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Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual in Ancient Israel

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Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual in Ancient Israel

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Dedication

Dedicated to my late father, Tien Shih “Thomas” Wang, who once told me that getting a Ph.D. isn’t really that hard; all it requires is a little “common sense.”

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"It takes a village to raise a scholar" (or something like that).

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Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual in Ancient Israel

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This dissertation argues that circumcision functions as a kinship ritual in the non-Priestly, narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible. Secondly, by showing the continuity between non-Priestly and Priestly conceptualizations of circumcision, this study challenges the prevailing categorization of circumcision as a ritual that only acquired significance during the exilic and postexilic periods.

Chapter 1 reviews the history of modern biblical scholarship on circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and explains the basis of the scholarly separation between non-Priestly and Priestly views of circumcision. Additionally, this chapter also discusses and evaluates various views of the function of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter 2 presents the critical theoretical basis for the primary claim of this dissertation: that circumcision functions as a kinship ritual in ancient Israel. The chapter introduces Nancy Jay's theory of the gendered nature of blood sacrifice and shows how it can be productively applied to the study of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible. The chapter argues for the kinship-oriented nature of both circumcision and blood sacrifice, taking into account not only biblical evidence but relevant anthropological data as well.

Chapters 3–5 are a literary, historical-critical analysis of three non-Priestly, narrative passages regarding circumcision in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 34; Exod 4:24–26; Josh 5:2–9). Each chapter discusses previous scholarship concerning the function of circumcision in the passage before showing how circumcision is best explained as a kinship ritual in each passage. Chapter 6 focuses on three Priestly texts concerning circumcision (Gen 17; Exod 12:43–49; Lev 12:3) and shows how they too present circumcision as a kinship ritual. In doing so, the chapter suggests that there is more continuity between non-Priestly and Priestly presentations of circumcision than typically acknowledged.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation, summarizes its main claims and arguments, and suggests a couple of directions for future research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The primary goal of this study is to elucidate the functions of preexilic, non-Priestly male circumcision in ancient Israel through analysis of three biblical passages: Gen 34, Exod 4:24–26, and Josh 5:2–9.¹ Before determining the functions

¹ Although this dissertation is focused on the functions of circumcision in preexilic Israel, it should be noted that there is a robust scholarly debate about the origins of circumcision in ancient Israel (and its West Semitic predecessors). Unfortunately, like many studies about origins, direct textual evidence is lacking, and conclusions are often based on sporadic archaeological data or scholarly imagination. The main question is whether circumcision was originally an Egyptian or West Semitic practice. The direction of transmission between Egyptian and West Semitic cultures, or whether there was even direct transmission at all, cannot be conclusively established based on current evidence. The Egyptian evidence for circumcision is indisputably ancient but eludes definitive interpretation. For more information about the evidence for Egyptian circumcision, see Rosalind M. Janssen and Jac J. Janssen, *Growing up in Ancient Egypt* (London: Rubicon, 1990); Frans Jonckheere “La Circonsion [*sic*] des anciens Egyptiens,” *Centaurus* 1 (1951): 212–34; J. Thompson Rowling, “The Rise and Decline of Surgery in Dynastic Egypt,” *Antiquity* 63 (1989): 312–9. According to Herodotus (II.104), circumcision originated in Africa (either in Egypt or among the Ethiopians) and was disseminated to Israel and Phoenicia through Egyptian influence. For a defense of Egyptian borrowing of an

of circumcision in those narratives, however, it is first necessary to understand the scholarly discussion of circumcision within biblical studies. In the discourse that surrounds circumcision, the Babylonian exile in the late sixth century BCE was the defining event that led to the transformation of the nature, purpose, and practice of

originally West Semitic practice, see the short, but very influential, article by Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966): 473–6. Sasson notes that bronze figurines of warriors from the early third millennium BCE in the 'Amuq valley (northern Syria) exhibit circumcision of the Israelite/West Semitic variety. Based on the strong Asiatic influence on Egypt during that period and the Semitic loanword *qrn.t* ('foreskin') in Egyptian, Sasson inverts the normal direction of influence and proposes that the West Semitic ritual was accepted and adapted by the Egyptian ruling classes. Nick Wyatt notes, however, that the difference in surgical procedure between Egyptian and West Semitic circumcision, which Sasson himself acknowledges, argues against any direct borrowing ("Circumcision and Circumstance: Male Genital Mutilation in Ancient Israel and Ugarit," *JSOT* 33 [2009]: 405–31 [406, n. 2]). In further support of Wyatt, the existence of circumcision practices in places as varied as Africa, the Americas, Australia, and the South Pacific Islands suggests that independent development should at least be considered a plausible explanation. Regardless, the ultimate origin of circumcision in ancient Israel is inconsequential to this study, which will be focused on the functions of circumcision in the non-Priestly literature of the Hebrew Bible.

ancient Israelite circumcision. As a result, circumcision is typically treated separately as either preexilic circumcision or postexilic circumcision, with little continuity between the two.² Whatever its function or purpose may have been

² Another common way to frame the discussion is to distinguish between Priestly (usually considered exilic or postexilic) circumcision and non-Priestly (preexilic) circumcision. I will also use this distinction, particularly as I focus on non-Priestly narratives in the Hebrew Bible. It is important, however, to point out that such a dichotomy is often unjustifiably utilized to elevate the Priestly view of circumcision as the sole legitimate or “orthodox” biblical view. It also obscures the fact that there likely would have been multiple competing or complementary views of circumcision operating at any given time in ancient Israel. Nina E. Livesey looks at circumcision in Jewish writings from the second century BCE to the first century CE and finds great diversity in the meaning of circumcision within late Second Temple Judaism. She finds that circumcision is viewed as a sacrifice (2 and 4 Maccabees), a means of controlling sexual desire (4 Maccabees), a mark of commitment to Judaism (Josephus), and a promotion of health and well-being (Philo) (*Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* [Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/295; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010]). Although she writes about a later time period than I am, her point is well-taken. The Priestly view was likely only one of a number of different understandings about circumcision, and it may not even have been the most common or prominent. Most studies of circumcision unfortunately focus on

before the exile, most scholars proceed as if true, biblical, Israelite circumcision did not begin until the exilic period.³ In this chapter, I will discuss the history of biblical

postexilic or Priestly views of circumcision and only treat preexilic or non-Priestly circumcision in a cursory or prefatory manner. See, e.g., David Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). Bernat completely divorces Priestly and non-Priestly circumcision. In his view, knowledge about non-Priestly circumcision “does not bring the reader any closer to understanding P’s views about circumcision” (ibid., 7). See chapter 6 for further discussion of Bernat’s work and the relationship between Priestly and non-Priestly views of circumcision.

³ For many interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, circumcision seems to have not really existed until the time of the Priestly writer’s adaptation of it into the Pentateuchal narratives and legal codes. Most scholars probably focus on the Priestly view of circumcision because the Priestly source is both considered the most coherent and self-contained source in the Pentateuch as well as the source that has the most concrete (but still debated) historical context. It is thought that a consistent picture of circumcision can be established by examining all of the Priestly writer’s references to circumcision. See ibid., 2. This methodology, however, neglects a significant portion of the Hebrew Bible’s writings on circumcision. The Priestly writings on physical circumcision, namely Gen 17:1–9, Exod 12:43–49, and Lev 12:3,

scholarship regarding circumcision that has led to this unfortunate imbalance. After surveying the major figures and developments in biblical scholarship regarding circumcision, I will introduce the four main views on the function of preexilic circumcision in ancient Israel: a marriage or fertility rite, an apotropaic rite, a covenant rite, and an initiation rite. Although rites are multivalent by nature,⁴ and

comprise only a minority of the Hebrew Bible's references to physical, non-metaphorical circumcision.

⁴ For various anthropological expressions of the multivalent nature of ritual, see Edward M. Bruner, "Epilogue: Creative Persona and the Problem of Authenticity," in *Creativity/Anthropology* (ed. Smadar Lavie, Kirin Narayan, and Renato Rosaldo; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 321–34, esp. 332; Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975), 150; Johannes Fabian, "Religious Pluralism: An Ethnographic Approach," in *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion* (ed. Wim van Binsbergen and Matthew Schoffeleers; London: KPI, 1985), 138–63, esp. 145–47; Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 207; Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 28–33; Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 90, 98, 122. For discussions regarding the multivalent nature of circumcision specifically, see John Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," *JSOT* 88 (2000): 3–18, esp. 7; Victor W. Turner,

each of these views is legitimate and has biblical support, I will argue that the only function that encompasses all of the circumcision passages in the Hebrew Bible is circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual. Last, I will challenge the commonly-accepted view that the exile dramatically increased the “religious” importance of circumcision and instead show that my functional view of circumcision reveals that there is more continuity between preexilic and postexilic circumcision than typically acknowledged.

From Wellhausen to de Vaux

Like so many topics in the academic study of the Hebrew Bible, modern discussion of circumcision begins with Julius Wellhausen.⁵ The division of Israelite

The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 3–21.

⁵ Wellhausen was the first to attempt to situate ritual practices like circumcision in their historical context. Others, such as the eighteenth-century German commentator Johann David Michaelis, were more concerned with establishing the rationale behind circumcision, an endeavor that hearkened back to Philo. Whereas Philo (*De Specialibus Legibus*, 1.1–11) proposed six reasons for circumcision (infection prevention, prevention of dirt collection, assimilation of the penis with the heart, facilitation of sperm delivery, excision of superfluous pleasures, and elimination of the belief of human autonomy), Michaelis suggested only four

circumcision into preexilic and postexilic circumcision is a result of his stark contrast between preexilic Israelite religion and postexilic Judaism. He established this sharp division on the basis of his understanding that the prophets of Israel chronologically preceded the composition of much of the law of Moses, which is the opposite of both the canonical order as well as the view of the majority of biblical

“natural” reasons for circumcision: two hygienic purposes, a deterrent to “manustupration” (i.e., masturbation), and a sexual desire suppressant (*Commentaries on the Laws of Moses*, vol. 3 [trans. Alexander Smith; London: F. C. and J. Rivington, and Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, and A. Brown, 1814], 58–93).

scholars in his day.⁶ He was not the first to propose such a radical idea,⁷ but no one before him had articulated the temporal priority of the prophets over the law and its consequences for understanding the history of Israel so clearly and powerfully. In

⁶ For a helpful overview of Wellhausen's impact concerning the question of the relationship between the law and the prophets, see Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–35. In his analysis, Stackert ultimately departs from Wellhausen's law and prophets dichotomy. Other treatments that consider the enduring influence of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* include John Barton, "Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* to the History of Israel: Influences and Effect," in *Text and Experience: Towards a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible* (ed. Daniel Smith-Christopher; Biblical Seminar 35; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 316–29; Rudolf Smend, "Julius Wellhausen and His *Prolegomena* to the History of Israel," *Semeia* 25 (1982): 1–20.

⁷ Wellhausen himself acknowledges his indebtedness to Karl H. Graf's ordering of the law and the prophets via Albrecht Ritschl in 1867, a conversation he recounts in his *Prolegomena* (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [New York: Meridian Books, 1957], 3–4; repr. of *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies, with preface by William Robertson Smith; Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1885]; trans. of *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* [2d ed.; Berlin: G. Reimer, 1883]). All page references are from the 1957 Meridian Books reprint of the English translation.

doing so, Wellhausen became the first scholar to offer a reconstruction of Israel's history based on literary, source-critical conclusions. His hypothesis that the law should come after the prophets in a proper history of Israel frames the entire discussion of arguably his most influential work, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*. In *Prolegomena*, Wellhausen situates the law of Moses in what he considered its proper historical context, which had dramatic consequences for the scholarly understanding of Israel's history.

Although Wellhausen is probably best known for his separation of the Pentateuch into its constituent sources—the traditional J, E, D, and P of the so-called Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis—it is the implications of his dating of those sources that concern us most. According to Wellhausen, P is a coherent and self-contained source that reflects the viewpoints of postexilic Judaism and is set against JE, the national epic of preexilic Israel.⁸ Because much of the Pentateuchal

⁸ Wellhausen (*Prolegomena*, 405) dates the publication of the Priestly code to the year 444 BCE, but such an exact dating of P is not necessary or relevant for the purposes of this study. Currently, there is a lively scholarly debate concerning the date of P, specifically whether it was a product of preexilic or postexilic Israel. The “Kaufmann” school argues that the Priestly source is a preexilic composition that reflects actual practices during the monarchic period. See, e.g., Avi Hurvitz, “Dating the Priestly Source in Light of the Historical Study of Biblical Hebrew: A Century after Wellhausen,” *ZAW* 100 (1988): 88–100; idem, “The Language of the Priestly

Source and its Historical Setting—The Case for an Early Date,” in *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Panel Sessions, Bible Studies and Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: World Congress of Jewish Studies, 1981): 83–94; Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995); Jacob Milgrom, “The Antiquity of the Priestly Source,” *ZAW* 111 (1999): 10–22. Most scholars still see the Priestly source as a primarily exilic or postexilic composition. See Menahem Haran, “Behind the Scenes of History: Determining the Date of the Priestly Source,” *JBL* 100 (1981): 321–33; Joseph Blenkinsopp, “An Assessment of the Alleged Pre-Exilic Date of the Priestly Material in the Pentateuch,” *ZAW* 108 (1996): 495–518; Ziony Zevit, “Converging Lines of Evidence Bearing on the Date of P,” *ZAW* 94 (1982): 481–510; Ultimately, it is more helpful to think of the Priestly texts as a tradition rather than a single priest or group of priests at a particular moment in time. The scholarly conversation revolving around the relationship between the Priestly literature and the Holiness Code reflects the likelihood that the Priestly texts themselves were the product of a long period of editing and development and did not originate from a single time period. This study looks at the various non-Priestly views on circumcision, which I consider to be primarily preexilic, but my argument would not substantially change if those texts were indeed postexilic. Chronology is secondary in my argument; the main claim I am making is that, whether preexilic or postexilic, the function of circumcision in non-Priestly texts is not fundamentally different than its function in the Priestly literature.

legal material—including Lev 12:3 regarding circumcision— is found in P, then, under Wellhausen’s schema, it is a later development of Judean religion, reflective of the postexilic rather than the preexilic period.

Not only did Wellhausen sharply divide preexilic Israelite religion from postexilic Judaism, but he also esteemed preexilic Israelite religion as superior to postexilic Judaism. Strongly influenced by German Romanticism and Idealism, which exalted free and unrestrained expression over cold and dead institutionalism, Wellhausen decried the codification of the free and unfettered prophetic *Zeitgeist* into the fixed, sterile Priestly code. As Mark Gignilliat writes concerning Wellhausen’s appraisal of Israelite religion, “Preexilic Israel is set over against exilic and postexilic Judaism as two very different expressions of Israel’s religion. For Wellhausen, much of Israel’s early religious life was lost when Judaism formalized the law code, which in turn displaced ancient Israel’s more natural and intuitive worship. The law, therefore, as an institutional norm is set over against the preexilic freedom of Israel’s ancient worship.”⁹ In Wellhausen’s view, postexilic Judaism refashioned the pieces of preexilic Israelite religion but without the original spiritual vitality that powered it. Because Wellhausen viewed the preexilic prophets as direct intermediaries between Yahweh and his people and the continuation of the living stream of law begun by Moses, he devalued the postexilic priests whom he

⁹ Mark Gignilliat, *A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 67.

viewed as merely human interpreters of a written, fixed code. He contrasted law and prophecy as two fundamentally-opposed ways of relating to God: “With the appearance of the law came to an end the old freedom, not only in the sphere of worship, now restricted to Jerusalem, but in the sphere of religious spirit as well. There was now in existence an authority as objective as could be, and this was the death of prophecy.”¹⁰ Thus, in Wellhausen’s estimation, in the Priestly code of the exilic and postexilic periods, the uninhibited worship of Yahweh by the Israelite people became a stilted and lifeless religion based on written legislation.

For Wellhausen, then, circumcision was part of this degeneration of pure, prophetic Israelite religion as legalistic priests wrested control of religious authority from Yahwistic prophets during the exile. Regardless of whether one disagrees with Wellhausen about the nature of priestly religion — and many today do — his temporal perspective still frames the modern scholarly discussion about circumcision. Circumcision is divided into preexilic circumcision and postexilic circumcision under the assumption that circumcision only began to have “religious” significance during the exile.¹¹ The common refrain is that circumcision before the exile was simply a “cultural” tradition that did not carry much significance. It only

¹⁰ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 402.

