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Circumcision as a Covenant Rite

By ERICH ISAAC

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The Jewish rite of *milah* (ritual circumcision) has been the subject of diverse interpretations. The Bible treats it as a token of God's covenant with Abraham. Ethnologists have regarded it as an initiation rite, as a tribal mark, as a mating device etc. (for references see WEISS 1962*a* : 1-2). Psychoanalysts have seized upon the rite as an obviously suitable one for exegesis – ANDREW PETO, for example, has urged that the circumcision of the son of Moses (Exodus 4 : 24-26) was a biblical interpretation of the Oedipus conflict. The son-hating mother symbolically castrated or killed the boy because the father failed to do so. The aggressive Yahweh-Father was thus appeased, the Moses-father was preserved, and Moses and Zipporah lived happily thereafter (PETO 1960 : 311-376). The most recent important studies are by CHARLES WEISS (1962*a*, 1962*b*), who offers bibliographical materials as well as the most comprehensive survey of current *milah* practices including comment on the medical aspects of Jewish ritual circumcision in the United States and abroad. In this paper we will argue that the explicit biblical view of circumcision as a covenant rite may be supported by data from ancient West Asian covenant practices as well as by ethnological and linguistic materials. The rite of circumcision is seen as a special case of general cutting or dismembering rites by which covenants or treaties were established.

1. Cutting as Covenant Rite

The biblical examples of dismemberment connected with covenants are well known. Genesis (15 : 7-18) records the covenant ceremony where at God's bidding Abraham divided a calf, goat and ram, aligning the parts in two rows at the end of which he placed a dove and another young bird undivided. Then in a dream vision Abraham sees an epiphany of the Lord pass

through the divided animals. The rite and vision culminate in the Lord's promise "Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates" (15 : 18). It should be noted that the covenant described does not in this case involve a mutual obligation ; it carries less the notion of a treaty entered into by two or more parties than the force of an oath. God states "... I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees to give thee this land to inherit it : and he said, Lord God whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it ?" (Genesis 15 : 7-8). The division of the animals was the reply to Abraham's wish for a binding sign of the covenant that made him in perpetuity master of a land in which, according to the patriarchal narratives, he then sojourned only as head of a nomadic clan. Further examples of oath-taking involving the division of an animal are in Jeremiah (34 : 10-19) where the nobility of Judah binds themselves to set their slaves free in the seventh year by dividing a calf and walking through the parts. Another parallel is undoubtedly the rite of the beheaded calf (Deuteronomy 21 : 1-9). In this case, to be sure, there is not an equal division of an animal, but the head is cut off in connection with an oath-taking ceremony.

A Hittite rite is quoted by GURNEY (1961 : 151) in which troops after a defeat walked through "a man, a goat, a puppy and a little pig ; they place half on this side and half on that side, and in front they make a gate of ... wood and stretch a ... over it, and in front of the gate they light fires on this side and on that, and the troops walk right through and when they come to the river they sprinkle water over them." Considering the biblical parallel, it seems probable that we deal here with a ceremony whose purpose is a renewal of the relationship with the victory-granting power which in this instance seemed to have failed in its obligation to the Hittite troops ; in other words, the ritual bears the character of a covenant ceremony. The parallel is especially significant in view of increasing acceptance of the allusions to Hittites in the patriarchal narratives in contrast to earlier scepticism as to Hittite presence in the Palestine of that period (GIBSON 1961 : 224).

Additional data supporting close cultural relationships between Israelites and Hittites are presently being studied. These range from specific parallels in the realm of ideas, e. g. historiography (MALAMAT 1955) to transactions of daily life. The conclusive demonstration that the land purchase by Abraham from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23) was in accordance with Hittite law is of particular relevance, for such transactions bear, though more remotely, a covenant character. G. MENDENHALL (1955) has demonstrated the astounding congruence between the covenant forms in the Hebrew Bible and Hittite vassal treaties. Hittite suzerainty treaties were drawn up according to set patterns very much like that found in Deuteronomy 28. Since MENDENHALL's essay new materials have been found which reveal great similarities in form and meaning of ancient Near Eastern treaties in general (FENSHAM 1962). In view of the Hittite rite previously described and Hittite rites mentioning the twelve parts of the body (GOETZE 1938 : 7) it is also likely that the division of the body of the Levite concubine after she had died into twelve parts (JUDGES 19 : 29) and Saul's hewing of the oxen into pieces (I Samuel 11 : 7) were intended to

