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Circumcision from a Jewish Perspective

Circumcision is the sign of **the Jewish people's** covenant with **God** (see the commentary on **Genesis, to see link click El – God's Covenant of Circumcision with Abraham**). Its centrality within **Judaism** is signified – among other things – by its inclusion in the list of acts for which a **Jew** must suffer martyrdom rather than violate the commandment: **For even if an enemy decrees that [Isra'el] should desecrate the Sabbath, abolish circumcision, or serve idols, they suffer martyrdom rather than be assimilated with them (Exodus Rabbah 15:7).**

Genesis 7:1-14 requires **circumcision of every male, whether born in Abraham's house** (which would be Abraham's own sons and the sons of his servant and maidservants) **or bought with money** (which would be any foreigner brought into Abraham's household). This is a clear and specific commandment. An uncircumcised male in Abraham's household was to be cut of (Hebrew: *karath*) from his people. **The rabbis differentiate between being cut off by the hands of men and being cut off by the hands of heaven. Cut off by the hands of men means excommunication from the community, or capital punishment, depending on the crime and situation** (as seen in the stoning of **Achan** in **Joshua 7**)**. Cut off by the hands of heaven means a death sentence by God.** The Torah presents an example of the latter in the case of Moshe, who had not circumcised his son Gershon. **The Angel of the LORD** (the preincarnate **Messiah**) appeared to him and his wife Tzipporah and was going to put Moshe to death. **The Angel** would have cut Moshe off **with the hands of heaven** if not for the quick intervention of Tzipporah, who circumcised the child (Gershon was no longer eight days old, but the mitzvah to circumcise the child still stood.[45]

Both **Jews** and **Gentiles** recognize circumcision as a distinguishing mark of **Judaism**. **The Oral Law lists some of circumcision's greatest attributes. Rabbi Ishmael says, "Great is circumcision, whereby the covenant was made thirteen times" (Genesis 17). Rabbi Jose says, "Great is circumcision which overrides even the rigor of the Sabbath." Rabbi Joshua Karha says, "Great is circumcision, which even for the sake of Mosh, the righteous,**

was not suspended so much as an hour" (Exodus 4:24). Rabbi Nehemiah says, "Great is circumcision, which overrides the commandments regarding leprosy" (Negaim 7:5). Rabbi says, "Great is circumcision, for despite all the religious duties that our father Abraham fulfilled, he was not called "blameless" until he circumcised himself, as it is written, "Walk before Me and you will be blameless." After another fashion [it is said], great is circumcision; but for it, the Holy One, blessed be He, had not created the world, as it is written in Jeremiah 33:25, "But for My covenant day and night, I had not fixed the patterns ordering the heavens and the earth" (Nedarim 3:11).

While circumcision can be applied to the heart **(Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25ff; Romans 2:25ff)**, the physical act can never be abolished: **Rabbi Elazar of Modim said, "One who profanes things sacred, and one who slights the festivals, and one who causes his fellowman's face to blanch in public, and one who nullifies the covenant of our father Abraham [i.e. removes his circumcision], peace be upon him, and he who exhibits imprudence towards the Torah, even though he has to his credit [knowledge of] the Torah and good deeds, he does not have a share in the world to come" (Pirkei Avot).**

This attitude also demonstrates how central the covenant is to the **Jewish** community's identity in the purity of its descent – and thus to **God's** promises of redemption: **At that time your people will be delivered (Dani'el 12:1)**. Through who's merit? **Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani said, "Through the merit of their lineage, for it is said, 'Bring My Sons from far and My daughters from the ends of the earth. Everyone who is called by My Name' (Isaiah 43:6b-7a)." Rabbi Levi said Joshua 5:2 declares, "Through the merit of circumcision. For the verse of this comment says: Make yourselves flint knives and circumcise . . . the sons of Isra'el (Midrash Psalms 20:3).**

The claim made of **Gentile** believers by **the Judaizers** who arrived for the Jerusalem Council (see **Ax – False Brothers slipped in to Spy Out our Freedom in Messiah**) that **unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved (Acts 15:1),** fits the attitude of those zealous for the Torah for whom "the Godfearer versus the proselyte" debate was decided in favor of the latter (for the difference between Godfearers and proselytes see the commentary on **Acts Bb – The Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53**). In this context the verb **be saved** (Greek: *sothenai*) appears to refer to the "righteousness"

through which a person merits in the world to come, both Godfearers and proselytes being judged according to their righteousness.

The acceptance of proselytes was a subject of debate between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel **(Aboth D'Rabbi Nathan, version A 15:3; Soncino, version B 29;Shabbat 31a)**. The dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua directly relates to the necessity of **circumcision**: **Our rabbis teach that if a proselyte was circumcised but had not performed the prescribed Mikveh (ceremonial cleansing), Rabbi Eliezer said, "Behold, he is a proper proselyte; for so our forefathers were circumcised and had not performed the prescribed Mikveh." But Rabbi Joshua said, "If he performed the prescribed Mikveh but had not been circumcised, behold, he is a proper proselyte (Yebamoth 46a).**

When interpreted in the context of Beit Shammai's zealous tendencies, this dispute may be read as emphasizing the fact that **the Gentile** is unclean by nature. He is forbidden to study the Torah until he has been circumcised, since circumcision is not merely a commandment by symbolizes entry into the covenant people. **Only full conversion – as seen in the blood drawn through circumcision – makes a person fit to study what God gave to Isra'el alone. Significantly, those responsible for the statements prohibiting Gentiles from studying Torah (Exodus Rabbah 33:7; Hagigah [Festal Offering] 13a; Sanhedrin 59a) also seem to have been those who insisted that they become full proselytes (Ben-Shalom 164f).**[46]