

## BRIT MILAH : RITUAL CIRCUMCISION

S. LEVIN, M.B. (RAND), M.R.C.P. (EDIN.), D.C.H., *Johannesburg*

Among Jews circumcision is not so much a surgical procedure as a religious operation. It is important to appreciate this point. Current apologetics on behalf of circumcision as being cleaner, healthier and associated with less cancer of the penis and of the cervix in the wife, are irrelevant. The operation is a devotional one and is therefore commonly done by an individual called a mohel, who not only possesses the necessary surgical skill but also the ritual qualifications. Fathers (in ancient times) and doctors may also perform ritual circumcision provided the prescribed prayers are intoned. The earliest record of a doctor doing this operation, on the proselyte king Izates of Adiabene, is recorded by the first century historian Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XX, 2:4). The king 'sent for a surgeon' who might, possibly, have restricted his practice to circumcision; the text is not explicit. If a capable Jewish adult is not available, a gentile may also perform this rite (*Talmud*, Avodah Zara, 26b — the text is disputed).

When a boy is 8 days old he must be circumcised, even though the 8th day may coincide with the Sabbath (*Talmud*, Sab. 131a,b; *John* 7:23) or the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The operation may not be done earlier (happily precluding the possibility of haemorrhagic disease of the newborn). Since God's ordinances were given in order that one should live by them (*Leviticus* 18:5) and not die by them, the operation may be postponed for reasons of health. A 16th century Jewish book of ritual, the *Shulchan Aruch* (specifically the 2nd section, Yoreh De'ah) forbids ritual circumcision in the presence of jaundice or sickness. Brit milah is also forbidden or must be postponed into adulthood if there is evidence of a bleeding disorder in the family (*Talmud*, Yebamot 64b).<sup>1</sup>

'And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations.' (*Genesis* 17:12, *Leviticus* 12:3; see also *Genesis* 21:4, *Luke* 1:59, 2:21, *Philippians* 3:5). This is the covenant (Brit, or Bris) of circumcision (milah) made with Abraham 'And I will establish my covenant between thee and me and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee.' (*Genesis* 17:7).

With the parents and well-wishers at the ceremony, an invisible Elijah also officiates. The prophet fought all his life to preserve the true religion of God (1 *Kings* 18:36) and he acts as a protector for the infant who is about to enter into the divine covenant, and as an example, in later life, to remain faithful to the religion of the Jewish God.

Over a full cup of red wine, prescribed blessings are said or sung during and after the operation when the infant is given his Hebrew name. Among the blessings is a prayer that he will grow up to be learned, married and a doer of good deeds. The mohel also places a drop or two of wine on the infant's lips and recites another important blessing from *Ezekiel* 16:6 'I said unto thee, In thy blood live. Yea, I said unto thee, in thy blood live.'

An uncircumcised child remains a Jew, though not within the covenant of Abraham. In times of persecution, most recently in Nazi Europe, it was common to postpone circumcision in order, possibly, to render the baby safe from detection and perhaps save his life. Potential bleeders and sickly children also have brit milah deferred. In hypospadias with congenital absence of the prepuce, brit milah is satisfied by drawing one drop of blood. A stillbirth, or baby dying before the brit milah, is also circumcised before burial, though no prayers are said.<sup>2</sup>

A male proselyte must undergo brit milah before he can be privileged to become a Jew. He is then usually honoured with the name Abraham;<sup>3</sup> God has re-established the covenant that he made with the first proselyte, Abraham. An infant born of a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish or unknown father, is called, at his brit milah, so-and-so the son of Abraham.

Paul's many arguments against circumcision (*Romans* 2:25-29, 3:30, 4:9-12, 1 *Corinthians* 7:18, 19, *Galatians* 5:6,

6:15, *Colossians* 2:11, 3:11) are irrelevant as far as Jews are concerned, and especially in view of *Deuteronomy* 4:2 'Ye shall not add unto the word which I command, neither shall ye diminish from it'.

## SOME SURGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The first blades used for circumcision were made of stone. A sharp flint serves admirably, and when stone was finally supplanted by iron, it continued, for many centuries, to serve as a handle for the blade.

