Either DeRouchie is certain that North Syria no longer practiced the rite in this way around 2000 B.C., which may weaken the evidence for Abraham's reception of the rite from the North, or DeRouchie is simply inconsistent on this very complicated point.

¹⁴ Jer 9:24–25 only mentions those peoples, which practice incomplete circumcision in Arabia, Egypt, and Canaan (Edom, Ammon and Moab). We will revisit this point below, but see Richard C. Steiner, "Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom: Jeremiah (9:24–25) in the Light of Josephus and Jonckheere," *JBL* 118 (1999): 497–505. For primary sources, which refer to the practice of circumcision among other nations without reference to mode of operation, see Herodotus, *Historia* 2.36, 37, 104. Herodotus concludes that the Egyptians, Colchians, and Ethiopians were the only nations to have practiced circumcision at first, and he could not decide which nation received the rite from the other. For circumcision among the Arabs, see Josephus, *Ant.* 1.214. For Philo's statement concerning the circumcision of Jews, Arabs, Egyptians, Ethiopians, and "nearly all those who inhabit the southern regions near the torrid zone" see Philo, *Supplement* 13.48. For circumcision among the Idumaeans, see Josephus, *Ant.* 12.257–8. For a detailed discussion of whether Jer 9:24–25 refers to the inception of circumcision among the Idumaeans (traditional reading) or whether at this time they conform their already existing practice of circumcision to that of the Jews, see Steiner, "Incomplete Circumcision," 503–4.

¹⁵ An exception to the rule is E. O. James, "Initiatory Rituals," in *Myth and Ritual* (ed. S. H. Hooke; London: Oxford, 1933), 155. James comments, "The cumulative effect of this evidence justifies us in supposing that the sojourn of a section of the Hebrew tribes in the valley of the Nile may have played some part in the adoption of the rite as the initiation *par excellence* into the covenant of Israel."

¹⁶ See *ANEPE*, 629 for a picture of the well-known relief from the VI Dynasty (ca. 2180) from Sakkarah. Dates in this paper depend on Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Egypt," in *NBD* 294. Kitchen locates Abraham during the

Egyptian XI–XII dynasties (ca. 2134–1786 B.C.).

¹⁷ Frans, Jonckheere, “La circonision [sic] des anciens égyptiens,” *Centaurus* 1 (1951): 214. Jonckheere points to a text drawn from the funerary biography of a prince from the Middle Empire, Knoumhetep II of Beni-Hasan of the XII Dynasty (ca. 2180–1786 B.C.), which clearly evidences the practice of circumcision during this time. He concludes, “The phrase of Khnoumhetep thus cleanly locks up a precise indication referring to circumcision.”

¹⁸ Historical critical explanations normally assign Gen 17 to P (postexilic), while they assign Exod 4:24–26 to J or E (the monarchy). William E. Propp assigns Josh 5:2–9 to P as well. See William H. Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 357, 359.

¹⁹ This assertion regarding the origin of circumcision is prevalent in the literature, but I could not find the ancient evidence which supports it. See the examples of Fox, “Sign of the Covenant,” 591–2; De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 47; Adolphe Lods, *Israel: From its Beginnings to the Middle of the Eighth Century* (trans. S.H. Hooke; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD., 1932), 198; Paul R. Williamson, “Circumcision,” in *DOTP*, 122; Propp, “Origins of Infant Circumcision,” 355 n. 1. Fox attempts to give anthropological evidence, which reveals that some tribes perform circumcision before marriage today, but although anthropological studies have a crucial role in this discussion, one must, as Fox does, remember the tenuous nature of such evidence, when attempting to establish ancient practice and significance (Fox, “Sign of the Covenant,” 591).

²⁰ Sasson, “Circumcision,” 474; Steiner, “Incomplete Circumcision,” 503; and DeRouchie, “Circumcision,” 187 accept the conclusions of Jonckheere’s study. For a dissenting opinion see Paul Ghalioungui, *Magic and Medical Science in Ancient Egypt* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 96–97. Ghalioungui’s reason for doubt comes from the Greek historian Strabo, who may indicate two parts to the circumcision operation: 1) the longitudinal cut on the medial line, and 2) then a circular one, around the base of the first. However, even Ghalioungui recognizes that one must be cautious with Strabo’s statements. In the final analysis, Jonckheere’s primary evidence from the *plastiques* and from mummies (see note 21) combined with Jer 9:24–25 should take priority over the comments of Strabo.