renew the tribal covenant. Both of these have been accepted by W. F. ALBRIGHT as "excellent parallels" to Hittite ritual practice (1940 : 316). The many examples of Hebrew-Hittite parallels point up the fact that the custom under discussion here – the division of a creature as covenant ritual – is not a spurious parallel, but the custom belongs to a common cultural stratum.

It is interesting in this connection that the Chinese performed solemn covenant sacrifices (H. G. CREEL, *Confucius and the Chinese Way*, New York 1949, pp. 16-17). A curious tradition developed in the making of contracts whereby small jade figurines of tigers (*hu*) were split lengthwise and fitted together by a raised character on one half and its sunken image on the other. This was a "contract mark" and the two half-tigers were kept by the parties to a contract as an emblem binding them to keep the agreement (H. P. WHITLOCK and M. L. EHRLMANN, *The Story of Jade*, New York 1949, pp. 71-73).

2. Derivation of *berīth*

The term used in the Bible for covenant-making is *likrōt berīth* meaning literally "to cut a covenant", while in Accadian a similar term is used with the same meaning. While the word *kārat* unquestionably bears the meaning of "to cut", "to cut off", as well as in derivative sense "to exterminate" and "to make a covenant" (LISOWSKY 1958 : 700), the word *berīth* is much more obscure. It is known from the context in which the word occurs in biblical Hebrew that it certainly means "covenant", but to date no certain Hebrew verbal root has been shown from which the noun derives. NOTH has recently argued that *berīth* was originally a preposition meaning "between" so that *likrōt berīth* normally translated "to make a covenant" actually means "to cut between" (NOTH 1957 : 147-48).

NOTH's suggestion that *berīth* means "between", "cut apart", or "gap", may be supported by the consideration that the word corresponds to *pered* "to be separated", "divided". In the Semitic languages the letter *bēth* changes frequently with *pēh* and *tāv* with *dāleth*. It is likely that Sanskrit *bhrātar*, old Persian *brātar*, Greek *phrētēr*, Latin *frater*, German *Bruder*, English *brother* etc. derive from the same ancient verbal root as Hebrew *berīth*. The Indogerman words mentioned all refer to separate individuals between whom nonetheless a very strong and special bond exists. Brothers derive from the same source and are separated from that source by their birth, the very separation being evidence that they belong to each other. POKORNY knows no verbal root for the Indogermanic *bhrāter* (1959 : 163-164) and WASSERZIEHER explicitly states that the German *Bruder* is as yet etymologically unexplained – "un-erklärt" (1952 : 136). The derivation of these words from a root *brat* meaning "separate yet belonging or tied together" is felt to be convincing by FRAENKEL who asserts that the ending *-er* cannot belong to the root since it is missing in Prussian *brāti* and Polish *brat* (FRAENKEL 1963 : 483-84), FRAENKEL argues further that just as in the Semitic languages, in Indogerman too *p* interchanges with *b*. The Greek *sparton* which probably derives from the same verbal root (*brat*) as *berīth* means "twisted rope", while Latin *sporta* means "wicker basket" – both

of course units tied from separate strands. It is likely that “bride” no less than the Assyrian *birītu* “shackle” are derived from the same root as may be the Greek *parthenos* “virgin” (FRAENKEL 1963 : 485). Actually as early as 1857 FÜRST (1863 : 219) translated *berīth* as “to cut” and related it to the tradition of passing between the parts of the animal.