Abraham (*Genesis* 17:24), Ishmael (*Genesis* 17:25), Isaac (*Genesis* 21:4), Moses (*Exodus* 4:25), the family and nation under Joshua (*Joshua* 5:3, 7) and the people of Shechem (*Genesis* 34:24) were circumcised with blades of flint. In the last instance the wounds became infected on the third day (*Genesis* 34:25). During the reign of King Saul, ca. 1,000 B.C., iron was available but there was no smith in Israel (1 *Samuel* 13:19).

The Hebrews were very proud of their circumcised state and circumcision came to be equated with purity and goodness (*Deuteronomy* 10:16, 30:6, *Jeremiah* 4:4). Conversely, they were contemptuous of the uncircumcised (*Genesis* 34:14, *Exodus* 6:30, *Judges* 14:3, 1 *Samuel* 17:36, 31:4, 2 *Samuel* 1:20, 1 *Chronicles* 10:4, *Jeremiah* 6:10, 9:26, *Ezekiel* 44:7, 9, *Acts* 7:51). In this regard it may be noted that among the Egyptians, civilized long before the Hebrews, the pharaohs and nobles were circumcised at puberty or adolescence, so that the Hebrews, who learned much from the Egyptians, might have derived their pride from pharaonic as well as Abrahamitic sources (*Genesis* 12:10; 13:1).

In later centuries, when the uncircumcised Greeks ruled over Palestine, some of the Jewish youths became ashamed of their circumcised state, especially during the (nude) Greek games. These youths attempted to lengthen whatever was left of their foreskins and were called epispadians (1 *Maccabees* 1:15). But the mass of Jews remained fiercely proud of their denuded organs and forced circumcision on idolatrous or fearful Jews (1 *Maccabees* 1:48, 60, 61, 2:46) and even on conquered tribes (*Antiquities*, Book XIII, 9:1, 11:3).

Little is known of the method of circumcision in ancient days. There are few documents available. It has been thought that the operation might have been simply a dorsal slit, or an amputation of the prepuce without reflecting the mucosa off the glans, this being the method among Moslems and the 'schismatic Jews' known as Karaites. Exposure of the glans was possibly instituted at the time of the Maccabees, or as late as after the Bar Kochba rebellion (135 A.D.). At any rate the Mishnah (initial section of the *Talmud*, Sab. 12:2), completed in the 2nd century of the Christian Era, insists on reflecting the mucosa off the glans.<sup>2</sup>

An interesting and previously unpublished—at any rate in a medical journal—account of brit milah has recently come to my attention. John Evelyn was a wealthy English traveller during the 17th century. He wrote a travel diary<sup>4</sup> and gives this account of a community of Jews in Rome during 1645: 'A Sermon was preach'd to the Jewes at Ponte Sisto, who are constrain'd to sit, till the hour is don; but it is with so much malice in their countenances, spitting, humming, coughing & motion, that it is almost impossible they should here a word, nor are there any converted except it be very rarely.'

(Here it should be explained to those not familiar with the history of the persecution of the Jews,<sup>5,6</sup> that Christians, unlike Pagans, found the Jews intolerable, and went to horrifying lengths in order to convert them. As late as 1747 a papal Bull permitted the forcible baptism of kidnapped Jewish children. In 1584 Pope Gregory XIII issued a Bull, *Sancta mater ecclesia*, which compelled Jews to attend Christian services.)

'I went to the Ghetto (in 1555 Pope Paul IV issued a Bull, *Cum nimis absurdum*, confining Jews to ghettos) where the Jewes dwell, as in a suburb by themselves; being invited by a Jew of my acquaintance to see a Circumcision: here I passed by the Piazza Judea (where their Serraglio begins)

for being environ'd with wales, they are lock'd up every night: in this place remains yet part of a stately fabric; which my Jew told me had been a Palace of theirs, for the Ambassador of their Nation in former times, when their Country was Subject to the Romans. There was a large Inscription on it, that I could not stay to reade.

