



# AFTER OFFICE HOURS

## THE HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF CIRCUMCISION

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Understanding the importance of circumcision in the religious history of Western civilization provides an insight into why the surgical procedure is still so prevalent today. Circumcision appears as a motif in the religious literature of Western civilization throughout the ages. The history of the Jewish faith can be traced through the Old Testament by using the motif of circumcision. Some of the important theologic problems experienced in the early Christian church derived from the practice of circumcision, and the motif can be traced in the New Testament as well, especially in the writings of Paul.

**T**HE antediluvian tribal ritual of male circumcision is practiced over a wide area of the world by approximately one-seventh to one-sixth of its population. It is often associated with similar mutilation of the female, such as clitoral circumcision and infibulation.<sup>1</sup> A survey

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The illustration at the top of the page, Avicenna, Galenus, Hippocrates, is from an early medical book. Woodcut, 1511 (The Bettmann Archive).

by the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Khartoum in Sudan, Africa, in 1967, showed that of 4000 women surveyed, 3800 were circumcised or infibulated, and 200 were not.<sup>1</sup> However, the present discussion will be limited to male circumcision.

Circumcision is known to have been practiced on all continents and among virtually all sociologic groups.<sup>2</sup> Among the earliest peoples to practice circumcision were the Egyptians. Evidence of their practice of this operation is found in their bas-reliefs and in mummies dating as early as 2300 BC.<sup>3</sup> Wall paintings from ancient Egypt date circumcision several thousand years earlier than this.<sup>4</sup>

It is from the ancient Egyptians that the Jews derived the practice of circumcision. The ritual became such a crucial element of the Jewish religion that one can actually trace the biblical development of Judaism by the motif of circumcision alone. The practice was also a crucial issue in the development of the early Christian church.



**Fig 1.** Circumcision performed by a bishop of the Church. Painted by Discepolo, Portuguese School, 16th century (courtesy of the Museum Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon).



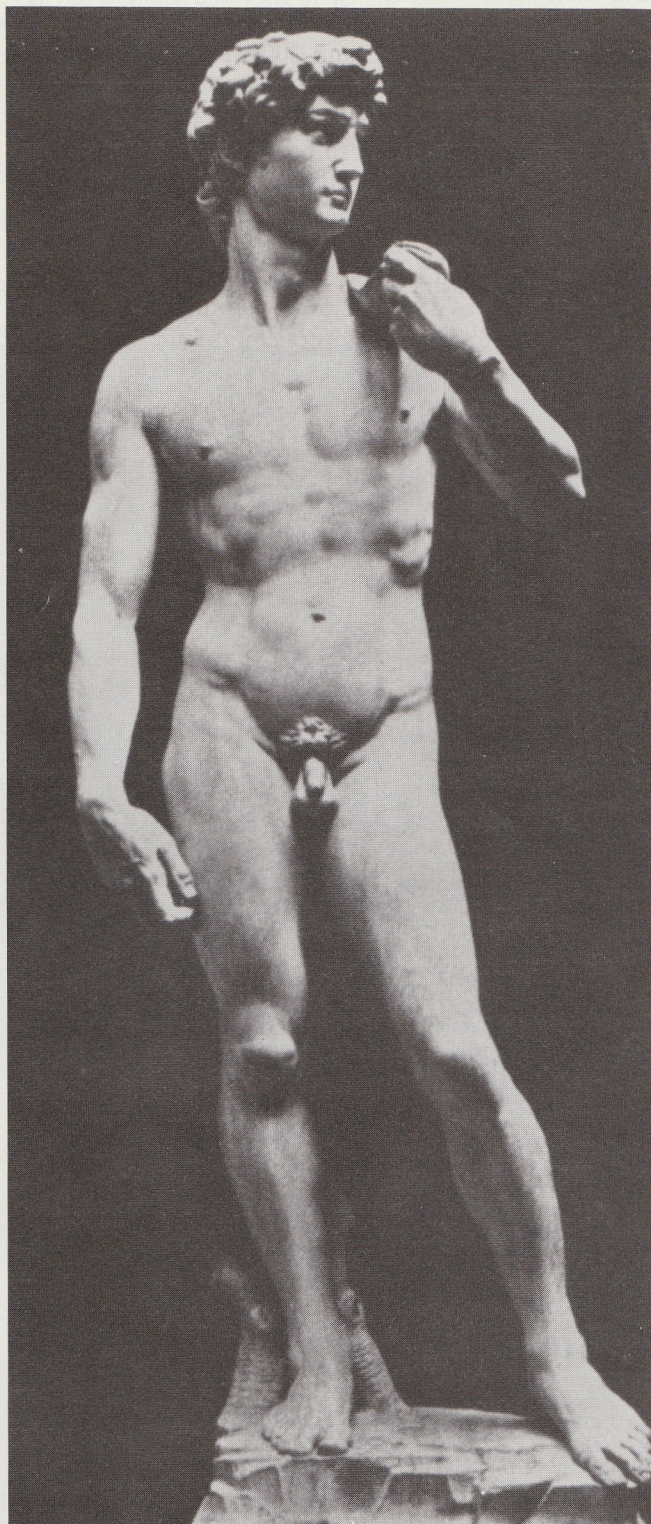


Fig 2. Michelangelo's statue of David.

