

Circumcision in Judeo-Christian Thought

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Physical Circumcision

The practice of circumcision wasn't unique to the ancient Hebrews. Egyptians and various groups in Syria and Palestine slit or completely removed the foreskin. In Scripture, circumcision is a symbol of God's covenant with Abraham. The ritual is a central aspect of Jewish cultural and religious identity. In orthodox and conservative Judaism, it is a mandatory practice. Naming of the baby takes place during the ritual.

Brit Milah ("The Bris")

- In modern Judaism, "the bris" is a continuation of the Law given to Abraham and Moses. Traditionally, it is done by the baby's father on the eighth day. In practice, a trained person (called a mohel) comes to the house and performs the ancient religious ceremony, followed by a meal. It is allowed on the Sabbath. The circumcision is done in the presence of the father and other men while prayers are said.
- With rabbinical permission, the bris can be postponed for premature or sick infants. Some Jewish groups will allow circumcision not to be done at all under certain, specific medical circumstances. For example, the Talmud prohibits circumcision if two previous brothers died from circumcision complications. When circumcision is medically contraindicated, it's best to tell the family at first that it needs to be delayed, and that you would be willing to meet with them and their rabbi to discuss the circumstances.
- Traditional circumcision requires that there be some bleeding as a sign of the covenant. One issue that might come up in ultra-Orthodox Jewish practice is that of *metzitzah be'peh*, or mouth suction, to stop the bleeding. This procedure incurs the risk of infecting the circumcision site with herpes or other agents. Most Orthodox authorities allow use of tube suction or a sponge to stop the bleeding.

Genesis 17

G-D came to Abram when he was 99 years old to make a covenant. He said, "I am El Shaddai (God Almighty). Walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between Me and you, and may multiply you greatly." G-D promised to make Abram the father of many nations, and changed his name to Abraham. The covenant established G-D as "G-D to you and to your descendants."

Genesis 17:10-14 (ESV). You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised.

Things to think about

Reform Judaism has varied in its support of the bris.

When a Jewish family has a male baby you can assume that there will be a circumcision, but perhaps not in the hospital.

Trivia: by legend, 13 men were born already circumcised, a medical condition called *aposthia*. One was Adam. Who are the others?)

I'm aware of situations in which circumcision was not done in life for medical or other reasons, but was done *post mortem*.

Also see:
Genesis 34:15-24.
Shechem.

Exodus 4. Zipporah does an urgent bris on her first-born son, fathered by Moses. This is an intricate passage.

Exodus 12:48. Only the circumcised may eat the Passover.

Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Joshua 5

The Children of Israel have entered the Promised Land, and the covenant is renewed at Gilgal.

- Joshua 5:2. G-D said to Joshua, “Make knives of stone and circumcise the Children of Israel a second time.”
- Joshua 5:8-9. And when the circumcision of the whole nation was finished, they stayed in the camp until they were healed. G-D said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”

Circumcision as a metaphor

- Exodus 6:12. Moses says to G-D, “If the people of Israel didn’t listen to me, then how will Pharaoh listen to me, since I am of uncircumcised lips?”
- Leviticus 19:23. When you come to the land and plant trees for food, the foreskin of its fruit is uncircumcised...
- Deuteronomy 10:16. Therefore, circumcise the foreskin of your heart so that your neck does not again harden (to be stubborn).
- Deuteronomy 30:6. And G-D your Elokim will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants so that you will love G-D your Elokim with all your heart, and with all your soul, so that you may live.
- Jeremiah 4:4. Circumcise yourselves to G-D. Remove the foreskin of your hearts.
- Jeremiah 6:10. To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot listen...
- Jeremiah 9:25. Behold! The days are coming, says G-D, when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh.

Greek and Roman attitudes

- Display of the glans was repugnant to the Greeks and Romans. Circumcised men, including Jews, were the target of contempt and ridicule.
- Jewish scholars attempted to explain the custom to the Greeks. Philo writes that circumcision 1) renders one less susceptible to disease; 2) promotes the idea that cleanliness of the whole body is necessary for priestly sanctification; 3) likens the circumcised member to the heart (since the heart begets thought, the highest

Leviticus 12:3. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin must be circumcised.

1 Samuel 18:25-27. David and Saul’s marriage contract.

One interpretation is that despite the Levitical command, male infants born on the journey out of Egypt had not been circumcised. Another is that the men had been circumcised as infants, and were literally circumcised again.

Circumcision is a symbol of suitability for participating in what God is doing, as well as ritual cleanliness. Here are examples of circumcision of lips, fruit, and the heart.