'Being lead through the Synagogue into a privat house, I found a world of people in a Chamber: by & by came an old man who prepar'd & layd in order divers Instruments brought by a little child of about 7 yeares old in a box. These the man layd in a silver bason; The knife was much like a short Razor to shut into the haft: Then they burnt some Insense in a Censor, which perfum'd the rome all the while the ceremony was doing: In the basin was also a little cap made of white paper like a Capuchins-hood, not bigger then my finger, also a paper of a red astringent powder, I suppose of bole: a small Instrument of Silver cleft in the midst, at one end to take up the prepuce withall, clowtes of fine linnen wrap'd up &c: These all in order the Women from out of another Chamber brought the infant swadd'd, and deliver'd it to the Rabbie, who carried, and presented it before an Altar or Cupboard dress'd up, on which lay the 5 bookes of Moses, and the Commandments a little unroll'd: Before this with profound reverence, and mumbling a few Words he waved the Child to & froo a while; then he deliver'd it to another Rabbie, who sate all this time upon a Table, he taking it in his hands put it betweene his thighs, whilst the other Jew unbound the blankets that were about it to come at the flesh: at this action all the company fell to a singing of an hebrew hymn, and in as barbarous a tone, waving themselves to & fro, a ceremony they observe in all their devotions: The Infant now strip'd from the belly downwards, the Jew tooke the yard of the child and chaf'd it within his fingers till it became a little stiff, then with the silver Instrument before describ'd (which was held to him in the basin) he tooke up as much of the Praeputium as he could (possibly) gather, and so with the Razor, did rather Saw, then cutt it off; at which the miserable babe cry'd extraemely, whilst the rest continu'd their odd tone, rather like howling then singing: then their Rabby lifting the belly of the child to his face, & taking the yard all bloody into his mouth he suck'd it a pretty while, having before taken a little Vinegar, all which together with the blood he spit into a glasse of red-wine of the Colour of french wine: This done he stripp'd downe the remainder of the fore-skin as farr and neere to the belly as he could, so as it appeared to be all raw, then he strew'd the read powder on it to staunch the bleeding and covered it with the paper-hood, & upon all a Clowte, and so swath'd up the Child as before: All this while they continue their Psalme: Then two of the Women, and two men, viz, he who held the Child, and the Rabbin who Circumcis'd it (the rest I suppose were the Wittnesses) dranke some of the Wine mingl'd with the Vinegar, blood & spittle: so ended the slovenly ceremony, and the Rabbin cries out to me in the Italian tongue, *Un Miracolo di dio*; because the child had

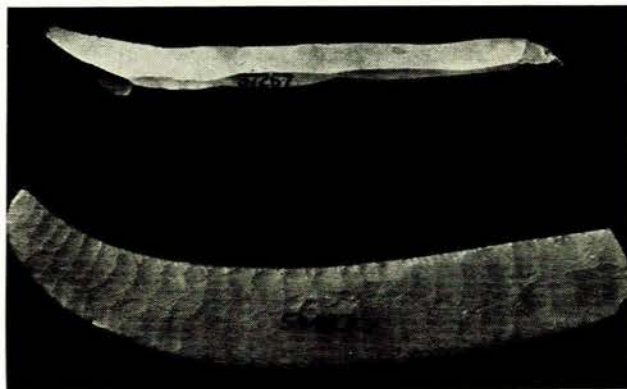


Fig. 1. Flint knives such as were used for circumcision until well after the age of King Saul.

immediatly left crying: The Jewes do all in Rome wear yellow hatts, and live only upon brokage & Usury, very poore and despicable beyond what they are in other territories of Princes where they are permitted.'

The writer, clearly, is hostile to ritual circumcison and to Jews, and lacks any compassion for their plight. Usury, of course, was forced on Jews. So were the yellow hats and badges that they were compelled to wear. These were ordered throughout Europe by the Church during the 13th century. An apocryphal tale relates that Jews were initially forced to wear red hats but that one day a short-sighted cleric saluted what he thought was an approaching red-hatted bishop and on coming closer observed that it was in fact a Jew. Furious, he interceded with the pope to change the colour of the Jewish hats.



Fig. 2. Circumcison knife discovered in a Turkish junk shop in 1955. Examined at the Bezalel Museum in Jerusalem, the blade was pronounced to be of 13th century Crusader pattern and is thus, as far as is known, the oldest circumcison blade in the world. The handle is more recent and is of stone (agate) and has a small diamond at the end. The bag and two gilt shields are also of more recent date.