It should be pointed out that among the various terms used in the Bible to denote “strong determination” or “irrevocable decision” by God, the most commonly used ones mean literally “cut” as, for example, in Daniel (9 : 24) “Seventy weeks are decreed” (*nechtach*), or the biblical *gāzar* (as in *ve-tigzar-ōmer* Job 22 : 28) or the post or extra-biblical *gezērāh* “decree”. Generally *gezērāh* means a harsh or restrictive decree ; literally its translation is “cut” or “wound”. HERZFELD, moreover, equated *gāzar* with *berīth* (1883 : 97). The obsolete meaning of our verb “decide” as “to cut off” is still carried in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1955). It derives of course from *caedo* meaning “to cut”, “to slay”.

Apart from etymological considerations there is additional evidence that “to cut in twain” was an expression denoting covenant-making. NOTH (1957 : 147-48) also pointed out that in a text from Mari the killing of a donkey is synonymous with the making of a covenant. Among the Amorites this usage prevailed ; to quote ALBRIGHT (1957 : 279) : “The Canaanites were brought into the Israelite fold by treaty, conquest, or gradual absorption ... the Bene Hamor (sons of the Ass [sic]) of Shechem were also incorporated in some such way, to judge from various early references to them and to their god Baal-berith (Lord of the Covenant) – note that the sacrifice of an ass was an essential feature of a treaty among the Amorites of the Mari period.” Recently WILLESSEN (1954 : 216-17) showed that “hmrm” (ass) in Minaean temple dedication inscriptions means “alliance”.

There are parallels to the covenant as described in Genesis 15 in the Greek *orchia pista temnein* and the Roman *foedus ferire* (SNIJDERS 1958). The oath taker in Greece took his oath in a ritual in which he stood between the pieces of the divided victim (CORNFORD 1912 : 24 ; cf. HARRISON 1912 : 163-4). A more remote parallel is the Great Oath where the gods swear by the two great primary divisions of the universe, Earth and Heaven – “Witness earth, and heavens... Which is the greatest and gravest oath, that any God can swear...” (CHAPMAN 1875 : 177). This is parallel to Deuteronomy 4 : 26 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day ...”. There are obvious biblical indications that according to an ancient Hebrew epos Earth and Heaven were created by a cleaving apart of a primeval being. The similarities (and differences) between this conception and Babylonian and other creation epics have been pointed out (HEIDEL 1951 ; cf. CASSUTO 1959a : 18, 21, 30-31ff.).

3. Ethnological Parallels

Recently AD. E. JENSEN (1960), offering a number of parallel practices in the Bible and Africa, devoted his analysis chiefly to the practice of splitting an animal into equal parts. JENSEN offered a variety of African parallels to the

Abrahamic covenant rite in which in connection with the entering in upon an obligation there was a lengthwise division into equal parts of at least one animal. His examples can be augmented with oath-taking rites in Africa where the animal's head is cut off, as for example in Madagascar (LEIB 1952 : 109-10).

It is, of course, evident to JENSEN that motivation and execution in most of the parallels between Africa and the Bible differ, but he offers one example which he believes to be very close to Abraham's covenant "genau dasselbe Opfer" (JENSEN 1960 : 453). A Nuer myth related by the SELIGMANS (1932 : 207) states that man's ancestor divided a bull lengthwise in order to bind his descendants to follow a specific marriage order. The similarity presumably lies in the fact that the sacrifice imposes a binding obligation upon posterity and that it takes place at the time a people emerges as a distinctive unit (JENSEN 1960 : 453-4). PATAI's rejection of this parallel because of similar sacrifices in antiquity which he describes as "purificatory" or "imprecatory" and not involving covenants is not decisive. The rites classified in this way may well be part of covenant and oath-taking ceremonies. It has been shown that in Greece at least an oath was not originally a contract but a curse (HARRISON 1912 : 163). Indeed as MENDENHALL (1955 : 32-34), FENSHAM (1962 : 3), and others have shown, curses and benedictions were closely linked up with the whole idea of unfaithfulness or breach of promise in the establishment of treaties.