¹¹ See, e.g., Stanley Gervitz, “Circumcision in the Biblical Period,” in *Berit Mila in the Reform Context* (ed. L. M. Barth; Los Angeles: Berit Mila Board, 1990), 93–103, esp. 102.

increased in importance during the exile because the Israelites lived among a people, the Babylonians, who did not practice circumcision.¹² In order to prevent assimilation to the greater Mesopotamian culture, the Israelites in exile adopted

¹² Wellhausen's view about the development of circumcision in the exilic and postexilic period remains commonplace even today. Cynthia Park has written a recent dissertation in which she argues that circumcision, alongside fasting and Sabbath observance, only became religiously significant during the exilic period due to the absence of animal sacrifice in the Temple. Whereas Wellhausen only stated that Sabbath and circumcision replaced temple sacrifices as "practical symbols of Judaism" (*Prolegomena*, 341), Park takes his argument one step further and argues that circumcision itself becomes seen as a propitiatory sacrifice as a replacement for animal sacrifice. See Cynthia Park, "An Analysis of the Influence of Non-priestly Ritual Performance on Covenant Theology" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2014), 128–85. See also Wyatt, "Circumcision and Circumstance," 421. Leonard Glick (*Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 13–34), makes this same argument, except with reference to the rabbinic period and the Second Temple rather than the First Temple. Glick posits that during the rabbinic period circumcision transformed from a rite of foreskin removal with an emphasis on the idea of covenant to a redemptive rite of ritual bloodshed as a result of the destruction of the Temple and the concomitant cessation of animal sacrifice.

various practices like circumcision to insulate themselves from Mesopotamian cultural influence and distinguish themselves as distinctly Israelite. Therefore, circumcision became an exilic symbol of Israelite cultural identity and imperial resistance.¹³ For Wellhausen, rituals like circumcision and Sabbath-keeping took on new meaning and importance after the exile. The elegant simplicity and lucidity of Wellhausen's innovative views on Israelite history and ritual practice had significant consequences for Hebrew Bible studies both in Germany and abroad.

While Wellhausen was working in Germany and charting the future of academic biblical studies, his Scottish colleague William Robertson Smith was laying

¹³ This view is adopted by the majority of the major modern commentaries on Genesis. See, e.g., John Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 296–7; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (trans. John J. Scullion; CC; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 265; Pauline A. Viviano, "Genesis," in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (ed. Dianne Bergant; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 35–78 (57). See also Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period. Volume II: From the Exile to the Maccabees* (trans. John Bowden; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 407–8; trans. of *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992); Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 124.

the groundwork for the burgeoning field of social anthropology and its often-tendentious relationship with biblical studies. Although a person of varied interests and capabilities, Robertson Smith is perhaps best known and cited for his work on sacrifice, about which he penned the entry in the influential ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Robertson Smith's lecture series presented at Aberdeen and later published under the title *The Religion of the Semites* comprehensively lays out his ideas on ritual and particularly sacrifice.¹⁴ Robertson Smith views ancient sacrifice as the nexus between the human and divine worlds, and he describes communion as the core concept of sacrifice: "The fundamental idea of ancient sacrifice is sacramental communion ... all atoning rites are ultimately to be regarded as owing their efficacy to a communication of divine life to the worshippers, and to the establishment or confirmation of a living bond between them and their god."¹⁵ Sacrifice, then, for Robertson Smith, includes a mystical experience for the worshipping group, whereby they experience communion with the deity.

Robertson Smith believed in a Darwinian religious evolution and viewed "primitive" peoples as degenerate but ultimately capable of progress towards "civilization." He saw within ancient Israel an example of just such a religious evolution from pagan, magic ritual to ethical, spiritual religion. He specifically cites

¹⁴ William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1894).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

circumcision as a ritual that underwent such a change from a pubescent to an infant rite:

As manners become less fierce, and society ceases to be organised mainly for war, the ferocity of primitive ritual is naturally softened, and the initiation ceremony gradually loses importance, till at last it becomes a mere domestic celebration ... When the rite loses political significance, and becomes purely religious, it is not necessary that it should be deferred to the age of full manhood; indeed, the natural tendency of pious parents will be to dedicate their child as early as possible to the god who is to be his protector through life.¹⁶

Accordingly, Robertson Smith also follows Wellhausen in viewing circumcision as a rite that only became “religious” during the exilic period when it underwent this change from a puberty rite to an infant rite. In Robertson Smith’s view, circumcision followed an evolutionary trajectory that mirrored the development of society; infant circumcision was for him the natural consequence of a less primitive society.

This understanding that circumcision only became a significant religious rite during the exile was popularized and ensconced as scholarly consensus by Roland de Vaux in his influential volume *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*.¹⁷ De Vaux only devotes a few pages to circumcision as part of his larger discussion about the cultural institutions of ancient Israel and includes scant evidence to support his conclusions; however, because his work became a standard reference work for the

¹⁶ Ibid., 328.

¹⁷ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

field in the late twentieth century, his views became crystallized as the scholarly consensus. Unfortunately, de Vaux's views are perpetuated as the standard view in biblical studies about circumcision both within and outside the field, even though his conclusions are not based on very much concrete evidence.¹⁸

De Vaux briefly comments on most of the biblical passages on circumcision and deduces what we can surmise about circumcision based on those passages. He also surveys the evidence for the practice of circumcision in the ancient Near East. He emphasizes the family-centric nature of the circumcision ritual, noting that “there was no ruling about the place where it was to be performed, but it was never done in the sanctuary by a priest,”¹⁹ though this is an argument from silence, for there is nothing in the Priestly legislation concerning circumcision apart from the command that it take place on the eighth day of the boy's life. He considers circumcision to have originally been an initiation rite before marriage that also initiated a man into clan life. Most significantly, he concludes from the fact that other West Semitic peoples besides the Israelites practiced circumcision that the Israelites must have “adopted this custom when they settled in Canaan ... but with them the

¹⁸ The influence of de Vaux's views even outside the field of biblical studies can be seen in its dissemination in the popular level book by David Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 9.

¹⁹ de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 46.

practice took on a particular religious significance.”²⁰ He continues, “Religion gave the rite [of circumcision] a more lofty significance ... It was only during the Exile that circumcision became the distinctive mark of a man who belonged to Israel and to Yahweh.”²¹ De Vaux also emphasizes the discontinuity between preexilic and postexilic circumcision when he writes, echoing Robertson Smith, that the significance of circumcision as a fertility or marriage rite must have died out when the operation changed from a puberty rite to an infant rite.²²

This belief about the relative insignificance of circumcision until the exile persists into the present day and undergirds the majority of studies about circumcision. Most studies focus on exilic or postexilic circumcision and only treat preexilic circumcision in a cursory manner.²³ Regarding those studies that do analyze preexilic circumcision, there are four predominant theories about its

²⁰ Ibid., 47

²¹ Ibid., 48.

²² Ibid., 47.

²³ See, e.g., Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*; Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990). In many ways, Eilberg-Schwartz’s work has greatly influenced my own and anticipates many of my own conclusions. The primary difference between our work is that I primarily analyze the preexilic, non-Priestly texts of the Hebrew Bible, while he focuses on the Priestly literature.

function in Israelite society: (1) a marriage or fertility rite, (2) an apotropaic rite, (3) a covenant rite, and (4) an initiation rite (or rite of incorporation).²⁴

Circumcision as a Marriage or Fertility Rite

By far the most common view of circumcision is as a marriage or fertility rite. The major figures we have discussed thus far—Wellhausen, Robertson Smith, and de Vaux—each regard preexilic Israelite circumcision as a marriage or fertility rite.²⁵

²⁴ These categories are fluid and often scholars will propose combinations of the four as the central functions of circumcision. For example, Julian Morgenstern (*Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites* [Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 1966]) views circumcision both as an apotropaic rite and a rite of incorporation, although he believes that the incorporation aspect is secondary. Wyatt views circumcision as an apotropaic marriage rite that protected the bridegroom from an “inherently dangerous situation” (Wyatt, “Circumcision and Circumstance,” 417). These four categories closely resemble what Eilberg-Schwartz (*The Savage in Judaism*, 144) has termed the “four related themes ... frequently embedded in African rites of circumcision: fertility, virility, maturity, and genealogy.” See also William H. Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 355–70, esp. 362, n. 28.

²⁵ de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 46; Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 328; Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 340.

Wellhausen and Robertson Smith appeal primarily to modern Arab circumcision practices, while de Vaux adduces the practices of ancient Egypt and modern African tribes to substantiate his claims, although it is not clear what specific Egyptian or African evidence he uses.²⁶ Robertson Smith represents the standard view when he describes circumcision as “originally a preliminary to marriage, and so an introduction to the full prerogative of manhood.”²⁷ The legacy of these scholars lives on in present-day scholars who view circumcision as a marriage or fertility rite. Two more recent proponents of this view are William Propp and Nick Wyatt.²⁸

Propp essentially echoes de Vaux’s arguments when he describes circumcision as a “domestic institution of pre-Yahwistic origin that the early legislators and prophets ... felt no need to regulate.”²⁹ He classifies preexilic circumcision as a non-religious, domestic rite separate from and irrelevant to Yahwistic religion. As for its function in society, Propp places circumcision in the

²⁶ Although de Vaux does not cite any direct Egyptian evidence, Sasson (“Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” 474) confirms that based on texts, sculptures, and mummies, circumcision in Egypt was “reserved for either a period of prenuptial ceremonies or, more likely, for initiation into the state of manhood.”

²⁷ Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 328.

²⁸ Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” 355–370; Wyatt, “Circumcision and Circumstance,” 405–31.

²⁹ Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” 357.

context of the rite of marriage based on Arabic lexical connections. He expands on de Vaux's claims that the original sense of the Proto-Semitic root **h*tn probably meant "to be related by marriage," since this is the usage most widespread in the Semitic family (Ugaritic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Old South Arabic, Akkadian).³⁰ Arabic *ḥatana* ('to circumcise') has the derivatives *ḥātana* ('to become related by marriage') and *ḥatan* ('male relation by marriage, son-in-law.')³¹ Certainly, this shared semantic domain suggests associations between circumcision and marriage, and circumcision indeed is a puberty rite performed as a prelude to sex and marriage in some premodern and modern Arab cultures. However, Propp himself notes that the extended meaning of *h*tn as 'to circumcise' represents a later Arabic development and is not present in other Semitic languages. Thus, the connection between circumcision and marriage is not proto-Semitic and may be confined only to Arabic. Specifically, it must be noted that these lexical correspondences are not found in Biblical Hebrew, in which the usual root for "to circumcise" is not *h*tn but *mwl*. Additionally, the only biblical context in which *h*tn is possibly related to circumcision is Exod 4:24–26, a passage which heretofore has resisted simple

³⁰ Ibid., 358. See also de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 47.

³¹ Brevard S. Childs makes the important point that the verb *h*tn in Arabic refers specifically to the circumcision of a bridegroom (*The Book of Exodus* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1974], 98).

explanation and may not even be originally Israelite.³² If Exod 4:24–26 is not an originally Israelite composition, then it cannot be used to establish a marriage context for circumcision in preexilic Israel.

Propp and Wyatt both appeal to the same biblical texts as de Vaux (Gen 34 and Exod 4:24–26) to argue that preexilic Israelite circumcision was a marriage rite.³³ Wyatt argues that circumcision was originally a marriage rite as opposed to a birth rite because Shechem is required to be circumcised in order to marry Dinah in Gen 34. Although this is one possibility, there is nothing in the narrative that requires this position, and there are a few things that suggest otherwise. First, as Julian Morgenstern argues, there is no explicit connection between circumcision and marriage in Gen 34.³⁴ Genesis 34 does not necessarily show that circumcision was practiced at puberty in ancient Israel; there is nothing in the passage that indicates that at that time infant circumcision was not the normal practice. It may merely be coincidental that Shechem and the Shechemites are circumcised on the occasion of Shechem's marriage. The importance of circumcision in Gen 34 is not that it must be

³² See chapter 4 on the possible non-Israelite origins of Exod 4:24–26.

³³ Propp also notes the possible relevance of 1 Sam 18:17–27, in which Saul sets for David a brideprice of one hundred Philistine foreskins to marry his daughter Michal. For a more in-depth examination of Gen 34 and Exod 4:24–26, see chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

³⁴ Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death*, 56.

performed before the wedding night but that it must be performed in order for Shechem (and the Shechemites) to qualify as *marriageable*. Secondly, every male in Shechem is commanded to be circumcised, regardless of age or marital status. Lastly, the Priestly understanding in Gen 17 is not that circumcision was originally practiced at puberty and only later became an infant rite in God's covenant with Abraham. The Priestly view of circumcision is that the proper *Israelite* practice of circumcision had *always* been during infancy. The inclusion of Ishmael's circumcision at the adolescent age of thirteen in Gen 17 may signal a recognition that non-Israelite peoples typically practiced circumcision at a later age than the Israelites, but there is no indication that the Israelites themselves thought that they had practiced circumcision at any other time than during infancy.³⁵

More than simply a marriage or fertility rite, circumcision is a rite by which the Shechemites are ritually incorporated into the Israelite community. In other words, it is a rite of incorporation, using Arnold van Gennep's language, that allows the Shechemites to intermarry with the Israelites.³⁶ As we can see, the identification

³⁵ In contrast, Wyatt ("Circumcision and Circumstance," 411–412) sees the various ages for those circumcised in Gen 17—Abraham at 99 years old, Ishmael at 13 years old, and Isaac at 8 days old (later in Gen 21:4)—as an etiology for the transformation of circumcision from a puberty rite to an infant rite.

³⁶ See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 20–24, 105–06;

of preexilic Israelite circumcision as a marriage or fertility rite is mostly based on limited cross-cultural comparisons and a possible linguistic correspondence with Arabic. Although pre-nuptial circumcision practices are common in non-Israelite cultures, there is no clear evidence that this was ever the practice in ancient Israel during biblical times.

Circumcision as an Apotropaic Rite

The second most common view of circumcision is as an apotropaic rite intended to ward off evil or danger at one of either two times, at birth or before marriage. An apotropaic view of circumcision does not necessarily preclude understanding circumcision as a marriage rite, and it is often a matter of preference whether an interpreter chooses to emphasize either the function of circumcision or the time at which circumcision occurs. Those who argue for preexilic circumcision as a marriage rite usually consider it to be either a rite to increase fertility (as above) or to ward off danger.

The most persuasive advocate of an apotropaic function of preexilic infant circumcision is Morgenstern, whose work has unfortunately been neglected in most

trans. of *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1909). For more on the function of circumcision in Gen 34, see chapter 3.

of the recent studies concerning circumcision.³⁷ Morgenstern, who assumes infant circumcision as the normal practice, argues on the basis of predominantly Arab cultural practices that circumcision functioned as an apotropaic rite that removed the taboo that was thought to rest on every newborn male child until they were circumcised. He writes that the “underlying principle in the removal of all taboo was that the sacrifice of a part of the tabooed person or object redeemed the whole.”³⁸ This theory was already anticipated in the early 20th century by Thomas K. Cheyne, the author of the entry on circumcision in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, of which Robertson Smith was the later editor. In that entry, Cheyne writes, “Circumcision was an economical recognition of the divine ownership of human life, a part of the body being sacrificed to preserve the remainder.”³⁹ This view that the circumcision of the foreskin was a sacrificial act of a part for the whole that removed a taboo that rested upon the child was considered by Morgenstern to be the fundamental principle of circumcision.

³⁷ One notable exception is Glick who partially follows Morgenstern’s apotropaic view of circumcision during what Glick calls “pre-Yahwist” times (“The Life of the Flesh is in the Blood: The Meaning of Bloodshed in Ritual Circumcision,” in *Bodily Integrity and the Politics of Circumcision: Culture, Controversy, and Change* [ed. George C. Denniston et al.; New York: Springer, 2006], 17–36 [21]).

³⁸ Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death*, 63.

³⁹ Thomas K. Cheyne, “Circumcision,” *Encyclopædia Britannica 9th Edition* 5:791.

The strength of Morgenstern's argument is that he uses comparative evidence with other Semitic-speaking groups. He compares circumcision to the Arab *'aqîqah* ritual, in which the first hair of a newborn infant is shorn and an animal sacrifice is offered as redemption for the child, often occurring on the seventh or eighth day after birth.⁴⁰ Morgenstern suggests that since the first seven days after birth are often considered a particularly dangerous time for an infant, then circumcision and the *'aqîqah* sacrifice are both apotropaic rituals intended to protect the child from harm.⁴¹ It should also be noted that Morgenstern believes that a kinship function is present but secondary in the circumcision ritual.

⁴⁰ According to Morgenstern (*Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death*, 36–47), the *'aqîqah* ceremony consists of two parts. The first part is the cutting off of the infant's first hair, from which the term *'aqîqah* is derived. The second part, which is also called *'aqîqah*, is the offering of a sacrifice. During the *'aqîqah*, the infant's head is daubed with the blood of the sacrificial lamb. Morgenstern equates the *'aqîqah* sacrifice with other sacrifices offered on the seventh or eighth day after birth by some Bedouin tribes. These Bedouin sacrifices serve as redemption (*fedû*) for the child. Interestingly, the *'aqîqah* ritual is only practiced at the birth of a boy and never at the birth of a girl.