²¹ Jonckheere, “Circoncision,” 228. Jonckheere indicates that two procedures of incomplete circumcision existed in Egypt: either 1) to longitudinally split the prepuce on the medial line, or 2) to make immediately an excision taking away a triangular scrap (225; for comparison see Fig. 3, 226; see Fig. 4 and 5 for the evidence of both procedures).

²² Sasson, “Circumcision,” 474.

²³ Ibid., 474.

²⁴ Ibid., 474. In addition to the difference of circumcision technique between Egypt and Israel, Sasson also includes the difference in the age of the subject of circumcision (see below) and the subject itself (see below). He notes that the question of whether circumcision was universal or obligatory in Egypt remains undecided.

²⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, “Circumcision,” *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (eds. R. Banks and R. P. Stevens; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 144.

²⁶ Cf. Gen 34:14 where uncircumcision is identified as a “reproach.”

²⁷ Jer 9:24–25 attests that Scripture makes this distinction between uncircumcised (reproach) and incomplete or “circumcised with the foreskin.” See Steiner, “Incomplete Circumcision,” 503. Steiner thinks that Jonckheere’s conclusions furnish more support to his understanding of Jer 9:24–25, than Sasson’s conclusion on Josh 5:2 (503).

²⁸ Jonckheere, “Circoncision,” 231. He says, “It [age] must be decided by interpreting the age attained by the individuals reproduced on the two reliefs speaking of circumcision. Now, do we need to recall that in Egypt the representation of the human figure is very often conventional? The man is generally reproduced without taking account of his age and without always taking care to endow him with an express fullness of physique.”

²⁹ Ghalioungui, *Magic and Medical Science in Egypt*, 150.

³⁰ Jonckheere, “Circoncision,” 232. Sasson, “Circumcision,” 474. Sasson says, “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.” The evidence only confirms the first part of Sasson’s statement concerning babies, but the evidence does not confirm his positive proposal.

³¹ In addition to the sources mentioned in n. 19, see Robert G. Hall, “Circumcision,” *ABD* 1:1026; Philip J. King, “Circumcision: Who Did It, Who Didn’t and Why,” *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2006): 50.

³² King, “Circumcision,” 50.

³³ See Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray, in *Josephus I*, ed. by G.P. Goold, [LCL], vol. 186 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 349. Josephus' testimony may indicate ancient practice, but it certainly remains consistent with Egyptian practice in Greco-Roman times. See Aylward M. Blackwood, "Priest, Priesthood (Egyptian)," in *ERE* (ed. James Hastings; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), 299b.

³⁴ For scholars who only question but do not seek to answer whether circumcision was general/specific and obligated/voluntary in Egypt, see Jonckheere, "Circoncision," 231; Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," 474 (cf. n. 10). Unfortunately, other scholars do not even seem to be aware of the question when they attempt to understand the significance of circumcision in the OT, see Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant . . .," 592; Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," 3–18; Hall, "Circumcision," 1026; de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 47; Lods, *Israel: From its Beginnings to the Middle of the Eighth Century*, 198; King, "Circumcision: Who Did It, Who Didn't and Why," 48–55.

³⁵ George Foucart, "Circumcision (Egyptian)," in *ERE* (ed. James Hastings; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), 674a. Foucart mentions that early in mummy research, the mummies of the high priests of Amon and their families were scattered all over the world and distributed among 17 museums. Unfortunately the strength of that collection was its unity.

³⁶ Foucart, "Circumcision (Egyptian)," 674a–b, 675b.

³⁷ Ibid., 673a. Foucart indicates that for this time period nothing more may be said about the generality or the character of the practice. See also James, "Initiatory Rituals," 155.