Among the interpretations given to the covenant sacrifice is that apparently held by Jeremiah (34 : 10-19). The prophet clearly understands the meaning of the rite to be conditional self-cursing : may we suffer the fate of the divided victim if we fail to live up to our agreement. Similar interpretations have frequently been advanced for oath and covenant sacrifices in Africa. However, as SNIJDERS (1958) points out, God's promise to Abraham made as He passes between the bisected animals cannot mean that He will be killed should He not fulfil the covenant. If the true meaning of the rite belonged essentially to a non-Jahwistic world of ideas it might have eluded a Judean of the time of Jeremiah just as much as it might elude its pagan practitioners today.

The ancient realm in which the covenant rites described occurred has been shown to possess a basic myth often reenacted in ritual recounting the death, usually violent, of a deity, and his rebirth or resurrection. (HOOKE 1933, 1935, JOHNSON 1955, cf. ISAAC 1963). Is it then not possible to explain this rite of the severed covenant as a dramatization of the extinguishing of the old order and the birth of the new ? The ritual establishes that the new order (the covenant) is really the order ordained from of old, for though separated and possessed of distinctive characteristics, the partners in the covenant are tied now, again, in an exceedingly strong bond, as they should always have been and as they, in a manner of speaking, had been from the beginning.

Ritual dissection of the bodies of the dead as a preparation for their supposed reconstitution and rebirth was practiced as a reenactment of the basic myth. FLINDERS PETRIE and his disciples found in cemeteries of southern Egypt a great many interments in which the bodies had been segmented, wrapped separately and then bound together again, e. g. at Medum, Deshashe,

and El Amrah (Farshut). (FLINDERS PETRIE 1892 : 21-22 ; 1898 : 20-24 ; and QUIBELL 1896 : 23, 31-33, 62 and *passim* ; RANDALL-MACIVER 1902 : 7, *passim*.) The concept of the severed body and its reassembly is common in the pyramid texts and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Similar interment rites are known elsewhere in western Asia and in Europe (HERMANN 1956 : 86-89). Indeed HERMANN (1956 : 90) quotes Greek and Roman classical texts in which tearing apart is almost a form of apotheosis. HERMANN suggests parallels to known normal and psychopathological states in which the subject visualizes himself being torn to pieces followed by an experience of becoming whole once more, but with a heightened sense of bliss and cosmic accord (93). Finally he interprets segmented mummification in prehistoric Egypt as a ritual shortcut through the depth of dissolution to a higher existence (95). Be this as it may, the occasional biblical use of *gāzar* (cf. 1 Kings 3 : 25) “to cut apart” to describe the fate of the dead may, in the light of extensive segmented burial practices in Egypt and western Asia be more than poetic usage for the dissolution of death (e. g. Psalms 88 : 6 ; Lament. 3 : 54). It may refer to bodies actually segmented or bisected (the epiphany of the Lord in Abraham’s covenant is said to have passed between the *gezārīm* – the “cuts”). Whether this usage refers to actual segmentation burial in ancient Israel remains uncertain. Nor can one determine with certainty whether an idea of rebirth was associated with being cut apart in the Bible. Ps 88 : 6 seems to have the opposite notion.

“Set apart among the dead,
Like the slain, that lie in the grave
Whom thou rememberest no more ;
For they were cut apart (*nigsaru*) by thy hand.”

The passage seems to express utter despair at the finality of death. Yet elsewhere the dried and scattered bones in Ezekiel’s vision (37 : 1-14) came together “bone to its bone... and the breath came unto them, and they lived, and stood... an exceeding great host”, a refutation to those who said “Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost, we are cut up” (Ezekiel 37 : 11).