The first reference to circumcision in the Bible is in the Book of Genesis. In fact, it was believed to be important enough to warrant an entire chapter (Ch. 17) because circumcision was to represent the covenant between Jehovah and the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup> The circumcision of Abraham and all the males in his family, related in that chapter, took place about 1713 BC, according to biblical scholars.<sup>3</sup>

The main historic significance of circumcision for the Jewish people is pointed out with great insight by Bertrand Russell.<sup>6</sup> He notes that the earliest point in Jewish history that can be verified by documents other than the Old Testament is when the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah already existed. In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom, and the kingdom of Judah alone preserved the Jewish religion and tradition. In the sixth century BC, however, Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and removed a large part of the population to Babylon. The Babylonian empire was subsequently conquered by Cyrus, king of the Medes and the Persians, who issued an edict in 537 BC allowing the Jews to return to Palestine. The Temple was rebuilt, and Jewish orthodoxy crystallized.

During the period of Babylonian captivity, Judaism underwent an important development: The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel proposed the idea that all religions except one are false and that the Lord punishes idolatry. A fiery nationalism was developed in the Jews that distinguished them from other nations of antiquity.

As the Temple had been destroyed, the Jewish ritual during captivity became nonsacrificial because sacrifice could be offered only in the Temple. Synagogues began at this time, with readings from such portions of the Scripture as already existed, and the importance of the Jewish Sabbath was first emphasized. Moreover, circumcision came to be the indelible, nationalistic mark of the Jew. It was a period of extreme exclusiveness among Jews, and at this time marriage to gentiles came to be forbidden.

The Jewish people then underwent a period of hellenization by the Greek conqueror Alexander the Great. However, after the reign of Alexander, Palestine became a disputed territory between the Seleucids centered in the North, with their capital in Antioch, and the Ptolemies in the south, with their capital in Alexandria.

In 168 BC, the Seleucid King Antiochus IV took over the province of Judah, determined to hellenize the Jews and to extirpate the Jewish religion. He forbade observance of Jewish laws relating to food; he forbade worship in the Temple; and most relevant to the present discussion, he strictly forbade circumcision, making it punishable by death.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, circumcision became a symbol of Jewish na-



tional identity, for which nationalists were willing to die. The rural Jews, or Hasidim, revolted under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus, who recaptured Jerusalem in 164 BC. To this day, faithful Jews celebrate the victory of Judas Maccabaeus as Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights.

To think that a war could take place over the issue of circumcision or the question of eating pork seems almost unbelievable, but Russell points out the significance of this period in Jewish history:

"But for the heroic resistance of the Hasidim, the Jewish religion might easily have died out. If this had happened, neither Christianity nor Islam could have existed in anything like the form they actually took."<sup>6</sup>

From this point on, ritual procedures prescribed by Holy Law—observance of the Sabbath, abstinence from unclean meats, and especially circumcision—held the Jews together as a nation. The importance they attached to the Law steadily increased until the time of Christ, and their observance became intensely rigid and conservative.

Even today in Israel, 70 circumcisions are performed daily, on the average, by the Jewish Mohel, persons especially trained to perform ritual circumcision.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE MOTIF IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The motif of circumcision can be followed further, through the beginnings of Christianity and even into the Middle Ages. The intensity of adherence to the Law that was characteristic in the time of Paul makes his revolt against its domination very remarkable. One of the main obstacles Paul faced in converting gentiles to his new religion was convincing them that they need not be circumcised to enter the Heavenly Kingdom.

Paul argued that foreskin status was not a relevant variable in his discriminant function of salvation.<sup>9,10</sup> Thus, in almost every one of the Epistles, Paul dealt with this problem, propagating the concept that it was "circumcision" of the heart and not of the flesh that was the true way to salvation.

Nevertheless, even by the 17th century, church fathers

were unconvinced by the arguments of Paul, as can be seen in the painting (Figure 1) depicting circumcision as a religious ritual performed by a bishop. The ritual is still recognized by the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian churches as a feast day, based on the circumcision of Christ,<sup>11</sup> and celebrated on January 1.

It comes as rather a surprise that Michelangelo's sculpture of the biblical hero, David, on which he worked from 1501 to 1504, depicts David (Figure 2) as uncircumcised,<sup>12</sup> given the historic, religious, and cultural significance of the circumcision. Michelangelo certainly must have been familiar with the Bible.

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