⁴¹ It is commonly thought that during liminal rituals people are especially vulnerable to malevolent forces. See Melissa Meyer, *Thicker than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual* (London: Routledge, 2005), 110.

The similarities between eighth-day infant circumcision and the Arab *'aqîqah* sacrifice are striking, but Morgenstern does not explain why circumcision rather than an *'aqîqah* sacrifice is performed in ancient Israel. Another weakness of Morgenstern's analysis is that his Arab evidence is often presented without commentary or distinction. Ancient and modern evidence are mixed throughout without any means to distinguish the quality of the evidence. In spite of these shortcomings, Morgenstern's view of circumcision has much to offer due to the conspicuous correspondences between circumcision and similar Arabic apotropaic rituals. This study departs, however, from Morgenstern primarily in elevating the kinship aspect of circumcision rather than viewing it as a secondary function of the ritual.

As noted above, the view of circumcision as a marriage rite is not incompatible with understanding it also as an apotropaic rite. Wyatt's reading of Exod 4:24–26 leads him to believe that "circumcision, possibly occurring in the context of a marriage, was in some way a prophylactic against a fate awaiting a bridegroom, unless rites were performed which would defuse an inherently dangerous situation."⁴² Hans Kosmala considers Exod 4:24–26 to reflect Midianite traditions that were not originally about Moses at all.⁴³ Instead, the story contains a blood ritual for Zipporah's son that serves as a "prophylactic," as is common among

⁴² Wyatt, "Circumcision and Circumstance," 417.

⁴³ Hans Kosmala, "The 'Bloody Husband,'" *VT* 12 (1962): 14–28.

Arab cultures.⁴⁴ Christopher Hays's interpretation of Exod 4:24–26 also leads him to conclude that “Zipporah's action can be understood as an apotropaic blood rite that invokes her family's kinship to Yahweh, the Divine Kinsman.”⁴⁵ Hays understands the third-person masculine personal pronoun in Exod 4:26 not as a reference to Zipporah's son as Kosmala believes but to Yahweh himself.⁴⁶ Hays's article is mostly a survey of later ancient interpreters of Exod 4:24–26, as he finds the most support for his views in some of the earliest interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, the translators of the Septuagint, the Targums, and early Rabbinic authors. Following Jon D. Levenson, he considers the touching of the child's circumcision blood to Yahweh's feet to have the same apotropaic function as the blood of the paschal lamb.⁴⁷ His evidence is circumstantial, and he fully admits that his interpretation is only one out

⁴⁴ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁵ Christopher B. Hays, “‘Lest Ye Perish in the Way’: Ritual and Kinship in Exodus 4:24–26,” *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007): 39–54 (54).

⁴⁶ The ancient interpreters responsible for the Septuagint of Exodus share Hays's assessment of the referent of the third person masculine pronoun as Yahweh. The translators soften the stark anthropomorphic implications of the text by replacing Yahweh with the “angel of Yahweh.”

⁴⁷ Hays, “‘Lest Ye Perish in the Way,’” 48; Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 50–51.

of many possible “valences of meaning” that a reader is forced to read into this “gapped” text.⁴⁸ For our purposes, it is significant that the apotropaic function of circumcision is not incompatible with the kinship view and in some respects is related to it as Hays also points out. He quotes Paul Kalluveettill regarding the fundamental importance of kinship as the “basic bond” among Semitic peoples: “Brotherhood ... was not limited to the kinsmen by birth. It could be created. A member of the family could accept a stranger into his household or tribe by concluding with him a covenant ... It is as if the newcomer shares in some sort the same blood.”⁴⁹ It is this basic kinship bond created through the circumcision ritual that is present throughout all the biblical passages concerning circumcision.

Circumcision as a Covenant Rite

Erich Isaac defends the only view of circumcision explicitly offered in the biblical text: circumcision as a covenant rite.⁵⁰ He appeals primarily to ancient Near Eastern covenant practices as well as ethnographic and linguistic materials in order to argue that circumcision is a “special case of general cutting or dismembering rites by

⁴⁸ Hays, “Lest Ye Perish in the Way,” 40.

⁴⁹ Paul Kalluveettill, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982), 205.

⁵⁰ Erich Isaac, “Circumcision as a Covenant Rite,” *Anthropos* 59 (1964): 444–56.

which covenants or treaties were established.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, even though he argues for a covenantal understanding of circumcision before the institution of the Abrahamic covenant in Gen 17, he does not discuss in depth other biblical passages regarding circumcision.⁵²

Isaac convincingly establishes that cutting rituals were a part of many ancient Near Eastern covenant ceremonies, and he is likely correct that the rite of circumcision was particularly suited to its application as a Priestly covenant rite in Gen 17, but he does not prove that circumcision had this covenantal function in Israelite culture before the Priestly institution of it as a “sign” of the Abrahamic covenant. Isaac acknowledges that circumcision is a “special case” of cutting in a covenant-making context, but he does not explain why circumcision was chosen rather than the more typical animal sacrifice that is reflected in the covenant formulation in Gen 15.⁵³ Few would deny that circumcision functions as a covenantal rite in Gen 17 and the Priestly worldview, but Isaac retrojects this covenantal function into the preexilic period as well. He contends that circumcision was “an ancient custom associated with treaty and covenant obligations” that was

⁵¹ Ibid., 444.

⁵² Isaac only mentions Exod 4:24–26 twice, once as a passing reference to the “biblical interpretation of the Oedipus conflict” (ibid.) and once as evidence for the practice of using flint knives for the circumcision surgery (ibid., 450).

⁵³ Ibid., 444.

“especially suitable for the particular covenant involved.”⁵⁴ Isaac, however, never establishes that circumcision was associated with treaty and covenant obligations before its incorporation into Gen 17. As noted above, he argues that “the rite of circumcision is ... a special case of general cutting or dismembering rites by which covenants or treaties were established,”⁵⁵ but he does not offer any explanation as to why this would be the case. First, why is circumcision a “special” instance of a covenantal cutting rite? Secondly, the “special” nature of circumcision as a covenantal cutting rite shows that circumcision did not have this previous function but only took on this function in the Priestly adaptation in Gen 17. Isaac convincingly shows that cutting rituals were present in other West Asian covenant practices, but he fails to demonstrate a sound basis for its connection to the Israelite covenantal practices, especially in cases outside of Gen 17.⁵⁶

Isaac argues for the covenantal view of circumcision to the exclusion of other proposed functions of circumcision, and he is unwilling to consider other cultural analogues. One of Isaac’s primary reasons for disassociating Israelite circumcision from other cultures’ views of circumcision is his view that the Bible prohibits bodily mutilation:

In general, the Bible is in strongest opposition to any form of bodily mutilation or deformation, ritual or otherwise. Tattooing, scarification

⁵⁴ Ibid., 453.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 444.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 452.

etc. are prohibited (Lev 19:28; 21:5; Deut 14:1) on the explicit ground that the Israelites are the children of God (Deut 14:1). The prohibition against scarification extends even to animals which become ritually inadmissible if marked (Lev 22:22).⁵⁷

Although, as Isaac correctly notes, there are explicit prohibitions against certain forms of tattooing and scarification in the Bible, there are also numerous instances where some sort of body modification—like circumcision—is prescribed. As Francesca Stavrakopoulou writes, “Circumcision is ... privileged in Torah as a modification practice by which the male body ... is materially marked and manifested as a site of Yahweh-religion.”⁵⁸ Stavrakopoulou goes on to argue that circumcision should be “differentiated from other forms of ritual cutting.”⁵⁹ The important question is what forms of bodily mutilation are allowed and for what reason.

Isaac acknowledges that circumcision likely functioned as an initiation ritual in non-Israelite cultures, yet he refuses to see ancient Israelite culture in the same light. Whether this is due to an *a priori* assumption of Israel’s spiritual uniqueness is impossible to know, but at the very least it is an example of what Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has referred to as an avoidance of the comparative method in order to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Francesca Stavrakopoulou, “Making Bodies: On Body Modification and Religious Materiality in the Hebrew Bible,” *HBAI* 2 (2013): 532–53 (535).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 536.

protect the uniqueness of Judaism (and by extension Christianity) in contrast to “savages.”⁶⁰ It is myopic to argue that because certain acts such as tattooing and scarification are forbidden, there are no initiatory rites of passage found in Israelite culture. Rather, some acts are forbidden, and some are allowed and even commanded. It is the job of the interpreter to find out which category actions belong to and why.

Circumcision as an Initiation Rite (or Rite of Incorporation)

Circumcision as an initiation rite is one of the oldest and most common views of circumcision, especially held by those who value cross-cultural comparisons.⁶¹ Circumcision practiced at the time of puberty or some time before marriage is commonly seen as an initiation into full manhood and inclusion into the male tribal community. Without necessarily excluding the legitimacy of other social functions for circumcision in ancient Israel, one of the main claims of this dissertation is that circumcision is a kinship-generating ritual, meaning that it creates, sustains, and strengthens the kinship bonds that unite males in various social relationships. Many

⁶⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 1–28.

⁶¹ See, e.g. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 47; Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 141–42; Arthena E. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity: An Ethical Reading of Exodus 4* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 206; Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 27–28.

have argued for circumcision as a kind of “tribal marker,”⁶² but it is more than a mere tribal marker because it establishes the very kinship bonds that it symbolizes.

Some have argued that because circumcision was commonly practiced by Israel’s neighbors, then circumcision alone could not serve as a marker of ethnic distinctiveness.⁶³ How could circumcision mark someone as distinctively Israelite when all the other cultures around Israel also practiced circumcision? Instead, as Propp argues, it was the “religious value” that P placed on circumcision that gave it

⁶² See, e.g., Avraham Faust, *Israel’s Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 87–94, for discussion of circumcision as a tribal marker in the late Iron Age I.

⁶³ See, e.g., Michael V. Fox, “Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly ‘ôl Etiologies,” *RB* 81 (1974): 557–96, esp. 595. Although the general consensus is that circumcision was a common West Semitic practice, there is no direct evidence for the practice of circumcision among ancient Israel’s West Semitic contemporaries. Most scholars point to Jer 9:24–25 as evidence for the circumcision of neighboring peoples, but it must at least be questioned whether the list of ethnic groups in Jer 9:24–25 reflects an accurate description of historical practices or was included for primarily rhetorical purposes. See Richard C. Steiner, “Incomplete Circumstances in Egypt and Edom: Jeremiah (9:24–25) in the Light of Josephus and Jonckheere,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 497–505.

its power.⁶⁴ However, this perspective fails to account for the multivalency of circumcision. As Avraham Faust writes,

The fact that many groups in the ancient Near East, including Israel's neighbors, practiced circumcision does not therefore mean that it could not serve as an ethnic marker ... The fact that one source gives a certain explanation for a practice does not exclude the possibility that other peoples/groups at the very same time had different explanations, nor that even the same group had other explanations in different times.⁶⁵

For the ancient Israelites, circumcision was not simply a physical marker for others to see; rather, it was a symbol of a kinship bond.

Van Gennep was a Dutch anthropologist whose book *Rites of Passage* centers on the various rituals that mark significant transitions within human life: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Van Gennep himself considered the primary function of circumcision, like other initiatory mutilations and excisions, to be a sign of social union.⁶⁶ He considered it to be a rite of incorporation that ritually linked boys with the patrilineal community. It is not difficult to see the attraction of viewing circumcision as a rite of incorporation, because that is how it functions in many cultures, as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood or from the female domain to the male domain. One of the difficulties with understanding circumcision as a rite

⁶⁴ Propp, "The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel," 357.

⁶⁵ Faust, "The Bible, Archaeology, and the Practice of Circumcision in Israelite and Philistine Societies," *JBL* 134 (2015): 273–90 (277).

⁶⁶ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 102–06.

of incorporation, however, is that there is no evidence of it having such a function for *infants* outside of ancient Israelite culture. It may be that circumcision was performed after infancy at some point in Israelite culture, but the biblical evidence only reflects the normative practice of infant circumcision. All of the passages we will examine, Gen 34, Exod 4:24–26, and Josh 5:2–9, all reflect atypical circumstances. The normal order of things is infant circumcision.

The view that the normal order of things in ancient Israel is infant circumcision is not commonly accepted in biblical scholarship. Based primarily on cross-cultural circumcision practices and various examples of adult circumcision in the Hebrew Bible,⁶⁷ the scholarly consensus has been that circumcision was originally a puberty or pre-marriage rite before the exile and that infant circumcision was an exilic, Priestly innovation. If we accept the hypothesis that the circumcision rite in Israel was initially a puberty rite and only later became an infant rite, then how do we account for this change? What rationale would lead the Priestly writer to shift the time of circumcision so drastically?

⁶⁷ Wyatt (“Circumcision and Circumstance”) considers Gen 17, Exod 12, and Josh 5 as evidence that infant circumcision was a transformation of an older practice of non-infant circumcision, but it is an argument from silence. The important thing to remember is that none of these passages record non-infant circumcision as the *normative* practice.

Although most scholars consider infant circumcision to be a Priestly innovation, few have proposed theories as to why the Priestly writer may have re-adapted circumcision as an infant rite. Propp is a notable exception, and he offers a series of possible reasons. First, he notes, “Through experience the Israelites probably discovered the operation less painful for babies.”⁶⁸ This explanation seems unlikely based on cross-cultural comparisons. Why would only the ancient Israelites and very few other cultures make this shift to infant circumcision, for surely other cultures were equally aware of the tremendous physical pain caused by circumcision. Additionally, many cultures consider it necessary for those being circumcised not to flinch as a result of the pain of the circumcision, meaning that the pain of circumcision is for some a necessary component of the rite.⁶⁹

Acknowledging the dangerous conditions of infant circumcision, Propp also proposes that circumcision may have been considered salutary: “Either God protects the Israelite child, or demons avoid it, or at the mundane level, it is simply

⁶⁸ Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” 362. See also George A. Barton, “Circumcision (Semitic),” *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* 3:679–80.

⁶⁹ In the Noikoro district of the Fiji islands, to flinch during one’s circumcision is a mark of weakness that follows a man throughout his entire life. See A. B. Brewster, “Circumcision in Noikoro, Noemalue and Mboumbudho,” *JRAI* 49 (1919): 309–16, esp. 311. See also Salau ole Koros, “Masaii Boys’ Circumcision,” *JASHM* 7 (1992): 94–101, esp. 97.

hygienic.”⁷⁰ This apotropaic function of circumcision has been proposed by others, and undoubtedly, the periods of birth, marriage, and death are considered the most dangerous times because of the inherent liminality of those life stages. This explanation, however, fails to account for the change from a puberty rite to an infant rite. The rite of passage from boyhood to manhood is just as dangerous and also often marked by various rituals. The hygienic reason strikes me as too modern a concern or explanation. As Louis H. Gray writes, “The lack of hygienic concepts among primitive peoples renders the hypothesis extremely improbable.”⁷¹ Again, it must be asked why only the ancient Israelites would be aware of or concerned with the hygienic consequences of infant circumcision.

Propp’s most unique contribution to the discussion about the development of infant circumcision is his hypothesis that “babies were circumcised as soon as it was safe *because* they were liable to die ... circumcision was believed to improve one’s fate in the world of the dead.”⁷² Propp notes that Ezekiel frequently mentioned the wretched fate of the uncircumcised in the next world (28:8–10; 31:18; 32:19, 21, 25–26, 28–31), but he fails to understand that in these instances the “uncircumcised” is Ezekiel’s cipher for the wicked and not simply the physically

⁷⁰ Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” 363.

⁷¹ Louis H. Gray, “Circumcision (Introduction),” *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 3:664.

⁷² Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” 363.

uncircumcised.⁷³ The point is not that if these peoples had been circumcised they would have avoided their unenviable fate. Rather, the point is that their wickedness leads to their judgment. Propp bases his analysis primarily on the work of Adolphe Lods, who argues that if the prophet had been thinking of uncircumcised nations, he would have mentioned the Philistines.⁷⁴ Since he did not, then he has in mind uncircumcised Israelites. There are two reasons this may not have been the case. First, the Philistines may not have even been in the purview of Ezekiel during that period. Second, Avraham Faust has recently argued that by Ezekiel's time, the Philistines may very well have been circumcised.⁷⁵ Ultimately, all of Propp's proposed reasons for the shift to infant circumcision are unconvincing.

In contrast to Propp, Morgenstern argues that puberty is merely the *terminus ad quem* for circumcision and that there is no explicit connection between circumcision and the onset of puberty or marriage. Instead, based mostly on Arab

⁷³ See Wyatt, "Circumcision and Circumstance," 406, n. 1.