A world view centering on a mythological death and subsequent resurrection and the ritual reenactment of this concept, notably in initiation rites, has been identified by JENSEN as the central religious concept of primitive cultivators. Its occurrence among ancient high cultures as well as contemporary hoe cultivators is according to JENSEN by derivation from that ancient culture complex which initiated cultivation of plants (JENSEN 1949). Others find that characteristic features of primitive rites in general, “wesentliche Züge der naturvölkischen Glaubenswelt” (STRAUBE 1963 : 2) – without further culture-historical qualifications – center on the mythos of death and rebirth. The so-called “rites de passage” especially illuminate the idea that the initiate suffers death to be subsequently reborn. It seems unquestionable that initiation, marriage and death ritual dramatizes a mythological death and rebirth or resurrection among many primitive peoples and that similar rites and myths have a wide spatial distribution. The “slain” initiate is reborn as a new being into a divinely ordained reality, new to him, but actually as old as the “Be-

ginning" (STRAUBE 1963 : 2). Perhaps then the covenant sacrifice can be explained as a dramatization of the idea that the old order through its extirpation gives rise to the new. Covenant rites could then be interpreted as a special case through which a more comprehensive religious reality is made transparent.

4. Meaning of Circumcision in the Bible

As a sequel to the covenant in which God promises Abraham possession of Canaan, a second covenant ceremony is recorded in which the outstanding covenant "act" is circumcision (Genesis 17). Generally, circumcision has been identified as passage or initiation rite (HASTINGS 1951 : 659 f. is an article over 40 columns in length and perhaps the most easily accessible discussion on the subject in general ; STRAUBE 1963 : 3 has additional references). Moreover, the fact that the rite involves the sexual organ has made it the focus of much psycho-analytical interpretation. But one is forced to concede with DE VAUX that as far as the meaning of the rite as practiced in ancient Israel is concerned "Nothing useful ... apart from dictionary articles" has appeared (DE VAUX 1961 : 522). The rite as instituted in Abraham's covenant "And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised" with the accompanying provision that servants, native and foreign, regardless of their age at acquisition, are to be circumcised (Genesis 17 : 12-13) has nothing to do with sexual maturity, or initiation rites before marriage. It is not a "Reifezeremonie" (JENSEN 1949 : 138). The stipulation that circumcision of the male be performed on the eighth day is repeated in Leviticus (12 : 3) and according to Genesis the Patriarchs observed this custom (21 : 4 ; 13-24). In Exodus (4 : 25) and Joshua (5 : 2-3) flint knives are used in the operation, and there is no ruling about the place where the operation is to be performed, but it never occurs in a sanctuary nor was it performed by a priest.

That circumcision was not peculiar to Israel is of course well known. That fact is borne out by Egyptian bas reliefs from the third millennium. HERODOTUS (II, 104 f.) mentions it as an Egyptian trait and there is an ancient Egyptian inscription in which a man tells how he was circumcised with 120 other men (PRICHARD 1955 : 326). While some mummies are not circumcised, circumcision certainly seems to have been mandatory for the male priesthood (DE VAUX 1961 : 46). There is also internal biblical evidence for the extensive practice of the rite in the Near East. Jeremiah (9 : 24-25) mentions Egypt, Edom, Moab and the Arabs along with Judah as being circumcised in the flesh but not in the heart. The opprobrious epithet "uncircumcised" was applied apparently only to the Philistines in the Bible.

It should be noted that some supporters of the documentary hypothesis of the composition of the Pentateuch argue that according to an Elohist document (E), circumcision in ancient Israel was introduced by Joshua at Gilgal, the Israelites having learned it from the Egyptians (Joshua 5 : 2-9). Genesis 17, in which the Abrahamic covenant is narrated, is assigned to a priestly document (P) supposedly composed in the Babylonian exile at a time when the rite had become exaggerated as a distinguishing mark separating

Jew from pagan. However, the antiquity of circumcision in Israel and in Canaan before the time of Joshua is now pretty much beyond doubt (SEGAL 1961 : 51-53).

Examples of circumcision from antiquity and more or less contemporary ethnological materials can be piled up, but the mere abundance of parallels may well lead to distortion of the meaning as the constant harping on circumcision as initiation rite testifies. Of course the parallel with initiation rites is obvious. Thus the Hebrew words for bridegroom, son-in-law, father-in-law, all derive from the root *chātan* which in Arabic means "to circumcise". The Arab usage of *chātan* for circumcision occurs in Exodus (4 : 24-26). For the meaning of this difficult passage the best source is KOSMALA (1962). But as has been said in another context "The counterbalance is notably absent, the qualifying is withheld, and the pile acts as an obstruction to seeing what really should be seen" (SANDMEL 1962 : 10).