³⁸ Maurice Stracmans, "Encore un texte peu connue relative à la circoncision des anciens égyptiens," *Archivo Internationale di Etnografia e Preistoria*, 2 (1959): 11–12. Unfortunately, most scholars have either overlooked the research of Stracmans, or they have not presented his ideas fully enough for others to appreciate his work. Sasson is an example of the latter, for he mentions the work of Stracmans, but he does not give the reader a lucid presentation of his evidence or his arguments. See Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," 474 (cf. n. 10).

³⁹ Foucart, "Circumcision (Egyptian)," 674a–b. Blackwood, "Priest, Priesthood (Egyptian)," 299b–300a. Stracmans, "Encore un texte peu connue . . .," 11–12. The meaning of this conclusion will be unpacked in the next section.

⁴⁰ Dows Dunham, *Naga-Ed-Dér Stelae of the First Intermediate Period*, (London: Humphrey Milford, 1937). See also ANET, 326; Maurice Stracmans, "A propos d'un texte relatif à la circoncision égyptienne (1re période intermédiaire)," *Mélanges Isidore Lévy* (1955): 631–639. A slight discrepancy appears in the translation of the verb tenses between Dunham and Stracmans. Stracmans understands the verbs as pluperfect, while Dunham understood them as simple past. I follow Stracmans, "(When) I had been circumcised along with 120 men, there was not any among them that I had struck, there was not any among them who had struck me; there was not any among them whom I had scratched, there was not any among them who had scratched me" (Stracmans, 635).

⁴¹ Stracmans, "A propos d'un texte relatif à la circoncision égyptienne . . .," 633. ANET and Dunham do not mention this point. Dunham simply describes this part of the picture as "holding staff in left hand and wand in right hand." See Dunham, *Naga-Ed-Dér Stelae . . .*, 103–4. Dunham understands this scene much differently than Stracmans. He says, "Whether the sentence is to be taken quite literally, as referring to a group ceremony involving 120 youths, is doubtful; it may well be a figurative way of saying that, at his coming of age, he was popular and on good terms with a large group of youths with whom he associated." ANET does not comment on the picture either, and they understand the text as indicating amazement "that so large a group should have been circumcised without injury to the youths or without any youth reacting violently" (326). Dunham's interpretation is almost certainly wrong, since there is no reason to employ a figurative reading. ANET's reading is closer to the truth, but this interpretation depends on the reading of the painful procedure at Sakkarah, which leads them to believe that the clawing and scratching refers to the circumcision itself.

⁴² For the significance of this role in the priesthood, see Blackwood, "Priest, Priesthood (Egyptian)," 301a.

⁴³ Stracmans, "A propos d'un texte relatif à la circoncision égyptienne . . .," 634.

⁴⁴ Stracmans, "Encore un texte peu connue . . .," 7. A full account of the evidence cannot be given here, but only the major contours of Stracmans' argument.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8–9. The texts containing circumcision may be translated, (2) "as a boy whom the foreskin was not loosed," and (3) "finding me in the palace (royal) in the state of a child, not yet circumcised."

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8. Stracmans returns to the reading of the knot, and he interprets it as reference to the sash, which would be conferred on the male at the time of his circumcision (14). Thus these texts refer to the same type of ceremony.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹ Stracmans, “Encore un texte peu connue...,” 11.

⁵⁰ Blackwood, “Priest, Priesthood (Egyptian),” 299b–300a. He says, “It is probable that admission to the priesthood entailed circumcision as far back as the Old Kingdom [2680–2180 B.C.], for even *ka*-servants, who probably were not as a rule *we-eb* priests were circumcised. Griffith suggests that the descriptive label attached to one of the two groups in the scene in question, viz. *sbt hm-k;*, should be rendered ‘qualifying the *ka*-servants by circumcision.’” Griffith’s “scene in question” refers to the staff of the temple of Osiris at Abydos or to that of Anubis at Illahún (301b).

⁵¹ Foucart, “Circumcision (Egyptian),” 675b. Foucart concludes, “Among the numerous explanations suggested for circumcision in general, we must first of all, for reasons given above, exclude those that connect it, directly or indirectly, with puberty...”

⁵² Ibid., 675b. See also Ghalioungui, *Magic and Medical Science in Egypt*, 98.