⁷⁴ Adolphe Lods, "Notes sur deux croyances hébraïques relatives à la mort et à ce qui la suit: le sort des incirconcis dans l'au-delà et la victoire sur Léviatan," *Comptes rendues des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 87 (1943): 271–97.

⁷⁵ Avraham Faust, "The Bible, Archaeology, and the Practice of Circumcision," 273–90. Faust shows how circumcision becomes an ethno-kinship marker in the Second Temple period, but he does not extensively discuss the biblical passages that are the main texts of this dissertation.

circumcision practices, he avers that circumcision could be performed “any time between the seventh day of birth and the attainment of puberty.”⁷⁶ However, he does still believe that infant circumcision is a secondary development, only that this development preceded its adoption in Israelite practice.⁷⁷ Although there are reasons that suggest that infant circumcision was practiced very early in Israelite culture, this matter cannot be settled definitively. The main options are either that circumcision was initially practiced as a puberty rite and then later became an infant rite, or that it was always an infant rite in ancient Israel and sometimes practiced on non-infants in exceptional cases. The conclusions of this study are valid, however, whether infant circumcision was a preexilic or postexilic practice. Regardless of the time of circumcision, its function was as a kinship rite that incorporates males, whether infant or pubescent, into the male patrilineal community.

Circumcision and the Exile

As noted previously, the scholarly consensus since Wellhausen is that infant circumcision is the Priestly re-adaptation of circumcision during or shortly after the

⁷⁶ Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death*, 63.

⁷⁷ Morgenstern believes that mass circumcision was originally performed at an annual spring festival, similar to what one finds in Josh 5:2-9, although there is little evidence for this position.

exile. In the standard, scholarly reconstruction, the Priestly writer took a pre-existing rite and adapted it for his own purposes in his socio-cultural and temporal context.⁷⁸ One of the primary arguments for the development of circumcision during the exile is that it is only in the presence of non-circumcising Babylonians that circumcision would stand out. Rather than merely being a cultural artifact inherited through tradition, it is a defiant stand against the Babylonian cultural overlords now infused with religious significance and meaning.⁷⁹ I question, however, whether the

⁷⁸ I speak of the Priestly writer as a singular figure for heuristic purposes rather than as a reference to a specific, historical person. It is more likely that the “Priestly writer” represents a stream of tradition over many years that is ultimately recorded in the Priestly texts of the Hebrew Bible. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 225–41, esp. 229–30.

⁷⁹ It is much clearer that circumcision became a marker of imperial resistance during the Hellenistic period. For example, Livesey (*Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 11) argues that according to 1 Maccabees, circumcision functioned as a nationalistic sign of allegiance to the Hasmoneans. See also Steven Weitzman, “Forced Circumcision and the Shifting Role of Gentiles in Hasmonean Ideology,” *HTR* 92 (1999): 37–59. I wonder if scholars unwittingly retroject this Hellenistic picture of circumcision back into the exilic period.

function of circumcision can be divided so neatly before and after the exile.⁸⁰ I will follow the schema laid out by Wellhausen but only in order to show that there is more continuity between preexilic circumcision and postexilic circumcision than has been previously acknowledged.⁸¹

The exilic transformation of circumcision is becoming less tenable as the consequences of the exile on all aspects of Israelite society are being re-examined. Specifically, scholars question whether the exile had as profound of an effect on all

⁸⁰ Another argument for the importance of circumcision before the exile is the metaphorical descriptions of circumcision which likely antedate the Priestly source. See Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," 14; Gerhard von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose: Genesis Kapitel 12,10–25,18* (Göttingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951), 64–76. Although I do not follow von Rad's interpretation of early circumcision as an implicit act of bodily purification and dedication, he makes the important point that circumcision had to have at least some degree of importance in order to have been used as a common metaphor for loyalty and dedication.

⁸¹ Even though Eilberg-Schwartz focuses on circumcision in the Priestly literature, he shows how the fertility aspect of circumcision exhibits continuity between preexilic and postexilic circumcision. A more common scholarly perspective, however, is typified by Isaac ("Circumcision as a Covenant Rite," 450), who argues that that the Priestly view of circumcision "has nothing to do with sexual maturity, or initiation rites before marriage."

cultural and religious rituals as previously thought. The destruction of the Jerusalem temple in the sixth century BCE and subsequent exilic period in Babylon likely had dramatic consequences for Israelite society, yet the possibility remains that not all cultural rituals underwent dramatic changes.⁸² Marc Brettler laments the great scholarly divide between ancient Israelite religion before the exile and ancient Judaism after the exile, which he understands as a modern scholarly construct.⁸³ As scholars, we seek neat periodization of history, yet such periodization always

⁸² This view follows others who have seen the exile as not that sociologically significant. The exile may appear to be more significant because the Bible is a literary product that portrays the exile as a traumatic, transformative event. The authors of the Bible may have been the ones most dramatically affected by the exile, yet their experience and conceptualization of its causes and effects may not have been mainstream at that time. How closely their interpretations of their experiences reflected life on the ground remains open for debate. See Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 187–88. For a somewhat contrary view that explores the sociological impact of the exile, see Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer Stone Books, 1989).

⁸³ Marc Zvi Brettler, “Judaism in the Hebrew Bible? The Transition from Ancient Israelite Religion to Judaism,” *CBQ* 61 (1999): 429–47.

simplifies complex socio-political, cultural, economic, and religious dynamics. Brettler cautions, “Crises such as the exile would create a *realignment* of rituals. Religion is always going through such a process, and the exile should not be seen as the place where a fundamentally new form of religion developed.”⁸⁴ He makes the important point that religion is not static and is always undergoing change and adaptation. Such a dynamic view of religion guards against an over-simplification that only looks for watershed crises as impetuses for change. Brettler continues,

The Hebrew Bible offers us *small windows* through which we can look into the changes that transpired and suggests (1) that an amazing diversity of opinions, laws or norms could and did exist within the community at the same time, and (2) that within subcommunities changes did occur throughout time, some of them connected to historical events that were watersheds, such as the exile, while others were not.⁸⁵

At the very least, Brettler allows for the possibility that even if some rituals underwent significant change during the exile, circumcision may not have.

Sara Japhet makes a similar claim regarding biblical historiography when she argues that even the nomenclature preexilic and postexilic assumes *a priori* that the exile was a redefining event, yet the evidence does not support such a weighty claim.⁸⁶ She believes that the terminology preexilic and postexilic should be viewed

⁸⁴ Ibid., 438.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 442.

⁸⁶ Sara Japhet, “Postexilic Historiography: How and Why?” in *Israel Constructs its History: Deuteronomistic Historiography in Recent Research* (ed. Albert de Pury,

with a “chronological” sense rather than an essential one. With respect to biblical historiography, she writes that biblical scholarship wrongly ascribes a “certain finality to the ‘exile’” that “may have been influenced by the historical picture of Ezra–Nehemiah.”⁸⁷ In other words, the scholarly distinction between preexilic and postexilic forms of Israelite religion is influenced more by the literary and ideological presentation found within Ezra–Nehemiah than by objective, historical analysis of the time period. Not only that, but she further argues, “The works that are commonly identified as ‘postexilic historiography’ were not written under the immediate impact of destruction and exile, nor as a direct response to them.”⁸⁸ Whatever importance we ascribe to the exile was not necessarily shared by all biblical authors.

Brettler and Japhet emphasize that every cultural symbol must be analyzed independently in order to determine if and how it changed as a result of the exilic experience. To say that circumcision increased in religious significance during the exile without much elaboration, as many scholars do, is to ignore many important questions: What was its function in preexilic Israel? If it did change during the exile, what group was responsible for the change, and how did they disseminate their

Thomas Römer, and Jean-Daniel Macchi; JSOTSS 306; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 144–73.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 146.

ideas? When the exilic group returned from exile, how did their view of circumcision compare to those who remained in the land? Unfortunately, these questions are often ignored. In this dissertation, I will expand on circumcision's function in preexilic Israel, which will also bring clarity to its relationship with postexilic circumcision.

As noted above, I will challenge the idea that circumcision became much more significant in ancient Israel as a result of the exilic experience in Babylon. To begin, the importance of circumcision, even after the exile, should not be assumed. Physical circumcision does not seem important to the exilic, priestly Ezekiel,⁸⁹ and it never appears in the postexilic histories of Ezra and Nehemiah. If anything, this lack of concern in Ezra and Nehemiah and other postexilic works may suggest that during the biblical period circumcision was more important before the exile than after. The strongest evidence of the importance of circumcision beginning in the exile is the centrality of Gen 17 in the theology of the Priestly writer.⁹⁰ Even so, direct Priestly legislation about circumcision is only found in Lev 12:3. Thus, there is

⁸⁹ The only mentions of circumcision in Ezekiel concern foreigners who are uncircumcised both in heart and flesh (Ezek 44: 7, 9). The reference suggests that by Ezekiel's time, physical circumcision for the Israelites was already commonplace and had "religious" connotations with obedience to Yahweh and proper temple worship.

⁹⁰ That is, if Gen 17 is exilic or post-exilic in origin. See chapter 6.

no sound biblical basis for arguing that the exile increased the importance of circumcision. There is even less evidence that its fundamental meaning and significance changed as a result the exile. This continuity becomes most clear when we focus on the social function of circumcision in ancient Israel.

The Plan of the Dissertation

Most interpreters have not focused on the non-Priestly texts concerning physical circumcision because they have considered them to be unrelated and resistant to an overarching understanding of circumcision. Without denying this complexity that seems to permeate the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, I argue that there are threads that can be traced throughout all of the non-Priestly circumcision narratives. The main claim of this dissertation is that each of these non-Priestly narratives portrays circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual. In identifying circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual, it will become clear that circumcision functioned in a way analogous to sacrifice in ancient Israel. Secondly, I hope to show that there is continuity in function between the non-Priestly and Priestly conceptions of circumcision. Rather than being a fundamentally different ritual, the Priestly literature also presents circumcision as a ritual that establishes, maintains, and strengthens male kinship bonds. This conclusion challenges the prevailing assumption that there was a significant break in religious practices in ancient Israel before and after the exile of the late sixth and early fifth c. BCE.

In chapter 2, I will lay out the theoretical basis for the identification of circumcision as a kinship ritual analogous to blood sacrifice. This identification will be based primarily on how circumcision relates to the gendered nature of blood sacrifice as well as the nature of blood ritual in general. Then in the following chapters I will show how both the non-Priestly texts of Gen 34, Exod 4:24–26, and Josh 5:2–9 as well as the Priestly texts of Gen 17, Exod 12:43–49, and Lev 12 reveal that circumcision participates in the same dynamics of kinship construction both before and after the exile. In chapter 3, I offer a reading of Gen 34 that situates the passage within the context of the Abrahamic story that is preoccupied with kinship concerns. I highlight the role that circumcision plays in the story of Dinah and Shechem, not only as a deceitful ruse but also as a kinship ritual that ostensibly makes the Israelites and Shechemites “one people.” In chapter 4, I present an interpretation of Exod 4:24–26 that understands circumcision as a kinship rite that symbolically marks Moses as a true Israelite, a status that has been in doubt for the first three chapters of Exodus. In chapter 5, I show how circumcision functions as a kinship ritual between Israel and Yahweh through an analysis of Josh 5:2–9. In chapter 6, I address the Priestly presentation of circumcision, which occupies a space analogous to sacrifice within the Priestly system. Ultimately, through a literary and historical-critical examination of biblical passages related to physical circumcision, I demonstrate that throughout the history of ancient Israel, both before and after the exile, circumcision functioned as a kinship-generating ritual.

Chapter 2: Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual

The current consensus of biblical scholarship considers the various occurrences of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible as disconnected and unrelated episodes. In the laudable attempt to avoid overgeneralization and instead analyze each instance of circumcision in its proper historical and literary context,¹ scholars have unnecessarily isolated each of the examples of biblical circumcision. The assumption is that since many of the occasions of circumcision originate in putatively separate biblical sources and from different socio-historical environments, then each case of circumcision is irrelevant for understanding every

¹ The move towards a more contextualized treatment of ritual in ancient Israel is admirable and a proper corrective against earlier studies that would compare ritual cross-culturally based on formal and often superficial similarities without first understanding its function within its own culture. For a balanced view about the necessity to first understand a ritual (and specifically sacrifice) in its cultural context, see Ronald Hendel, "Sacrifice as a Cultural System: The Ritual Symbolism of Exodus 24, 3–8," *ZAW* 101 (1989): 366–90, esp. 370, 389. The analysis of any ritual in its cultural context, however, is merely the first step in the interpretive process. In order to achieve a more complete picture of a ritual, it must also be situated in its own historical development, which allows its particular significance and function at any given time to be more clearly recognized.

other case of circumcision.² Any hope for a comprehensive, synchronic view of circumcision in ancient Israel is quickly abandoned in favor of establishing the proper diachronic and hermeneutical boundaries around each biblical source. The present consensus emphasizes the multivalency of circumcision's social function: in one instance circumcision functions as a tribal mark, in another as a procreative fertility rite, and yet in another as an apotropaic or purifying sacrifice.³ While the need to understand a ritual first within its contemporary religious and cultural system is a warranted caution, it can sometimes overshadow the continuity of ritual meaning over long periods of time. Also, only when a ritual is placed in a diachronic

² This impulse also often lies at the heart of those who restrict their analysis of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible to the Priestly source. See, e.g., David Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (AIL 3; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 1–10.

³ See, e.g., Shaye J. D. Cohen's summary of the biblical examples of circumcision in *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 8–21. In the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* entry on circumcision, Robert G. Hall expresses similar sentiments: "Hebrews could draw from a plethora of significances when interpreting stories about circumcision. They could emphasize connotations of marriage and fertility, of covenant making, of deliverance from evil, of suitability for participation within God's activity, and of national identity" ("Circumcision," *ABD* 1:1026).

comparison with other iterations of the same ritual at different points in time can differences in form and function become meaningful.⁴

In the previous chapter, I showed how the piecemeal analysis of circumcision has led to the unfortunate dichotomy of preexilic and postexilic circumcision as well

⁴ For example, in one the most well-known studies of circumcision in a particular society, Maurice Bloch traces the evolution of the social function of circumcision among the Merina of Madagascar between approximately 1780 and 1970 CE. This was a period of tremendous upheaval in Merina society, yet the mechanics of the circumcision ritual remained relatively unchanged. According to Bloch, however, the meaning of the ritual underwent a dramatic transformation from “the mystical transmission of the moral identity of descent groups through time” to “the legitimation of the domination of one group of Merina over others and a celebration of the conquest of non-Merina by the Merina rulers and their army” (review of Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence*, *Current Anthropology* 27 [1986]: 349–60 [349]). The important point to note is that Bloch is able to trace the development of the circumcision ritual within Merina society. Additionally, his description of the earlier social function of circumcision as the “mystical transmission of the moral identity of descent groups through time” corresponds to the main argument of this dissertation of circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual in ancient Israel.

as the proliferation of various views on the social function of circumcision.⁵ In this chapter, I will argue that there is a social function of circumcision in ancient Israel that encompasses all of the relevant non-Priestly circumcision passages in the Hebrew Bible: circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual.⁶ Whatever other purposes it may have had during different periods in ancient Israel, circumcision always functioned in some way as a kinship ritual, establishing and maintaining both human and divine kinship relationships. I will clarify and expand this argument by identifying circumcision as a ritual functionally analogous to blood sacrifice,

⁵ For a recent discussion about the social function of circumcision in preexilic Israel, see Avraham Faust, "The Bible, Archaeology, and the Practice of Circumcision in Israelite and Philistine Societies," *JBL* 134 (2015): 273–90. Rather than following the conventional distinction between preexilic and postexilic circumcision, I will instead use the nomenclature of Priestly and non-Priestly circumcision in the remainder of the dissertation. In this case, Priestly (with a capital P) refers to the source in the traditional documentary hypothesis responsible for the bulk of the book of Leviticus and other various passages in the rest of the Pentateuch. The appellation non-Priestly does not imply that priestly groups were not responsible for those texts. Non-Priestly simply refers to texts that were not a product of the Priestly tradition as commonly understood within biblical studies.

⁶ These passages, which include Gen 34; Exod 4:24–26; and Josh 5:2–9, will be discussed in chapters 3 through 5.

another ritual that has been classified as a kinship-generating ritual. In order to do so, I will first establish the importance of kinship in ancient Israel. Then, I will show how sacrifice operates as a kinship-generating ritual, particularly focusing on the relationship between sacrificial practices, social organization, and gender. Finally, I will lay the groundwork for the main argument of the remainder of the dissertation: circumcision is a ritual analogous to sacrifice based primarily on its social function of generating and maintaining patrilineal lines of descent. Comparative anthropological evidence regarding circumcision's connections with kinship and descent is abundant, and although it is important to avoid facile comparisons between disparate cultures, the widespread nature of the cross-cultural examples suggests the plausibility of this social function in ancient Israel as well. We will see that circumcision parallels both the symbolic and social-structural values of sacrifice as a marker of patrilineage. At the same time, circumcision shares important formal characteristics with sacrifice as well, including the presence of blood and the physical act of cutting.