What ought to be understood is the association of circumcision with the particular covenant rite described in Genesis 17. In the covenant God demands first that "Abram" walk before Him and be wholehearted (17 : 1). He then promises him an abundance of offspring, to make him the father of "a multitude of nations" (17 : 4). Then he changes his name from "Abram" to Abraham, repeating the promise to make nations from him and adding that "kings shall come out of thee" (17 : 6). Subsequently God affirms that the covenant shall be everlasting "to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee" (17 : 8). God repeats the promise of the land and demands that every male shall be circumcised on the eighth day as a sign of the covenant. Servants, as we noted, were also to be circumcised. Subsequently He changes the name of "Sarai", Abraham's wife, to Sarah, promises a son to her and that "she shall be a mother of nations ; kings of peoples shall be of her" (17 : 16).

Fertility is the central theme of this covenant. The language of Genesis (17 : 2, 6) "I will multiply thee exceedingly ... and I will make thee exceedingly fruitful" parallels almost exactly the promise given to Noah (Genesis 9 : 1, 9 : 7) "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth ... And you, be ye fruitful and multiply ; swarm in the earth, and multiply therein". These statements are in turn almost a literal repetition of the blessing to Adam (Genesis 1 : 28) "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth ...". The assurance of a multitude of offspring in identical language to three "patriarchs" spaced in the biblical narrative exactly ten generations from each other leaves little doubt as to the narrative's purpose. The original promise to Adam was to be fulfilled through Noah ; subsequently the promise to Noah was to be fulfilled through Abraham (cf. CASSUTO 1959a : 46-47 ; 88-90). Thus while the covenant ushers in a new order, this order is at the same time almost ceremonially established in words spoken at the oldest "covenant" of all – the prototypical covenant in which Adam is blessed with the promise of many offspring. Although the covenant involves the idea that a preceding order is superceded, in the case of Noah quite dramatically by the flood, the covenant is nonetheless thought to repeat the oldest past happening, the original covenant. Abraham's covenant of course repeats Noah's and Adam's (CASSUTO 1959b : 36-37).

In view of the stated contents of the covenant promise it is tempting to interpret circumcision as a fertility or initiation rite. Yet the fact that circumcision among primitives today (or yesterday) symbolized the mythical death of the initiate (STRAUBE 1963 : 2-3) and that a similar notion may have accompanied the operation as practiced before adulthood or marriage in antiquity cannot be the primary reason for its inclusion among the covenant acts. In general the Bible is in strongest opposition to any form of bodily mutilation or deformation, ritual or otherwise. Tattooing, scarification etc. are prohibited (Leviticus 19 : 28 ; 21 : 5 ; Deuteronomy 14 : 1) on the explicit ground that the Israelites are the children of God (Deuteronomy 14 : 1). The prohibition against scarification extends even to animals which become ritually inadmissible if marked (Leviticus 22 : 22). There is then opposition to the very acts usually associated with circumcision as initiation or passage rite. The tenor of the biblical documents is so "anti-pagan" that the admission of circumcision as covenant symbol or token must mean that this is precisely what it was intended to be.

When one examines Genesis 17 one finds that the covenant bears striking similarities to one form of Near Eastern ritual, namely the accession or enthronement ritual of sacral kings. Abram's change of name to Abraham mirrors this, for the candidate for the throne, often after a symbolic death, was reborn king and given a new name. FRANKFORT quotes (1948 : 2-16) from the coronation ritual in Erech where the goddess Nin-pa

"... After she had discarded his 'name (of) smallness'
She did not call his bur-gi name
But called his 'name (of) rulership' ".