⁵³ Stracmans, “Encore un texte peu connue...,” 14.

⁵⁴ Goblet D’Alviella, “Initiation (Introductory and Primitive),” in *ERE* (ed. James Hastings; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919), 317b. He notes the following characteristics of initiation rituals: “mystic dances, the use of bull-roarer, daubing with clay and washing this off, performances with serpents and other mad-doings; a simulation of death and resurrection, the granting of a new name to the initiated, the use of masks or other disguises.” D’Alviella includes circumcision under “separation rites,” but he also lists circumcision under the rubric of “admission rites”, when he says, “On the other hand, the mutilations which were classes under separation rites (circumcision, the drawing of a tooth, the removal of a phalanx, etc.) may also be taken as admission rites when their object is to test the courage of the neophytes and their power of resistance, *or to set a mark on them by which they will know each other*” (318b). This last point will become significant below.

⁵⁵ Maurice Stracmans, “Un rite d’initiation a masque d’animal dans la plus ancienne religion égyptienne?” *Annuaire de l’Institut de Philologie et d’Histoire Orientales et Slaves*, XII (1952): 427–440. Stracmans examines the bas-relief from the Ancient Empire n° 994 in the British Museum, and discerns an animal mask, games (or dances?), and a separation aspect to the ritual. Stracmans posits that this scene depicts events consecutive to circumcision and not, as with Ankh-ma-hor, to a representation of the circumcision proper (432).

⁵⁶ Stracmans, “A propos d’un texte relatif à la circoncision égyptienne...,” 636. He says, “It [the scratching and the clawing] concerns, to the contrary [Dunham’s thesis of popularity], from all evidence, *an allusion to the ordeals of endurance and others*, which accompanied and still accompany in our days the ceremonies of circumcision in Africa” (emphasis added).

⁵⁷ For this reference in the Egyptian *Book of Deaths*, see Jonckheere, “Circoncision,” 215. For the most probable meaning of this reference, see Foucart, “Circumcision (Egyptian),” 676b. He says, “Being thus led by a process of elimination to see in circumcision the idea of a mark of submission to a god, a sign of *initiation* into a god, or *alliance* with a god, we may now state that the obscure passage, already quoted, in which mention is made of ‘Rā mutilating himself,’ may have a value far beyond thought. Circumcision would then be an imitation of the action of Rā... *It would be a sign of admission into the company of those who belonged to the family and household of the god*” (emphasis added). Foucart clearly states that circumcision is not a mark of slavery, since the king and priests were considered sons and relatives of the god. In this way the physical sign of circumcision would be an *identification mark*, similar to tattooing or other cuttings that a particular family or tribe might do (676b). Foucart also leaves open the possibility of circumcision as a rite of ceremonial purity of the people in service to their god (676b).

⁵⁸ James, “Initiatory Rituals,” 157.

⁵⁹ Jonckheere, “Circoncision,” 228. He provides a possible explanation for how the Jews and Egyptians could have “two distinct techniques, two clear cutting methods” by suggesting that the two rites could have arose independently. In n. 58 he focuses on another difference, “Another fundamental distinction between the two rites is the age at which they take place; while with the Jews circumcision takes place on the eighth day after birth, we will see that with the Egyptians, some boys are near puberty or even adolescents when one submits to this mutilation.”

⁶⁰ Jack Sasson’s and Richard Steiner’s articles remain as exceptions to this rule, although their analyses are incomplete.

⁶¹ G. K. Beale, “Myth, History, and Inspiration: A Review Article of Inspiration and Incarnation by Peter Enns,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 290.

⁶² One may object saying that Israel has a distinct priesthood within the nation, and that the laity and the priesthood were never considered to be the same cult at any point in the history of Israel. While this point

is true, the Levites also underwent circumcision and thus they, as Israelites, were consecrated to Yahweh. Their family lineage is what qualified them to serve in the cult of Israel, but each Levite had to be circumcised primarily to identify themselves with Yahweh's nation.