Kinship in Ancient Israel

Before speaking about circumcision specifically, it is helpful to establish the importance of kinship in ancient Israel more broadly. Important topics in the Hebrew Bible such as genealogy and descent, marriage and divorce, and dowry-systems and inheritance, are all subsumed under the umbrella of kinship studies. It is not possible to study the Bible without at least an awareness of the biblical

kinship system(s), particularly because it is different from the kinship system with which most modern-day (Western) interpreters are familiar. In ancient Israel, kinship is the fabric that structures all societal relationships, and kinship studies provide analytic frameworks within which to interpret biblical texts. Raymond C. Kelly offers a basic definition of kinship: “Kinship relations are social relations predicated upon cultural conceptions that specify the processes by which an individual comes into being and develops into a complete (i.e., mature) social person.”⁷ The two significant aspects to highlight for our purposes are Kelly’s use of the terms “social” and “cultural,” and the processual nature of kinship relations.

First, the terms “social” and “cultural” emphasize that kinship relations are socially-constructed and culturally-conditioned, even when they follow what seem to be purely biological lines. The choice to organize society based on biological relationships is still a choice that a particular culture makes, and there are a variety of different ways in which those biological relationships can be structured. This “artificiality” is important because it reinforces the notion that kinship relations are not inherent to biological parentage; they need to be created and periodically reinforced. Stanley Stowers avers, “Physiology and biology do not create descent groups and patterns of kinship. People do. Thus, the organization of kinship is

⁷ Raymond C. Kelly, *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue among the Etoro* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 521.

always political.”⁸ This inherent social construction of kinship means that the common distinction between “biological” and “fictive” kinship is misleading because in a sense all kinship is “fictive.” Even biological children need to be incorporated into the kinship line through ritual means. For instance, according to biblical norms, both male slaves bought with money and non-Israelite foreigners can be incorporated into the “people of Yahweh” (*‘am yhwh*) and participate in the Passover ritual only after they undergo circumcision (Exod 12:43–49).⁹ If my thesis that circumcision is a kinship-generating ritual is correct, then the act of circumcision brings those men who are not biologically-related to any Israelites into a close enough kinship relationship that they can participate in one of the foundational rites of Israelite cultural and ideological construction. At the same time, males born to native Israelite families are no more qualified than non-circumcised slaves and foreigners to partake of the Passover sacrifice merely by virtue of their physical birth; they too need to undergo the same circumcision ritual (Exod 12:48; Lev 12:3). Second, Kelly highlights the processual nature of kinship, which means that an individual’s kinship relations are never fixed but always fluid

⁸ Stanley A. Stowers, “Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Toward an Anthropology of Greek Religion,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 293–333 (313).

⁹ For more on this particular passage, see the discussion in chapter 6.

and subject to change. Similar to the point made above, no one is born a fully-formed person with fully-formed relationships. Social kinship relations are created over the course of one's life primarily by means of ritual, and circumcision is one of the most significant of those rituals for an Israelite male.

In ancient Israel, like other West Semitic tribal cultures, understanding kinship relations and the way that they are constructed and ordered is important because these relations “defined the rights and obligations, the duties, status, and privileges of tribal members,” so much so that, as Frank Moore Cross writes, “kinship terminology provided the only language for expressing legal, political, and religious institutions.”¹⁰ The situation in the book of Judges is instructive. The book of Judges reflects the kinship relationships that united the disparate tribes that would later comprise the nations of Israel and Judah. Early, pre-monarchic Israel was probably organized as a tribal, segmentary lineage system, in which “authority devolves to the local and kinship levels, with the primary figures of authority the heads of family and the elders of the village.”¹¹ Each tribe was obligated to come to the assistance of the others in times of distress, and according to the book of Judges, some tribes fulfilled their duties more faithfully than others. In Judges 5, a poetic passage that is commonly regarded as one of the most ancient compositions in the

¹⁰ Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 3.

¹¹ Hendel, “Sacrifice as a Cultural System,” 378.

Hebrew Bible,¹² various tribes are commended or criticized for their response to the oppression of Israel by Jabin king of Canaan. The Israelites tribes who all shared a kinship bond were under mutual obligation to help each other when in danger, but whereas the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir,¹³ Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali fulfilled their kinship duties faithfully, the tribes of Reuben, Gilead,¹⁴ Dan, and Asher

¹² See, for instance, Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975); Jo Ann Hackett, "There Was No King in Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 211–5; Susan Niditch, *Judges* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 76–77.

¹³ Machir is not one of the traditional twelve tribes of Israel. He was Jacob's grandson, the son of Manasseh, and may have represented the eastern, Transjordan part of Manasseh (Num 32:40; Deut 3:15; Josh 13:31; 17:1).

¹⁴ Gilead is also not one of the traditional twelve tribes of Israel. He was the grandson of Manasseh and son of Machir (Num 26:29; Josh 17:1). Later in the book of Judges, the judge Jephthah is a Gileadite. According to Trent C. Butler, Gilead may be "a geographical term for an area distinct from that controlled by Machir and parallel to that designated for Gad but not at the time populated by any Israelite tribe. Otherwise, Gilead is a poetic name of Gad or a tribe controlling part of the Transjordan in a revolving door of tribal names early in Israel's fight for the land" (*Judges* [WBC 8; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009], 149).

did not (Judg 5:14–18).¹⁵ Though the precise nature of the political relationships of the various tribes of Israel at that time remains uncertain, what is clear is that they were under mutual obligation to support one another on the battlefield as the collective “people of Yahweh.”¹⁶ Therefore, as we see in the Judges narrative, kinship

¹⁵ Lawrence E. Stager surmises that the Song of Deborah depicts a ten-tribe confederation and that those tribes who participated “had far fewer economic entanglements with non-Israelites than those tribes whose livelihoods depended to a large extent on maritime trade or on specialized pastoralism” (“The Song of Deborah: Why Some Tribes Answered the Call and Others Did Not,” *BAR* 15 [1989]: 51–64 [62]). In other words, their economic and political alliances superseded any sense of tribal loyalty.

¹⁶ For a minimalist view of the various tribes as only “groups of clans banded together for military purposes” and lacking any sort of internal cohesion, see Barnabas Lindars, “The Israelite Tribes in Judges,” in *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament* (ed. John A. Emerton; VTS 30; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 95–112. Lindars does not believe that the Israelite tribes had any concrete, defined obligations to one another. In contrast, the view taken here aligns more closely with J. Andrew Dearman, who writes that during the time of Judges ancient Israel was a “loose coalition of tribes and clans related to one another through lines of kinship and obligations of mutual support” (*Religion & Culture in Ancient Israel* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992], 35).

relations were used to express the bonds that united tribes on a larger political scale.

The political relationships among West Semitic tribes were expressed in kinship terms, as is evidenced by studies of the Amarna letters,¹⁷ Ugaritic literature,¹⁸ and Israelite literature.¹⁹ For example, King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre refer to each other as “brothers” after they enter into political alliance with one another (1 Kgs 9:13). However, the focus in scholarship on the political sphere should not obscure the foundational arena of family or household religion, from which the political kinship terminology ultimately derives. In a seminal article on the relationship of biblical covenants to Near Eastern treaties, Moshe Weinfeld writes, “The use of familial metaphors in order to express relationships belonging to the royal-national sphere should not surprise us, since the whole diplomatic vocabulary of the second millennium is rooted in the familial sphere.”²⁰ The

¹⁷ William D. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Aaron Tugendhaft, “How to Become a Brother in the Bronze Age: An Inquiry into the Representation of Politics in Ugaritic Myth,” *Fragments 2* (2012): 89–104.

¹⁹ Steven Elliott Grosby, “Kinship, Territory, and the Nation in the Historiography of Ancient Israel,” *ZAW* 105 (1993): 3–18.

²⁰ Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970): 184–203 (194). Mark Smith builds upon this same idea

language of international politics is modeled after the most basic language of familial kinship units, and the fundamental unit for kinship relationships is not the state but the family.²¹ It is in this domain of the family unit as a part of the larger tribe that circumcision generates and maintains patrilineal lines of descent. Without excluding the legitimacy of other social functions for circumcision in ancient Israel, I argue that circumcision's purpose as a kinship-generating ritual should be regarded as one of its fundamental functions in ancient Israelite society. Many have argued for circumcision as a kind of "tribal marker,"²² but it does more than simply mark a person as a member of a tribe; it establishes the very kinship bonds that it symbolizes.²³ This performative nature of circumcision can be seen in

in his article about kinship in Ruth 1:16–17 ("Your People Shall Be My People': Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17," *CBQ* 69 [2007]: 242–58).

²¹ See, e.g., Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985): 1–35.

²² Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 13–15; Hall, "Circumcision," 1:1026; Cynthia Park, "An Analysis of the Influence of Non-priestly Ritual Performance on Covenant Theology" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2014), 150.

²³ In a similar point, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz asserts that circumcision is not merely a sign of the covenant in the Priestly worldview; rather it is a *symbol* of the covenant, in that it "has properties that make it appropriate for the content which it

Gen 17 when circumcision is described as both the *bərîṭ* ('covenant') and the *'ôt bərîṭ* ('sign of the covenant'). Circumcision both symbolizes the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people and brings the people into that relationship; it is a performative rite. Ritual theorist Jean La Fontaine writes about the performative nature of ritual, "Like some forms of linguistic utterances, ritual establishes what it described."²⁴ Circumcision is not merely a physical marker; rather, it is the generator and continuing symbol of a kinship bond.

signifies" (*The Savage in Judaism* [Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990], 146). He further elaborates on the symbolic importance that the rite of circumcision is performed on the male sexual organ necessary for the continuation of the patrilineal line: "As an operation on the male reproductive organ, circumcision symbolizes lines of descent. This is an especially powerful symbol in patrilineal societies, where descent is traced from father to son" (*ibid.*, 145). It is no surprise, then, that circumcision was chosen as the symbol of Yahweh's covenant with Abram, which is focused on the continuation and expansion of his patrilineal line.

²⁴ Jean La Fontaine, "The Power of Rights," *Man* 12 (1977): 421–37 (423). For more on the performative nature of ritual, see also Emily M. Ahern, "The Problem of Efficacy: Strong and Weak Illocutionary Acts," *Man* 14 (1979): 1–17; Maurice Bloch, "Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority?" *Archive. Europ. Social.* 15 (1974): 55–81; Ruth Finnegan,

One of the problematic issues, however, with calling circumcision a kinship-generating ritual is that kinship is so pervasive that there may not be many rituals in ancient Israel that do not at least in some way relate to kinship. Rituals represent and reinforce the collective *Weltanschauung* of any given culture.²⁵ In the case of ancient Israel, where kinship concerns were paramount, it is not surprising that many rituals revolve around the establishment and maintenance of kinship

“How to Do Things with Words: Performative Utterances among the Limba of Sierra Leone,” *Man* 4 (1969): 537–51; Roy A. Rappaport, “The Obvious Aspects of Ritual,” *Cambr. Anthropol.* 2 (1974): 3–69; Stanley J. Tambiah “A Performative Approach to Ritual,” *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 65 (1979): 113–69.

²⁵ David Janzen emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which a ritual occurs before attempting to discern its meaning. He describes ritual as activity that legitimizes and maintains the present worldview and claims, “A ritual cannot have a social significance at odds with its social function” (*The Social Meanings of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: A Study of Four Writings* [New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004], 10). It is too rigid, however, to claim that ritual is completely coherent and *always* promotes the prevailing societal worldview. It is sometimes contradictory, variegated, dynamic, and deconstructive. A more nuanced perspective would be that of Mary Douglas, who acknowledges that “perhaps all social systems are built on contradiction, in some sense at war with themselves” (*Purity and Danger* [New York: Routledge, 1966], 140).

relationships. For instance, the Passover ritual, the establishment of *maṣṣebôt* ('pillars'),²⁶ and the sprinkling of blood on the people in Exod 24:3–8²⁷ all function to establish and maintain kinship relationships, both human and divine. It remains important, however, in the case of circumcision to identify the mechanisms that create and reinforce these kinship bonds. In order to establish circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual, we will first look at blood sacrifice, another ritual that has been identified as having a kinship-generating social function.

Blood Sacrifice as a Kinship-Generating Ritual

In the following discussion of blood sacrifice as a kinship-generating ritual, I wish to avoid a reductionist or essentialist view of sacrifice (or any ritual for that matter) that only allows for one “fundamental” meaning or function of sacrifice. Even Nancy Jay, whose theoretical work on sacrifice forms the heart of this chapter’s argument, notes that she does not attempt to distill sacrifice into one essential meaning or

²⁶ Doron Ben-Ami, “Hazor at the Beginning of the Iron Age,” *NEA* 76 (2013): 101–4; William G. Dever, “The Middle Bronze Age ‘High Place’ at Gezer,” *BASOR* 371 (2014): 17–57.

²⁷ Hendel, “Sacrifice as a Cultural System,” 366–90.

purpose.²⁸ Rather, she seeks to ask a series of questions about relations between sacrificial practices, social organization, and gender.²⁹ In arguing for the use of sacrifice as a kinship-generating ritual, I am not excluding other possible and legitimate understandings of sacrifice. However, I do claim that kinship generation and maintenance is one of the primary social functions of sacrifice, particularly in ancient, agrarian societies where inheritance of real property is a central focus. Whether sacrifice is thought of as a “gift,” “power,” “communion,” or “expiation,” one of its central functions within society is to produce and reinforce kinship bonds, both human and divine. As Stowers writes concerning Greek society from the classical period into the early Roman Empire, “The significant forms of Greek life were always organized by agnation and the criterion for membership was not birth but sacrifice.”³⁰ Put simply, “Sacrifice is a social act that brings humans into relationship with God and with each other.”³¹

²⁸ This admission by Jay is a powerful counterpoint to those who argue that Jay’s conclusions about the universality of blood sacrifice as a kinship-generating ritual are unwarranted by the evidence.

²⁹ Nancy Jay, *Throughout your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 147.

³⁰ Stowers, “Greeks Who Sacrifice,” 311.

³¹ Theodore J. Lewis, “Covenant and Blood Rituals: Understanding Exodus 24:3–8 in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” in *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and*

Early on, William Robertson Smith, whom we encountered in the previous chapter, associated sacrifice with kinship, both human and divine.³² For Robertson Smith, the original essence of sacrifice was mystical communion with the group's deity with a focus on the consumption of the sacrifice. This shared experience strengthened the pre-existing bond between human and deity as well as the community members' bonds with each other.³³ Religious theorists since Robertson Smith have elaborated on the intimate connection between sacrifice and eating, especially influenced by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss who explored the relationship between cooking and eating in sacrificial practices and how they

Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William Dever (ed. Seymour Gitin, J. Edward Wright, and J. P. Dessel; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 341–50 (348).

³² William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on The Religion of the Semites* (New York: D. Appleton, 1889), esp. 29–81, 251–93. No less a figure than Émile Durkheim praised Robertson Smith for his vital contributions to the understanding of sacrifice as alimentary communion (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [trans. Carol Cosman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 241.) Smith himself was preceded by Ludwig Feuerbach, but it is not clear if Robertson Smith was directly influenced by or familiar with Feuerbach's work.

³³ See Aelred Cody, "Exodus 18,12: Jethro Accepts a Covenant with the Israelites," *Bib* 49 (1968): 153–66, esp. 158.

symbolized larger cultural realities.³⁴ For example, in the Levitical legal codes, some sacrifices are roasted while others are boiled (Lev 2:14; 8:31). This contrast is sometimes understood as a contrast between nature and culture, which we will explore more later.