In Egypt, where the king was born divine, the new name (or names, for he actually received four in addition to his family name, cf. GELB 1953 : 152) was made public immediately upon accession, while in Mesopotamia the new name was not given until the coronation (FRANKFORT 1948 : 246). The practice was also followed in Judea (e. g. Uzziah-Azariah, Jehoahaz II-Shallum, Jehoiahin-Jeconia). Whether Abraham in becoming "a new man" also died symbolically is not clear. A "death" is possibly hinted at in the first covenant "... a deep sleep fell upon Abram ; and, lo, a dread, even a great darkness, fell upon him" (Genesis 15 : 12). This sleep, described as *tardēmā* is considered a deathlike sleep (THOMSON 1955 ; JACOB 1934 : 397-8). Both Jewish and Patristic exegesis have regarded sleep and death as a continuum.

That the idea of rebirth should be dramatized in this covenant, which broke moreover with a past which in the marriage of Abram and Sarai had not been fruitful is not surprising. Abraham was not reborn king, but what was established in the covenant was Abraham's status as vassal to his liege lord. The practice of assuming a second or new name on entering into a vassal or subject treaty is well known throughout western Asia (DE VAUX 1961 : 165-7). Thus the king of Hamath under Israelite domination changed his name from Hadoram to Joram replacing the foreign theophoric element in his name

with a Jahwe element. Two Judean kings, Eliakim-Jehoiakim and Mattaniah-Zedekiah, changed their names under the pressure of their respective Egyptian and Babylonian overlords (MALAMAT 1963 : 6-7 ; cf. HONEYMAN 1948 : 18-19). The stress in Abraham's covenant is clearly not on kingship but on vassal status in relation to God, his liege lord. There may well be a parallel here to the rite of circumcision as practiced in Egypt where it was obligatory upon the priesthood and may have had the meaning of a loyalty covenant.

The kind of circumcision performed in the case of Abraham as well as in Egypt may well have been the incomplete circumcision MERKER found among the Masai. MERKER first suggested this possibility in an early study on the Masai (MERKER 1904 : 318-20). In circumcision among the Masai the upper part of the glans is cut and the skin flaps are left hanging from the fraenum ; the praeputium is thus not completely removed. The practice is found also among Chaga, Somalis and others in East Africa. MERKER proposed that the "second circumcision" mentioned in the Book of Joshua (5 : 2) refers to the completion of the operation, and the statement "This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you" (Joshua 5 : 9) to the reproach constituted by circumcision performed in the Egyptian manner. Various medieval Jewish commentators refer to the tradition that all Israel was circumcised a first time at the beginning of the exodus. RASHI (R. SHELOMO YITZHAKI of Troyes in the Champagne A. D. 1040-1105) however, in his commentary *ad loc.* "to circumcise again the children of Israel the second time" (5 : 2), while mentioning this tradition of a first collective circumcision at the exodus, states "Our rabbis said that 'a second time' refers to the tearing off [of the praeputium] which was not demanded of our father Abraham". Thus an interpretation hazarded by the German *Schutztruppe Hauptmann* coincided with a rabbinical commentary written a thousand years earlier and embodying a much older tradition. It is possible, moreover, that incomplete circumcision was practiced among the Jews into the Greco-Roman era. The circumcised Jew, becoming an object of derision in the gymnasium, often subjected himself to an operation to conceal his circumcision. To obviate the possibility of concealment the rabbis made *peri'ah* (complete exposure of the glans) an indispensable prerequisite for ritual circumcision (HASTINGS 1951 : 660 ; see WEISS 1962a : 31 for references).

But whatever the meaning of the second circumcision in Joshua and in whatever manner Abraham's circumcision was performed, it would seem highly probable that "cutting" was a covenant rite by which treaties between equals as well as vassal obligations were confirmed. That the cutting of a generative organ is involved in Abraham's covenant is an appropriate symbol for a covenant made with the generations and dealing with offspring. There is no need to indulge in problematical sexological explanation of the Abrahamic covenant. For the author of the narrative, the rite of circumcision was merely a particular application of an ancient custom associated with treaty and covenant obligations – an application, moreover, especially suitable for the particular covenant involved. The meaning of a rite at a particular place and in a particular time cannot fully be understood merely by referring it to other

similar rites at other places and times. The search for interpretation must always address itself to the discovery of the "Sitz im Leben" of a historical rite just as much as to its derivation.

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