⁶³ James, "Initiatory Rituals," 155.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 157. "Mr. Hocart has shown that initiation persists mainly in those communities in which the divine kingship has been discarded. If this cult existed in Palestine, as seems probable from the foregoing evidence, it was certainly in abeyance when the literature of the Old Testament took its present form, though we may hesitate to affirm that Israel was never conscious of the identification of the king with the god. It is significant, however, that, as the ancient conception of kingship disappeared, the institution of circumcision came into greater prominence. After the Exile it acquired a dominant place in Jewish ritual."

⁶⁵ See Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant . . .," 559.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 567–8.

⁶⁷ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 152–161; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC, (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2005), 195.

⁶⁸ The sign would function in similar manner to Genesis 9:13. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant . . .," 595. Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 81. Dempster follows Fox's study since he believes that the promise of descendants is the focus of the context. My study does not deny the references to progeny in Gen 17 but maintains a both/and interpretation. Thus Gen. 17 is about both the progeny of Abraham and the consecration of the same progeny to Yahweh and the service of Yahweh.

⁶⁹ Kline, "Oath and Ordeal Signs," 115, esp. 120. Kline concludes that circumcision as a symbolic oath sanction has two functions: malediction and consecration. Kline has conducted a very important study with conclusions similar to my own, especially regarding consecration. However, he establishes his study on research of ancient Assyrian treaties from around the eighth century B.C., which does not seem as probable of a foundation for what the rite would have meant for Abraham and the Israel of the Exodus. However, a maledictory function may be clearly perceived from the text itself (Gen 17:14), and the consecration meaning may be grasped from Jer 4:4, though this text occurs much later. See also DeRouchie, "Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible . . .," 202–3. DeRouchie concludes similarly to Kline, "The imagery emphasized the Lord's call to covenant fidelity, which meant separation from pagan practices and loyalty to God and his ways. Circumcision also symbolized the covenant curse of excision if loyalty to the Lord was not lived out." For similar conclusions see in addition W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, (UK: Paternoster Press, 1997), 74.

⁷⁰ Note also the repetition of בְּנֵי in Gen 17:1, which only occurs in these two texts in the book of Genesis. Gen 17, therefore, alludes to the original promises of Gen 12:2–3, where God commands Abraham to be a blessing, and now here, in covenant relationship, "be blameless."

⁷¹ In this way, Gen 17 may be more like the sign of the Sabbath in Exod 31:13, which was to remind the Israelites that the Lord sanctifies them.

⁷² Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant . . .," 591, esp. 593. Fox says, "If in Israel, as in most other places, circumcision was originally a puberty or marriage rite, we may surmise that here too circumcision was a preparation for the most important aspect of this turn in the life cycle—reproduction. This connection significantly appears in Gen. XVII, where circumcision is the human expression of God's covenant with Abraham, the major and original part of which is the promise of great posterity."

⁷³ Blackwood, "Priest, Priesthood (Egyptian)," 293b–294a.

⁷⁴ Note the reference to service in Exod 4:23. The Egyptian Pharaoh would have understood the concept of the son of God serving God. He will also understand that circumcision was the way into this service.

⁷⁵ For a challenge to the thoroughgoing thesis that בְּנֵי means "to cut" and therefore "separate" see C. B. Costecalde, "SACRÉ (ET SAINTETÉ)," in *Dictionnaire De La Bible Suplément* (ed. L. Pirot; Paris: Letouzey and Ané, Éditeurs, 1985), 1392–3. One of his conclusions is as follows, "In the non-biblical Semitic texts 'to be consecrated' is not 'to be separated', but 'to approach': the consecration is contrary to the separation. One imagines already the possible consequences of this positive sense in the ritual and ethical biblical texts in which the derivatives of the root *qds* appear." Although בְּנֵי does not appear with בָּנִי in any context, circumcision as a sign of consecration or devotion and affiliation to Yahweh would certainly be a sufficient sign to remind Israel that they are a *holy* (devoted to and affiliated with Yahweh) nation and a royal priesthood.

⁷⁶ The table contains all texts mentioning circumcision in Egypt along with the three bronze figurines from the 'Amuq valley and the ivory from Megiddo. It does not contain every instance of mummy and plastique evidence from Egypt. For comments on these, see the article by Jonckheere, 1951.