Some even go so far as to say that sacrifice *is* eating or at least that eating is the most important part of the sacrificial ritual. Stowers writes that ancient Greeks did not focus on sacrifice as ritual killing, a perspective that has been engendered and propagated by Western Christianity. Rather, for the ancient Greeks, the meaning of sacrifice was “primarily in the distribution, cooking (including the god’s portion), and eating of the meat.”³⁵ In ancient Greek religion, the principal ritual was the

³⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, vol. 3, (trans. John and Doreen Weightman; New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

³⁵ Stowers, “Greeks Who Sacrifice,” 297. There is reason to think that ancient Israel had more affinities with ancient Greece than other Semitic cultures regarding sacrifice and kinship construction. As will be noted below, blood did not play a significant role in other Near Eastern religious rituals besides those in ancient Israel. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 706; Dennis J. McCarthy, “The Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 166–76; Baruch J. Schwartz, “Prohibitions concerning the ‘Eating’ of Blood,” in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan; JSOTSS 125; Sheffield:

sacrifice of animal victims, and some have gone so far as to claim that there was no consumption of meat apart from sacrifice. Although it is an exaggeration to claim

Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 56. For the central importance of blood in the Priestly religion of ancient Israel, see Stephen A. Geller, "Blood Cult: Toward a Literary Theology of the Priestly Work of the Pentateuch," *Proof* 12 (1992): 97–124. Additionally, some scholars have posited the priority of milk over blood in kinship construction in Arabic cultures. See Avner Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses: Medieval Islamic Views on Breastfeeding and Their Social Implications* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Peter Parkes, "Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk was Thicker than Blood?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (2004): 587–615. In a similar vein, Edouard Conte in his study of Arab conceptualizations of kinship states that Arab texts do present kinship bonds in terms of shared substance, but the substance is not blood but rather meat or flesh ("Agnatic Illusions: The Element of Choice in Arab Kinship," in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East* [ed. F. Abdul-Jabar and H. Dawod; London: Saqi, 2003], 15–49). Based on these ethnographic data, Cynthia Chapman has attempted to show the importance of milk in Israelite kinship construction. Although she does cite a few significant examples from the biblical text, she does not prove that milk was more important than blood for kinship construction in ancient Israel ("'Oh that you were like a brother to me, one who had nursed at my mother's breasts.' Breast Milk as a Kinship-Forging Substance," *JHS* 12 [2012]: 1–41).

that *all* meat the ancient Greeks ate was in some way linked to the sacrifice of domestic animals, the division, distribution, and consumption of meat was clearly linked to sacrificial ritual.³⁶ According to Marcel Detienne, “The butcher who sheds the animal’s blood bears the same functional name as the sacrificer posted next to the blood altar.”³⁷ In ancient Greece, sacrifice was intimately connected with eating.³⁸ The same holds true in ancient Israel as well. Ronald Hendel, influenced by Mary Douglas, writes that ancient Israelite sacrifice is “a highly ritual form of a meal

³⁶ Gunnel Ekroth argues that although sacrificed domestic animals constituted the bulk of meat eaten in Ancient Greece (ca. 700–100 BCE), wild animals not involved in sacrificial ritual were also sometimes eaten (“Meat in Ancient Greece: Sacrifice, Sacred or Secular?,” *Food and History* 5 [2007]: 249–72).

³⁷ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, eds., *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (trans. Paula Wissing; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3; trans. of *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1979).

³⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Domestication of Sacrifice,” in *Violent Origins* (ed. Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 191–238; Stowers, “On the Comparison of Blood in Greek and Israelite Ritual,” in *Hesed ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs* (ed. Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin; BJS 320; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 179–94, esp. 184–5.

in sacred space, offered and shared with God.”³⁹ Additionally, in many cultures, men and women are not permitted to eat together.⁴⁰ The separation of genders during meals validates the importance of eating in kinship creation. If consuming a meal comprised of the meat from a sacrificial act generates, maintains, and strengthens kinship bonds between men, then it makes sense that women would be formally excluded from participating in the meal. Although this prohibition is often ignored in private settings for practical reasons, the importance of eating as a kinship ritual is reinforced by societal norms.

Many scholars have followed Robertson Smith in identifying sacrifice as a kinship-generating ritual, but Nancy Jay was the first to bring its gendered nature to the forefront of the conversation. Rather than attributing kinship creation to a vague mystical communion, she provided a concrete picture of how kinship bonds are

³⁹ Ronald Hendel, “Table and Altar: The Anthropology of Food in the Priestly Torah,” in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney* (ed. Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2007), 133. See also Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Rens Heringa, “Reconstructing the Whole: Seven Months Pregnancy Ritual in Kerek, East Java,” *Kinship and Food in South East Asia* (ed. Monica Janowski and Fiona Kerlogue; Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2007), 40–42; Audrey I. Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 122.

created in societies that practice blood sacrifice. She correctly showed that the primary mechanism by which sacrifice created kinship bonds in many cultures is the exclusion of women from participation. There have been a few important criticisms of her work. Stowers rightly notes that maternity, which Jay assumes is natural and biological, is a societal construction just as much as paternity in sacrificing societies.⁴¹ Leslie Goode offers a variety of ethnographic examples that do not fit neatly into Jay's conventional sacrificial typology.⁴² Despite these

⁴¹ Stowers, "Greeks Who Sacrifice," 293–333, esp. 299–300. Maternity, here, refers not only to the physical process of childbirth but to the ideas and values a culture places on everything surrounding being a mother, from how society symbolizes menstrual blood to the means by which young boys are transferred away from the female, domestic sphere. See also Carol Delaney, "Cutting the Ties that Bind," in *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (ed. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 445–67, esp. 453–54, who makes a similar point in her analysis of the Abrahamic narrative in Genesis.

⁴² Leslie Goode, "'Creating Descent' after Nancy Jay: A Reappraisal of Sacrifice in Relation to Social Reproduction," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21 (2009): 383–401. Goode builds primarily on Kathleen McClymond's work that challenges the association of non-Christian sacrifice with violence, which Goode argues blurs the clean distinction that Jay makes between blood sacrifice and other types of offerings (Kathleen McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative*

criticisms, her general theory about the ritual exclusion of women by means of blood sacrificial ritual remains valid. Jay convincingly argued that since only adult males may perform blood sacrificial rituals in a wide variety of cultures,⁴³ blood sacrifice in tribal societies functions to “constitute and maintain patrilineal descent systems.”⁴⁴ In patrilineal descent systems, continuity of authority and property passes through men only, from fathers to sons, to the exclusion of the women who

Study of Sacrifice [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008]). Although Goode uses McClymond’s work to discredit Jay’s theory, it can also be used productively to expand the bounds of Jay’s work. For example, although Jay shows that blood sacrifice is a very common cross-cultural kinship-generating ritual, McClymond’s analysis allows for other kinds of offerings that participate in the dynamics of kinship, gender, and social organization.

⁴³ Jay, “Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman,” in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret Ruth Miles; Boston, MA: Beacon, 1985), 283–309 (284): “Around the world, ordinarily only adult males (fathers, real and metaphorical) may perform sacrifice ... It is not women as such who are regularly prohibited from sacrificing, but women as childbearers or as potential childbearers.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

have given birth to these men.⁴⁵ Placing such significance on agnatic relationships creates an obvious problem, since childbirth and nursing are exclusively female enterprises. There is also the important question of how one can be sure that a wife has been faithful and that a son is a legitimate continuation of the male, ancestral line. The answer, according to Jay, is blood sacrifice: “Blood sacrificial ritual can serve as evidence of patrilineal descent.”⁴⁶ For instance, she gives the example of the West African Yakö, who are organized in both patrilineal and matrilineal descent groups; however, only the patrilineages practice sacrifice.⁴⁷ Blood sacrifice bypasses the need to “prove” (in the modern-day sense) that a son is legitimate, because through participation in rites of blood sacrifice, a son is symbolically severed from the mother who bore him and integrated into the patrilineal line. As Nancy Ruane writes, “Patrilineal systems require an alternative ‘birth’ that would confirm paternal descent for legal and social purposes and establish the fixed group of males belonging to the patrilineage.”⁴⁸ Jay identifies blood-sacrificial ritual as this “alternative birth” and concludes that “kinship relations can be restructured,

⁴⁵ In matrilineages, descent of authority and property is typically passed from mother’s brother to sister’s son, that is, from uncle to nephew.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴⁸ Nancy Ruane, *Sacrifice and Gender in Biblical Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.

individuals can be adopted, and even subsidiary lineages can be incorporated into a descent group by participation in sacrifice.”⁴⁹

Jay goes one step further in her analysis. In addition to identifying sacrifice as a means by which societies maintain and perpetuate patrilineage, she also attempts to answer the question of why in so many unrelated traditions sacrifice specifically rather than some other ritual is used to identify patrilineage membership. She offers two preliminary answers, one symbolic and the other social-structural. The symbolic answer is that “the only action that is as serious as giving birth, which can act as a counterbalance to it, is killing,” and “unlike childbirth, sacrificial killing is deliberate, purposeful, ‘rational’ action, under perfect control. Both birth and killing are acts of power, but sacrificial ideology commonly construes childbirth as the quintessence of vulnerability, passivity, and powerless suffering.”⁵⁰ This structuralist contrast between “natural,” female, reproductive (i.e. menstrual and childbirth) blood and “cultured,” male, sacrificial blood is a common trope in anthropological studies. In her book on the origins of blood as symbol and ritual, Melissa Meyer writes, “symbolically neutralizing the pollution of mothers’ blood through male bloodletting is a widespread cross-cultural trope in male initiation

⁴⁹ Jay, “Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman,” 293.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

rituals.”⁵¹ It is interesting to note at this point that the only explicit circumcision command in the Pentateuchal legal codes occurs in the context of purity laws concerning women and childbirth (Lev 12).⁵² The reproductive power of females, which is their inherent and biological right, is viewed as threatening by the dominant male gender, so men devise means by which boys can be extracted from the female domain and enter into the male sphere.

Jay’s social-structural answer as to why it is so widespread that sacrifice is used to identify patrilineage is based on the internal logic of sacrifice. Sacrifice is commonly broken down into two types: communion and expiation, but Jay argues that these two types are really two aspects of the same process.⁵³ In her words, “the work of sacrifice is the creation and maintenance of contradictory dichotomy ...

⁵¹ Melissa Meyer, *Thicker than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 110. She also includes many examples of the ways in which circumcision rituals specifically separate sons from mothers. See *ibid.*, 107–22.

⁵² The role of circumcision in the Priestly literature will be discussed in chapter 6.

⁵³ It is important to note that Jay is heavily influenced by categories drawn from Christian Eucharistic theology. The Eucharist has also often been described in sacrificial terms, despite the lack of actual blood in the ritual. For more on the Eucharist as a sacrifice without ritual killing, see Meyer, *Thicker than Water*, 192–202.

Sacrifice can both expiate descent from women (along with other dangers) and integrate the 'pure and eternal' patrilineage."⁵⁴ One must always consider both the positive and the negative aspects of ritual. To say that a male initiation ritual joins boys into the patrilineage is also, at the same time, to imply that they are ritually separated from their mothers and the female, domestic realm.

Both Jay's symbolic and social-structural reasons for identifying sacrifice as a kinship-generating ritual apply equally to circumcision. The blood of circumcision serves as a clear counterpoint to the blood of childbirth. Léonie Archer argues that "the blood of circumcision served as a symbolic surrogate for the blood of childbirth, and because it was shed voluntarily and in a *controlled* manner, it transcended the bounds of nature and the *passive* blood flow of the mother at delivery and during the preparatory cycle for pregnancy, menstruation."⁵⁵ With respect to the social-structural nature of sacrifice, the dual nature of sacrifice as both communion and expiation is mirrored in the symbolic nature of circumcision as symbol of both

⁵⁴ Jay, *Throughout your Generations Forever*, 141.

⁵⁵ Léonie J. Archer, "Bound by Blood: Circumcision and Menstrual Taboo in Post-Exilic Judaism," in *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Traditions* (ed. J. M. Soskice; London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), 38–61 (53). For the theoretical basis of Archer's juxtaposition of circumcision and menstruation, see Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture, and Society* (ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974).

fertility and, at least explicitly in the Priestly source, the curse of the covenant.⁵⁶ Genesis 17:14 states that any male who is not circumcised will be “cut off” (Heb. *krt*) from his people. Besides the obvious wordplay with the vocabulary used in the making of covenants (also Heb. *krt*; e.g. Gen 15:18; Exod 34:12; Josh 9:6), to be “cut off” from one’s people is often associated with a lack of progeny.⁵⁷ Circumcision as an act executed on the locus of male reproduction represents the possibility both of lineal success and of lineal failure. Obedience to the circumcision command leads to

⁵⁶ Meredith G. Kline, “Oath and Ordeal Signs,” *WTJ* 27 (1965): 115–39.

⁵⁷ See Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 148; Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 115; Donald J. Wold, “The *Kareth* Penalty in P: Rationale and Cases,” in *SBL Seminar Papers 1979*, vol. 1 (ed. Paul J. Achtemeier; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 1–45, esp. 15. Other interpretations of the *karet* penalty include expulsion from the people or capital punishment, whether performed by human institutions or by Yahweh. See discussions in Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 473–74; Gerhard F. Hasel, “כרת *karat*,” *TDOT* 7:347–49; William Horbury, “Extirpation and Excommunication,” *VT* 35 (1995): 13–38, esp. 31–34; Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 241–42; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 457–60; *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 405–8.

fruitfulness of descendants; disobedience leads to the “cutting off” of one’s descendants. In sum, circumcision in ancient Israelite society, like sacrifice, is a ritual means by which a son is differentiated from his mother and enters into the patrilineage. This imagery of transcending physical birth and offering a male birth into male society is clearer in the case of circumcision than even in the case of other types of blood sacrifice.

Blood Sacrifice as a Kinship-Generating Ritual in the Hebrew Bible

Many scholars have pointed out the need to analyze rituals in the context of an entire cultural system rather than in isolation. No single ritual can be understood independent of the rest of the cultural system. Anthropological, cross-cultural examples from similar or even dissimilar cultures may be helpful guides and comparisons, but ultimately, the analysis of ritual in a culture should first be located within that particular cultural system.⁵⁸ So, the first step is not to compare circumcision and sacrifice with circumcision and sacrifice in surrounding cultures but to situate circumcision within the Israelite cultural system. I am first going to

⁵⁸ That is not to say that there is not a proper place for cross-cultural comparison. In contrast to the position taken by Bernat, which I discussed in the last chapter, I value cross-cultural comparisons, and they will be used occasionally to buttress conclusions from the biblical text as well as fill in gaps where the biblical text is silent or incomplete.

highlight a few texts that have been traditionally located outside of the Priestly corpus. These examples—Gen 15, Gen 28–31, Exod 18—shed light on the function of sacrifice and eating as kinship-generating rituals.⁵⁹

Genesis 15 is significant with respect to circumcision because the passage is often presented as a counterpoint to the Priestly Gen 17 that centers on circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Genesis 17 is thus commonly considered the Priestly writer's version of an earlier Abrahamic covenant found in Gen 15.⁶⁰ With respect to circumcision, whereas Gen 17 presents circumcision as

⁵⁹ Another possible example includes the shared covenant meal between Abimelech and Isaac (Gen 26:26–30). A possible phenomenological parallel of eating and drinking as a kinship-generating ritual is the *marzeah*/*marziḥu* dining ritual that has been observed in a wide variety of ancient Near Eastern cultures. See John L. McLaughlin, *The Marzēah in the Prophetic Literature: References and Allusions in Light of the Extra-Biblical Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

⁶⁰ For a contrary viewpoint, see Paul R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Williamson instead argues that Gen 15 and Gen 17 contain two distinct but related covenants established between Yahweh and Abraham. Williamson also does not consider the animal rite in Gen 15 and circumcision in Gen 17 to function in the same way relative to their respective covenants.

both the covenant and the sign of the covenant, Gen 15 makes no mention of circumcision. There is, however, in Gen 15 a ritual act that many have considered a kind of sacrifice. This “animal rite” in Gen 15 plays the same role as circumcision in Gen 17: both serve as covenant ratification rituals that cement Yahweh’s status as Abram’s suzerain.⁶¹

In Gen 15, the word of Yahweh comes to the still-childless Abram in a vision and promises him a son and offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen 15:5). Yahweh also reaffirms his promise of land to Abram, and in response to Abram’s desire for reassurance, he commands Abram to bring him various animals: a three-year old heifer, a three-year old female goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.⁶² Abram cuts all of the animals in half except for the

⁶¹ The circumcision in Gen 17 also has thematic resonances with the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22. See T. Desmond Alexander, “Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision,” *JOT* 25 (1983): 17–22. Levenson argues that circumcision may reflect the sublimation of child sacrifice in ancient Israel, a trope that also features prominently in Gen 22 (*The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993], esp. 50–52).

⁶² Weinfeld suggests that according to ancient Near Eastern parallels, three-years-old simply represents a suitable age for sacrifice, lending further credence to the view that Abram’s offering had a sacrificial character (“Covenant of Grant,” 198).

birds and arranges them in a row. Some time later, a deep sleep falls upon Abram, and Yahweh speaks to him again in a vision, predicting the Israelites' future Egyptian captivity and ultimate deliverance. Then a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces of divided animals. In Gen 15:18, the narrator declares that Yahweh made a covenant with Abram, promising him the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."⁶³ The question that I would like to consider is whether the animal rite in which Abram cuts the various animals in half can be considered a sacrificial act.