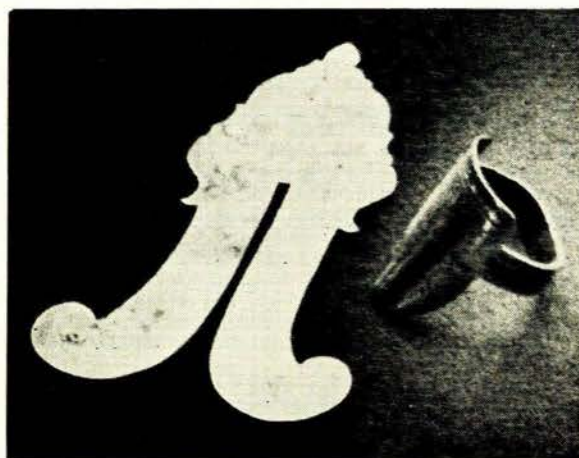


Fig. 3. Silver shield, mid-17th century, Manheim, Germany. Ring used (rarely) by mohel, instead of fingernail, to facilitate periah, i.e. the tearing of the preputial mucosa off the glans. There is a Hebrew inscription from the Mishnah (Sab. 19:6): 'mal veloh perah ke'ilu lo mal'. Circumcison without periah is equivalent to no circumcison.

The red powder used to staunch bleeding fell out of favour during the 18th century as a consequence of the Blood Libel. Jews were commonly accused of murdering Christian children in order to use their blood for various purposes and especially for baking the matza of the Passover. Such accusations were regularly followed by pogroms so that Jews were careful to avoid red preparations, especially at emotional periods like Easter, which is generally celebrated at the same time as the Passover.

John Evelyn is correct in noting that the mohel sucked the bleeding penis with his mouth. This is known as metzitzah



Fig. 4. Silver bowl, 1860, Vienna, used for receipt of the orlah, i.e. the amputated foreskin.

and is still practised in primitive Jewish communities. It is usual for the mohel to first take some wine or vinegar into his mouth before sucking the bleeding penis. Blood, wine and saliva is then spat into a glass. A different glass of wine is used for the blessings. Metzitzah is seldom done in culturally advanced communities though occasionally the mohel will place a sterile cottonwool-filled glass tube on the bleeding penis and give a perfunctory suck on the other side. The *Talmud* (Sab. 133b) insists on metzitzah but does not stipulate that it must be done with the mouth.

Other changes have also taken place. It is becoming much more common for doctors or properly trained mohalim<sup>9,10</sup> to perform brit milah, while bone forceps, haemostats and scalpel are in increasing evidence. One still commonly observes the ancient alcohol-cleaned guard or shield for holding the prepuce to a slightly sterile knife blade. It is still usual for preputial mucosa to be torn and reflected off the glans by fingernails which may be none too clean, but it is becoming more common for the properly trained mohel to first free the prepuce from the glans by means of a probe, and to use a scissors for achieving a pleasing cosmetic result. Sutures are rarely used and sepsis is becoming infrequent. Subsequent bleeding of any consequence may occur though it is uncommon. Haemophilia (but not pseudo-haemophilia) is so rare among Jews as to be almost non-existent.

Fig. 1 is by courtesy of the British Museum. Figs. 2-4 are reproduced by the courtesy of Rev. Dr. H. Abt, curator of the Jewish Museum, Johannesburg. Mr. S. Chai took the photographs. John Evelyn's book was brought to my attention by Miss M. B. Lucas, chief librarian at the Medical School, Johannesburg.

#### REFERENCES

1. Feldman, W. M. (1917): *The Jewish Child*. London: Ballière, Tindall & Cox.
2. Jakobovitz, I. (1959): *Jewish Medical Ethics*. New York: Philos. Library.
3. Carmel, A. (1964): *So Strange my Path*. New York: Bloch.
4. De Beer, E. S., ed. (1959): *The Diary of John Evelyn*. London: Oxford University Press.
5. Hay, M. (1960): *Europe and the Jews*. Boston: Beacon Press.
6. Trachtenberg, J. (1961): *The Devil and the Jews*. New York: Meridian Books.
7. Parkes, J. (1963): *Antisemitism*. London: Vallentine Mitchell.
8. Isaac, J. (1964): *The Teaching of Contempt*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
9. Weiss, C. (1962): *Clin. Pediat.*, **1**, 65.
10. Shulman, J., Ben-Hur, N. and Neuman, Z. (1964): *Amer. J. Dis. Child.*, **107**, 149.