These passages are relevant to the New Testament debate on the necessity of physical circumcision.

excellence to issue from human beings, it is fitting for the member which alone begets sensible things to resemble the heart as much as possible), and 4) circumcision, by clearing the way for the seed, enhances fertility.

- In the Greco-Roman era, some Jews found ways to hide their circumcision, others underwent surgery to restore the foreskin, some only removed a small portion of the foreskin, and some did abandon circumcision entirely.

The Gospels

- Luke 1. John the Baptizer, born in a town of Judea, was circumcised on the eighth day.
- Luke 2:21. And when eight days were completed, when He was circumcised, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

Early Christianity

- Early Christians had to deal with the Greco-Roman prejudice against circumcision. There were different opinions. Some felt that circumcision was essential, while others argued that requiring circumcision for Gentiles converting to Christianity was inappropriate.
- The anti-circumcision faction focused on the meaning and symbolism of circumcision and asked how the Covenant of Jesus (the “New Covenant”) related to the covenant given to Abraham (the “Old Covenant”). Some argued that the Covenant of Jesus replaced the Abrahamic Covenant, making circumcision irrelevant.
- The pro-circumcision faction argued that circumcision is the continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant through Jesus Christ.
- One compromise was that Jews becoming Christians should be circumcised, while Gentiles becoming Christians need not be.

Acts 15:1. And some men came down from Judea, and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

- It was argued that circumcision is a prerequisite to salvation. Paul and Barnabas argued otherwise, and the church sent them to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. (This meeting is called the First Council of Jerusalem, or the Apostolic Decree.)
- Those who had been Pharisees sided with the pro-circumcision faction, arguing that Gentile converts must observe the Law of Moses. James opined that Gentile converts should not be given extra trouble, proposing a simplification of the Law, a return to the Laws of Noah.

Acts 16:1-3. Paul circumcises Timothy.

John 7:21-24. Jesus discusses circumcision on the Sabbath.

The Gospels don’t explicitly abolish the practice of newborn circumcision.

In our modern era, adult circumcision has a painful post-operative course, and there can be complications. Back then, it was a dangerous thing to do.

This was a huge dispute in the early Apostolic era. To this day, it remains controversial in Christianity.

Romans 4:9-12. Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? Paul argues that circumcision itself does not bring salvation. It is faith in Christ. Circumcision signifies acceptance with God, but does not bring it about.

Galatians 5:6. In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision carries

Discussion of the implications of the Apostolic Decree, including circumcision, occupy much of the Christian Scriptures. Here are some passages:

- Acts 7:8; 10:45; 11:2-3
- Romans 2:25-29; 3:1-2; 4:9-12
- 1 Corinthians 7:18-19
- Galatians 5:1-6
- Ephesians 2:11-22
- Colossians 3:11
- Philemon 3:1-21

Circumcision and Modern Christianity

- The bottom line from the Apostolic era seems to be that circumcision isn't mandatory, nor is it forbidden.
- Many of the Eastern churches practice routine circumcision of the newborn.
- At the Council of Florence in 1442, the Roman Catholic Church decreed that observance of circumcision is a mortal sin. The current Catechism forbids elective amputations and mutilations, but does not explicitly mention circumcision. The Church is neutral on routine, elective circumcision, allowing parents to decide for themselves.
- Most other Christian groups also have a neutral position.
- Many Christian groups who practice infant baptism, where the child is ritually named, see this ceremony as a replacement for the circumcision ritual.

The Bottom Line

- When circumcision gets brought up as a religious question in Judaism and Christianity, be aware that there's diversity of thought and religious opinion.
- When in doubt, contact the family's clergy.
- When there's a clear medical contraindication to circumcision, it might be necessary to arrange a conference with physician, parents, and clergy.

Sources and Additional reading (I have these articles)

- Content experts: Dr. John Fisher, Dr. Phil Lieberman.
- The Wikipedia has a lot of information.
- Anchor Bible Dictionary
- Goldingray J. The significance of circumcision. J Study Old Testament 2000;88:3-18.
- Martin TW. The covenant of circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14) and the situational antithesis in Galatians 3:28. J Biblical Literature 2003;122:111-25.
- Propp WH. That bloody bridegroom. Vetus Testamentum 1993;43:495-518. A study of the Zipporah passage.
- Sasson JM. Circumcision in the ancient near east. J Biblical Literature 1966;85:473-6.

any weight; on the contrary, faith working through love.

Galatians 6:1-15. A person's concern for literal circumcision indicates a mind set on earthly things, on the flesh; not set on heaven or the Spirit.