Although the animal rite in Gen 15 is not described as a sacrificial act explicitly in the biblical text, a number of interpreters have considered it to be a kind of sacrifice.⁶⁴ Moshe Weinfeld compares Gen 15 with analogous treaties from

⁶³ All biblical translations are my own.

⁶⁴ David Biale, *Blood and Belief* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 39; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 181; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Worship in Israel* (trans. Geoffrey Buswell; Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 119; E. Löwenstamm, "Zur Traditionsgeschichte des Bundes zwischen den Stücken," *VT* 18 (1968): 500–506; JoAnn Scurlock, "The Techniques of the Sacrifice of Animals in Ancient Israel and Ancient Mesopotamia: New Insights through Comparison, Part 2," *AUSS* 44 (2006): 241–64, esp. 256–7;

Alalah and Mari to conclude, “The animals slaughtered at the scene of the covenant are considered as sacrificial offerings,” since a treaty document from Alalah contains the phrase “the neck of a *sacrificial* lamb.”⁶⁵ Weinfeld notes that both Near Eastern treaties beginning from the third millennium BCE and biblical passages like Gen 21:27, Exod 24, and Gen 31:54 reveal that ancient covenants in Israel and the Near East in general were ratified by sacrifices.⁶⁶ Accordingly, Gerhard F. Hasel refers to the animal rite in Gen 15 as a “covenant ratification sacrifice.”⁶⁷ In further support of the animal rite in Gen 15 as a sacrifice, Gordon Wenham notes that the word *lqh* (‘to take’) often “introduces a ritual such as a sacrifice” and the “list of animals that follows [*lqh*] covers all those species that could be offered in sacrifice.”⁶⁸ The use of sacrificial terminology in Gen 15:9–10 leads Wenham to believe that the ritual act in

Weinfeld, “Covenant of Grant,” 196–9. Contra Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 37, n. 93.

⁶⁵ Weinfeld, “Covenant of Grant,” 196 [emphasis added]. For more on the treaty from Alalah between Yarimlim and Abban, see Donald J. Wiseman, “Abban and Alalah,” *JCS* 12 (1958): 124–9, esp. 129.

⁶⁶ Other possible biblical examples that Weinfeld does not cite include Deut 27:5; Josh 8:30; 2 Sam 15:12; and Ps 50:5.

⁶⁷ Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15,” *JSOT* 19 (1981): 61–78 (70).

⁶⁸ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 331.

Gen 15 should be interpreted within the same sacrificial categories as other rituals in the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁹ In accordance with the later legal codes, Abram splits the animals in half but not the birds (Lev 1:6, 17).

Both Hasel and Wenham are in agreement with respect to the sacrificial nature of the animal rite, but they differ on its meaning and significance. Hasel understands the animal rite as a kind of divine self-imprecation, as if God is saying, “May I be like these split animals if I do not keep the terms of the covenant.”⁷⁰

Wenham questions whether such an interpretation would be plausible for an ancient audience. Instead, in Wenham’s interpretation of Gen 15, the birds of prey that Abram drives away represent Gentiles and perhaps Egypt specifically. The animal pieces represent all Israel, since every type of sacrificial animal is included. Thus, the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch passing through the cut animal pieces signify Yahweh’s willingness to dwell among his people, imagery that foreshadows the Israelite exodus and wilderness wandering. Whether it is interpreted as a self-imprecation or a divine promise to dwell in the midst of his people, the animal rite clearly confirms the kinship relationship between Yahweh and Abram and his offspring.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 332.

⁷⁰ For a current discussion on the merits of this view, see Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 430–3.

Genesis 28–31 is another passage that shows the kinship-generating nature of sacrifice. It is a story that centers on the young patriarch Jacob and his relationship with his mother’s brother Laban. As the story goes, at his parents’ request, Jacob goes to live with his uncle Laban in order to marry one of his daughters. Once there, he makes an agreement with Laban that he will work with him for seven years for the right to marry Laban’s daughter Rachel. After seven years, Laban deceives Jacob and gives him his elder daughter Leah as a wife instead. Laban then agrees to let Jacob marry Rachel as well in return for another seven years of service. Jacob continues to live with Laban, and Yahweh blesses his work, so much so that the sons of Laban become jealous of Jacob, accusing him of stealing from their father. Jacob determines to leave Laban and return to his homeland, taking his wives and wealth with him. On the way, Laban and his kinsmen meet Jacob, and they make a covenant together. After setting up a heap and a pillar as a witness to their covenant, Jacob offers a sacrifice and calls his kinsmen to eat with him. The dual act of sacrifice and communal meal represents the renewal of kinship bonds between Jacob and Laban, despite their previous antagonism. As Jay writes,

Jacob and Laban’s resolution of their conflict about descent was to rephrase their relationship, by means of sacrifice, in terms of patrilineal descent. This is why the invocation was to ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, the God of their father’ ... In terms of this sacrifice, Laban was no longer Jacob’s mother, but his patrilineal classificatory brother: they had become agnates sacrificing together.⁷¹

⁷¹ Jay, “Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs,” *VT* 38 (1988): 52–70 (67).

After everything that they had gone through—the struggle, the deceit, and the intrigue—they sacrifice together and share a meal. The fact that they share a meal together is not an inconsequential narrative detail; the feasting is a necessary component of the sacrifice and renewal of kinship bonds.⁷²

Last, Exod 18 relates the story of Moses' meeting with Jethro, his father-in-law according to the Elohist source.⁷³ We learn in Exod 18 that Moses had

⁷² Jo Ann Hackett (personal communication, October 9, 2016) notes the additional significance that Laban is Jacob's *mother's* brother; therefore, he is related to Laban through the maternal line. When they sacrifice and share a meal together, the two work their way back through their lineages until they come up with a *paternal* ancestor they share.

⁷³ This passage is particularly significant for those who subscribe to the Midianite/Kenite hypothesis and believe that Yahwism originated with Midianite groups. In this view, Moses learns the name of Yahweh and the proper way to worship him from his Midianite kinsmen, which explains how Jethro, a non-Israelite and a Midianite priest, leads the worship of Yahweh in Exod 18. For more on the "Midianite hypothesis," see Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah," *JSOT* 33 (2008): 131–53; Cross, "Reuben, the Firstborn of Jacob: Sacral Traditions and Early Israelite History," in *From Epic to Canon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 53–70; J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus Belli*," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 18–38; Stager, "Forging

previously sent his wife Zipporah and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, back to Zipporah's father Jethro. Once the Israelites have reached the wilderness and are camped at the "mountain of God," Jethro brings Moses's family back to him. Moses recounts everything that Yahweh had done to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, and Jethro rejoices and praises Yahweh. He provides a burnt offering and sacrifices to God and then eats with Moses, Aaron, and all the elders of Israel "before God" (Exod 18:12).⁷⁴

The focus of most commentators has been on Jethro's benediction and his

an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90–131, esp. 142–9.

⁷⁴ The language of sacrifice followed by eating is mirrored in Gen 31. Whereas the Gen 31 context is explicitly covenantal, the Exod 18 context is only covenantal by implication. See Chris H. W. Brekelmans, "Exodus xviii and the Origins of Yahwism in Israel," *OTS* 10 (1954): 215–24; F. Charles Fensham, "Did a Treaty between the Israelites and the Kenites Exist?" *BASOR* 175 (1964): 51–54. The Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon also lists several rituals through which men bind themselves together in a "mutually binding oath": these include "setting a table," "drinking from a cup," and "kindling fire" ("Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty," Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* [SAA 2; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988], 35).

relationship as a Midianite priest to Yahwistic faith.⁷⁵ Not enough attention has been placed on the sacrifice and shared meal after the benediction. John Durham argues that the main theme of Exod 18 is the integration of two sides of the Abrahamic family: “The nuclear theme of the whole of Exod 18 is the integration of the traditions of the Sarah / Isaac / Jacob / Joseph side of Abraham’s family with those of the Keturah / Midian side. Moses, the descendant of the Sarah-Isaac side, becomes the divinely chosen medium of connection with Jethro, the descendant of the Keturah-Midian side.”⁷⁶ If this is correct, then we must consider how the two sides of the Abrahamic family are integrated. The joint sacrifice and meal are an expression not only of the kinship bond that had been formed by the marriage between Moses and Jethro’s daughter but also of the larger Abrahamic lineage.⁷⁷ Additionally, they sacrifice and eat “before God,” signifying that the kinship bonds they share receive divine approbation, and perhaps even that Yahweh himself is part of the family.

⁷⁵ For an overview of the various theories concerning the traditions that underlie Exod 18, see Durham, *Exodus*, 241.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁷⁷ Note also the incorporation of Midian into the the genealogy of Abraham and Keturah in Gen 25:1–4.

Circumcision as Sacrifice

Jonathan Z. Smith has noted that the preponderance of ritual theorists have focused on one of three ritual genres: sacrifice, New Year's festivals, and male initiation rituals.⁷⁸ If these are considered distinct categories, then the problem with viewing circumcision as a sacrifice is that it conforms, at least superficially, more to the pattern of a male initiation ritual, a separate ritual genre. It is very clearly something that can only be performed once and is usually performed at some transitional period in a boy's life. However, rather than viewing these three ritual genres as mutually exclusive categories, it is possible to view them on a spectrum and consider them as overlapping.⁷⁹ Rituals can participate in one or more of the ritual genres concurrently. The overwhelming majority of cultural anthropologists have

⁷⁸ Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 196.

⁷⁹ This idea mirrors the advancements that have been made in literary genre theory of the past twenty years. Rather than viewing genres as distinct, static categories with formal features, literary theorists now treat genres as a set of fluid categories with permeable boundaries. Every literary work participates in multiple genres that instruct the reader on how to approach a literary work. See Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 203–18; Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 55–81; Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), esp. 37–41.

regarded circumcision primarily as a kind of male initiation ritual. However, I argue that circumcision often has as much affinity with sacrifice as it does with initiation rituals. Thus, I will argue that circumcision is a male initiation ritual that also bears striking resemblances to sacrifice in Israelite culture in terms of its social function.

Arnold van Gennep was an anthropologist whose book *Les rites de passage* centers on the various rituals that mark significant transitions within human life: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Circumcision in various cultures interfaces with the first three of these transitions and has symbolic connections with death, as the cutting of the foreskin has been viewed as a symbolic death by some anthropologists.⁸⁰ Van Gennep himself considered the primary function of circumcision to be as a symbol of kinship bonds.⁸¹ He understood circumcision to be a rite of incorporation that ritually linked boys with the patrilineal community; we have noted that ritual theorists have described sacrifice in much the same way. It is not difficult to see the attraction of viewing circumcision as a rite of incorporation, because that is how it functions in many cultures. Circumcision represents a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood or from the female domain to the male domain.

⁸⁰ John G. Galaty, "The Maasai Ornithorium: Tropic Flights of Avian Imagination in Africa," *Ethnology* 37 (1998): 227–38.

⁸¹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 102–6; trans. of *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1909).

It is an act that shifts boys from mothers to fathers and associates males with timeless, entombed ancestors and descent groups rather than houses or women. This function is fairly clear from the ritual practices that surround circumcision in many cultures. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz notes examples of circumcision from various cultures that suggest this function of circumcision:

Wiko men, for example say that 'women want to grab children [during the rite of circumcision] but we prevent them. Men thus associate circumcision with the desire to deny the connection between mother and son and emphasize that between father and son ... In Bwiti, men of the boy's patrilineage speak words of encouragement to him during the operation. During circumcision rites, frequent reference is also made to patrilineal ancestors ... The Wiko also claim that the blood of circumcision is danger [*sic*] to female reproduction ... Circumcision blood is treated as dangerous to female reproduction because it is the vehicle by which males attempt to build their own kinship ties and minimize those between mother and son.⁸²

These examples show the connection between circumcision and patrilineal kinship in a variety of different cultures. This interplay between circumcision and kinship participates in a larger dynamic between male and female blood. In her book on the symbolic significance of blood, Meyer focuses on four domains in which blood plays a significant role: conception, pregnancy, and childbirth; initiation rites; menstruation; and sacrifice. Her primary claim is that there is tremendous cross-cultural, cross-temporal patterning of the juxtaposition between women's blood and men's blood, which she calls a

⁸² Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 163.

“patterned heterogeneity.”⁸³ She notes that “through circumcision or other initiative bloodletting men gave birth to men or patrimonies and simultaneously drained away the influence of their mothers’ blood. Through blood sacrifice men cemented relations with the gods and created agnatic patrilineages by accomplishing ‘birth done better’ than women.”⁸⁴ Yet, as I have attempted to show, circumcision can be viewed as both a rite of initiation as well as a sacrifice.⁸⁵

The view of circumcision as a kind of sacrifice is actually one of the oldest views in modern scholarship.⁸⁶ One question that remains is this: if circumcision is a

⁸³ Meyer, *Thicker than Water*, 205.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 206.

⁸⁵ Meyer herself intimates this when she writes that in contrast to menarche blood that was fertile, “boys’ initiation rites were sacrificial” (*Thicker than Water*, 122).

Most male initiation rituals involve blood, even though bloodshed is not a “natural” product of male adolescence. The reason may be that the primary initiation rite for females involved menarche blood, and there needed to be a male counterpoint.

Besides the common symbolic value of blood, the gendered nature of different kinds of blood illuminates aspects of ritual practices.

⁸⁶ See George. A. Barton, “Circumcision (Semitic),” *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* 3:679–80; Louis H. Gray, “Circumcision (Introduction),” *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 3:659–70. Notably, circumcision as a kind of atonement sacrifice is one of the

kind of sacrifice, then what exactly is being sacrificed? Early twentieth century scholars considered circumcision to be an example of a sacrifice of a part for the benefit of the whole. In other words, the one who offers up a sacrifice gives up a part of himself in order to win the favor of the deity for future blessings. Morgenstern draws the parallel between sacrifice of the firstborn, a substitutionary gift to the god in order to secure protection for future children, and circumcision, a partial sacrifice in order to secure protection for the future of that particular child.⁸⁷ These scholars have described circumcision with “sacrifice”-language, but most have done so without elaboration and few have done so with methodological precision. Nor have they explored how circumcision fits in with the broader sacrificial system in ancient Israel. How does circumcision relate to other acts that are explicitly described as sacrifices? It is not clear whether the description of circumcision as a sacrifice is meant to be connected to the sacrificial system of ancient Israel or merely a word that describes the painful nature of the physical act alone. Can we speak of circumcision as a sacrifice in a more technical sense than merely the giving up of something?

primary views of classical rabbinic Judaism. See Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

⁸⁷ Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage and Death Among the Semites*, 62–64.

Ultimately, circumcision can be considered a type of blood sacrifice because it fulfills the same function as blood sacrifice, that is, it generates and maintains patrilineal lines of descent. Eilberg-Schwartz comes closest to identifying circumcision as a type of sacrifice when he writes that circumcision and sacrifice have overlapping functions. He also utilizes Jay's theory of the gendered nature of blood sacrifice to show that circumcision helps to establish and maintain patrilineal lines of kinship.⁸⁸ He writes that circumcision had two primary functions within the Priestly community, to symbolize the "fertility of the initiate as well as his entrance into and ability to perpetuate a lineage of male descendants."⁸⁹ He continues, "Circumcision is often a mechanism for making visible and solidifying kinship bonds ... circumcision ceremonies develop solidarity among male cohorts and solidify individual commitment to lines of descent."⁹⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz restricts his analysis to the Priestly corpus, but his insights apply to the earlier, non-Priestly texts as well.

⁸⁸ Jay herself points to the sacrificial system of the Priestly source in the Hebrew Bible as a paradigmatic example of sacrifice establishing patrilineal descent. See Jay, "Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs," *VT* 38 (1988): 52-70.

⁸⁹ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 143.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

What he shows is that Priestly texts adapt the circumcision ritual to a new socio-cultural context but do not completely abandon its prior social function.⁹¹

Although this study focuses on non-Priestly texts that describe circumcision, it is instructive to examine Bernat's comparison between Priestly circumcision and two other types of body modification found in the Priestly literature, the branding of slaves and the pierced ear in Exod 21 and Deut 15.⁹² Based on the lack of explicit ritualization, Bernat links circumcision more closely with the branding of slaves than the pierced ear. Bernat avers, "There are no extant descriptions or regulations

⁹¹ David Vanderhooft has shown how the Priestly source evidences continuity of kinship structures in ancient Israel between pre-monarchic Israel and monarchic Israel (Iron I and Iron II), particularly in the usage of the term *mišpāḥā(h)* as a concept related to kinship and land ownership. This continuity in kinship structures may be one reason why the function of circumcision in non-Priestly and Priestly texts is the same. By the time of the postexilic period, however, circumcision is no longer connected to tribal kinship bonds but becomes an ethnic marker of an Israel that is no longer organized along tribal, ethnic lines tied to particular parcels of land. See David Vanderhooft, "The Israelite Mišpāḥâ, the Priestly Writings, and Changing Valences in Israel's Kinship Terminology," in *Exploring the Longue Durée: Essays in honor of Lawrence E. Stager* (ed. J. David Schloen; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 485–96.

⁹² Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 56–59.

as to marking practices, in terms of specific steps in the procedure, or their order, tools, the timing of the marking with respect to the acquisition or birth of new slaves, and who must apply the mark.”⁹³ However, the reason for this lack may be because there is very little in the Hebrew Bible about slave branding at all. The only examples that Bernat gives of slave marking are its metaphorical usage in such verses as Isa 44:5, where Yahweh’s name is inscribed on an Israelite’s arm as a marker of adoption or ownership. Bernat simply assumes that the example in Isa 44:5 is indicative of a widespread Israelite practice based on comparative evidence. His employment of cross-cultural evidence is particularly confusing given his reticence to utilize comparative data, even from other ancient Near Eastern cultures, let alone non-Semitic cultures, regarding circumcision.

Bernat emphatically rejects the view of circumcision as analogous to sacrifice and argues instead that it is simply a type of body modification similar to slave marking that represents the relationship between Yahweh and his covenant people (males and by extension their wives and daughters). Although circumcision may be similar to slave marking in its lack of explicit ritualization in the Priestly texts, if we look at the function of the ritual, then the picture changes dramatically. Bernat claims that the marking of a slave is not a transformative act,⁹⁴ but, in response to Bernat, circumcision is a transformative act, which can be seen in the example of the

⁹³ Ibid., 57.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

circumcised slave who partakes in the Passover in Exod 12. Exodus 12:48 states, “And if a stranger lives with you and keeps the Passover to Yahweh, let every male in his household be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he will be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised may eat of it.” The circumcision of the foreigner is not just an external sign that shows that he is a member of the community and thus allowed to participate in the Passover ritual. Circumcision in his case is a performative ritual that *transforms* him into a person who is able to partake of the Passover; he would not be allowed to participate in the Passover ritual if he were not circumcised.

To this point, I have shown that a functional view reveals that circumcision is a kinship-generating ritual in both the non-Priestly and Priestly texts of the Hebrew Bible. In this way, it is analogous to the function of ritual sacrifice in ancient Israel. In addition to the functional similarities, however, circumcision also resembles sacrifice in a couple of formal features. Both circumcision and sacrifice include the shedding of blood and a deliberate act of cutting. These shared formal characteristics help to explain why circumcision is a “natural” corollary to sacrifice in ancient Israel.

As noted above, both circumcision and sacrifice involve the ritual, controlled, and voluntary shedding of blood. These features are in sharp and sometimes explicit contrast to the natural, involuntary shedding of female blood in childbirth and menstruation. One significant obstacle in identifying circumcision as a kind of sacrifice, particularly when utilizing Jay’s general theory of sacrifice, is that Jay

specifically looks at *blood* sacrifice, and while circumcision is undoubtedly a bloody affair, the blood of circumcision is never mentioned explicitly in the Bible.⁹⁵ Does the lack of reference to blood and its manipulation disqualify circumcision from being viewed as a kinship-generating ritual? Do sacrificial acts that lack overt blood manipulation still participate in the function of kinship generation and maintenance?

Notably, all of the references to blood manipulation occur in the Priestly literature. Is it not possible that sacrifice, which assuredly occurred at some point outside the Temple complex, had a kinship-generating function even when blood manipulation was involved but not directed in any specific way?⁹⁶ William Gilders has made the prescient observation that Lev 17:11, which states that the life is in the blood, cannot bear the exegetical weight that is often placed on it.⁹⁷ That one verse and the principle contained therein cannot govern all references to blood

⁹⁵ The one exception may be Exod 4:24–26 in which Zipporah exclaims “You are my bridegroom of blood!” after circumcising her son. This passage will be explored more in depth in chapter 4.

⁹⁶ In each of the three examples of sacrifice discussed above—Gen 15; Gen 28–31; and Exod 18—there were kinship-generating sacrifices but no mention of blood or its manipulation.

⁹⁷ William Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 158–80.

found in the Bible. Even verses that prescribe something about the manipulation of blood in a sacrifice like Exod 23:18a and 34:25a tell us little more than the bare minimum. As David Biale has noted, there is little theological rationale given for the centrality of blood in the Israelite cult, which is somewhat surprising given the relative unimportance of blood in other Near Eastern cultures.⁹⁸ There is nothing in the legal codes about what is to be done with the blood or why the leaven and the blood could not be mixed. Though blood is not even explicitly mentioned, there is no doubt that there was blood involved in the circumcision ceremony and anthropological evidence testifies to the importance that blood plays in both initiation rites and sacrificial rituals, even when there are no instructions concerning the manipulation of blood. The presence of blood seems to be important if only to serve as a counterpoint to the female blood of childbirth and menstruation. The blood of circumcision does not need to be manipulated in order to be significant.

The cross-cultural evidence about the importance of blood in ritual is mixed. Blood did not play an important role in Mesopotamian, Hittite, or Egyptian rituals. It

⁹⁸ Biale, *Blood and Belief*, 13. Biale's own explanation for the reason of the Bible's lack of theological rationale is that the purpose of the priestly discourse of blood was political rather than theological. The priests intended to create a priestly monopoly on not only sacrifice but all slaughter of animals for meat while "simultaneously declaring other ritual uses of blood as abominations."

is well-known that in Babylonian cultures blood did not seem to have very much significance in ritual practice.⁹⁹ Mesopotamian sacrifice was essentially a meal for the gods, and in A. Leo Oppenheim's oft-cited words, Mesopotamian sacrifice lacked the "blood consciousness" of the West.¹⁰⁰ Closer to ancient Israel, the Ugaritic ritual texts from the fourteenth to twelfth c. BCE provide the largest corpus of sacrificial and ritual practice of a West Semitic culture outside of the Bible. Regarding the Ugaritic evidence, Dennis Pardee writes, "The Ugaritic texts prescribe the detailed performance of a given rite or series of rites at a specific point in time with virtually no information on technique, function, or meaning."¹⁰¹ In the Ugaritic ritual texts, we have examples of sacrifices that mention neither blood nor fat, leading Pardee to conclude that "the blood and fat may not have been entities that were considered to be offerings in their own right" or that possibly "the handling of these items would

⁹⁹ Tzvi Abusch, "Blood in Israel and Mesopotamia," in *Emanuel: Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov* (ed. Shalom M. Paul et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 675–84.

¹⁰⁰ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 192.

¹⁰¹ Dennis Pardee, "Animal Sacrifice at Ugarit," *Topoi, Supplement 2* (2000): 321–31 (322). For his more comprehensive work on ritual at Ugarit, see Pardee, *Les textes rituels, Ras Shamra – Ougarit XII* (Paris: ERC, 2001).

have been a matter of technique not necessary to mention.”¹⁰² Thus, based on the Ugaritic evidence, the lack of explicit mention of blood manipulation does not necessarily mean that the blood did not have any symbolic value or importance in the sacrificial system of ancient Israel.

While blood is indeed one of the most common and powerful cross-cultural symbols,¹⁰³ it must ultimately be understood in the context of its own culture. In ancient Israel, there are some sacrificial rituals where blood is prominent and seems to have an efficacious role and others where it is not prominent and does not seem to have an efficacious role.¹⁰⁴ Does this mean that the biblical authors did not consider the blood in the circumcision ritual to be significant? Or is there another reason that they omitted the mention of blood?¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Pardee, “Animal Sacrifice at Ugarit,” 326.

¹⁰³ For general overviews of the symbolism of blood in multiples contexts, see Janet Carsten, “Substance and Relationality: Blood in Contexts,” *ARA* 40 (2011): 19–35; Melissa Meyer, *Thicker than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual* (London: Routledge, 2005); Michael Y. Nabofa, “Blood Symbolism in African Religion,” *RS* 21 (1985): 389–405.

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., the in-depth analysis of blood ritual in the Hebrew Bible in Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible*.

¹⁰⁵ Leonard Glick posits that in the Priestly mindset the purposes of animal sacrifice and circumcision were so different that the display of blood in the circumcision

Dennis J. McCarthy notes that the motive for the presence of blood must be carefully studied in each individual case; the same is true for the *absence* of blood in individual cases as well.¹⁰⁶ If the cutting off of the prepuce and subsequent bloodletting served as a substitute birth, then it makes sense that there would not be any explicit mention of the handling of the blood, because the Priestly writer rarely comments extensively on the handling of blood. The Priestly texts, similar to many other cultures, make it clear that both menstrual blood and childbirth blood are ritually polluting, yet these texts do not outline what is to be done with that blood. Rather, the focus is on what is to be done to bring about ritual purity to counteract the polluting effects of menstrual blood. The lack of blood manipulation

ritual might have seemed improper. He views the purpose of circumcision similarly to this study, in what he calls “initiation into a community of covenanted males,” but he understands sacrifice as an “exclusively priestly act, effecting purification and release from punishment for sin” (“The Life of the Flesh is in the Blood: The Meaning of Bloodshed in Ritual Circumcision,” in *Bodily Integrity and the Politics of Circumcision: Culture, Controversy, and Change* [ed. George C. Dennison et al.; New York: Springer, 2006], 22). While sacrifice may indeed have a purificatory function, this fact does not preclude it from also participating in the same kinship dynamics as the circumcision ritual. His focus on the Priestly literature alone may have forced him into an unwarranted Priestly versus non-Priestly dichotomy.

¹⁰⁶ McCarthy, “The Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice,” 166.

in the circumcision texts does not mean that the blood of circumcision was not important during the biblical period. The presence of blood alone was enough to serve as a substitutionary birth and function as a kinship-generating ritual.

Not only does circumcision mirror sacrifice in the presence of blood, but both also involve the physical act of cutting. Erich Isaac focuses on cutting as the primary characteristic of circumcision rituals and considers cutting to be the element that most closely links circumcision to covenant.¹⁰⁷ Isaac claims that circumcision is associated with covenant at an early stage only because sacrifice, which involves cutting, is connected to covenant. He is right to point out that the language used in making covenants is connected to sacrificial language, but it is an unwarranted jump to conclude that circumcision was always a covenantal marker, at least in the way that biblical scholars most often speak of the biblical covenants. It is more prudent to connect circumcision simply with the act of cutting, which is a formal characteristic that it shares with sacrifice. Circumcision does indeed become legitimized as the sign of the covenant in the Priestly source (Gen 17), but this explicit connection between circumcision and covenant is absent in the non-Priestly texts.

As we have seen, circumcision can be classified as analogous to sacrifice because of its kinship-generating nature. Blood sacrifice, in both the Bible and other

¹⁰⁷ Erich Isaac, "Circumcision as a Covenant Rite," *Anthropos* 59 (1964): 444–56.

cultures, is a ritual that generates and maintains male kinship relationships as a result of the ritual exclusion of females from the sacrificial process. In the same way, male circumcision in ancient Israel functions to integrate Israelite boys into the patrilineal ancestral line. In the following chapters, we will analyze the relevant non-Priestly biblical passages in order to show how they inform and develop this view of circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual analogous to sacrifice. The next three chapters will show how circumcision functions as a kinship-generating ritual in the following three non-Priestly passages: Gen 34, Exod 4:24–26, and Josh 5:2–9. These passages reveal how circumcision functions to generate and maintain kinship bonds both between various ethnic groups, within ethnic groups, as well as between gods and man.

Chapter 3: Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual in Genesis 34

In his book *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, Shaye Cohen presents a standard scholarly view on circumcision and its function in Gen 34:

Genesis 34, when read on its own, seems to understand circumcision not in terms of covenant but in terms of a tribal mark, an ethnic habit. Circumcision is one of the things that we do. If you wish to join us, then be like us and do as we do: circumcise your males. God, covenant, sign of the covenant, paternity, the land, fertility—all of these have no bearing on the text. The circumcision of the Israelite foreskin is a sign of difference vis-à-vis the Shechemites, but that difference is not invested here with any theological or covenantal meaning.¹

While it may indeed be anachronistic to speak of circumcision in Gen 34 as a covenantal mark in the same way that it appears in Gen 17, Cohen seems to imply that circumcision has no significance whatsoever in Gen 34 aside from being a mere physical “mark” or “ethnic habit.” My study of the function of circumcision in ancient Israel up to this point challenges Cohen’s minimalistic perspective and argues instead that circumcision in Gen 34 has very much to do with issues like paternity and land because it functions as a sacrifice-like kinship-generating ritual, as I argued in the previous chapter. Rather than simply a malicious deceit intended to render the Shechemites physically unable to defend themselves, circumcision in Gen 34 functions as a kinship-generating ritual and unites the Israelites and Shechemites in a kinship relationship, simultaneously allowing for the possibility of intermarriage

¹ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 15.

between the two groups and magnifying the horrific nature of Simeon and Levi's actions.

Cohen represents the traditional historical-critical interpretive method that attempts to isolate the "original" meaning of texts by extracting them from their canonical context and re-situating them in the temporal and cultural context of their original composition.² The end product of this methodology is a "history of Israel"

² Cohen's explicit description of his methodology is found in his qualification from the quote above that he is reading Gen 34 "on its own." In doing so, he isolates the passage from its canonical context in order to determine circumcision's significance and comes to the conclusion that circumcision in Gen 34 does not have any theological or covenantal meaning. However, it is notoriously difficult to establish what the original story may have been before it was incorporated into the biblical text, and the significance of circumcision cannot be divorced from its present canonical context. Regarding the attempt to isolate an original story within Gen 34, see David Frankel, "The Final Form of the Story of the Rape of Dinah in Light of Textual and Redaction Criticism," *Shnaton* 25 (2017): 13–57 [Hebrew]; Nick Wyatt, "The Story of Dinah and Shechem," *UF* 22 (1991): 433–58. Wyatt's attempt to trace the historical and geographical development of the original story of Gen 34, though creative in its own right, reflects the inherent difficulty of this endeavor. Wyatt interprets Gen 34 as a version of an ancient Semitic myth surviving in several extant recensions in Akkadian (perhaps based on a Sumerian original) and Ugaritic

that takes into account to varying degrees the biblical text but ultimately exists independently from it. In contrast to Cohen's methodology, this chapter will pursue instead what Terry J. Prewitt has termed a "sociology of Judah" rather than a "history of Israel."³ Rather than mining the book of Genesis for data that might

(perhaps based on a Hurrian version). He notes that this Semitic myth is a story of both seduction and reciprocal passion that ends with a happy marriage. The proposed links between Gen 34 and this ancient myth, however, are tenuous. The only shared features between the two stories are the details of two lovers and a bridegroom who is willing to pay both a dowry and a bride-price. It is not difficult though to see how the shared features could be due to a common trope in ancient literature as a way of expressing the love and resolve of a bridegroom. In order to explain the sharp contrast between Gen 34 and the rest of the Sumerian myth, Wyatt appeals to a Vedic text *Rigveda* 10.95, which even he admits is an obscure composition. Wyatt sees the story of Dinah and Shechem as a version of this Vedic tradition filtered through the medium of Hurrian and subsequently West Semitic culture, but it is difficult to follow this transmission history without Wyatt's prior belief and commitment to the direct influence of Mesopotamian and Indo-European culture on Israelite literature.

³ Terry J. Prewitt, "Kinship Structures and Genesis Genealogies," *JNES* 40 (1981): 87–98 (87). Prewitt's work was one of the first sociological analyses of Genesis, a scholarly sub-field that blossomed in the early 1980s. Two other important studies

clarify the history of Bronze Age proto-Israel, I will examine how the stories within Genesis reflect social structures and kinship practices. In his own research, Prewitt focuses on the political functions of stories within Genesis and finds that they often indicate political relationships and kinship structures that are common to other societies.⁴ Before offering my own “sociology of Judah” with respect to the function of circumcision in Gen 34, I will first survey previous scholarly approaches to Gen 34, both regarding its redactional history as well as the function of narrative in the passage. Then, I will show how Gen 34 participates in the discourse woven throughout the patriarchal narratives concerning kinship and marriage preferences, highlighting the role that circumcision plays within the narrative and its contribution to the theme of kinship. Last, I will show how my interpretation of

are Mara Donaldson, “Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives: The Case of the Barren Wife,” *JAAR* 49 (1981): 77–87; and Robert A. Oden Jr., “Jacob as Father, Husband and Nephew: Kinship Studies and the Patriarchal Narratives,” *JBL* 102 (1983): 189–205.

⁴ Prewitt, “Kinship Structures and Genesis Genealogies,” 87–88. These societies provide an external, objective control for analyzing the system(s) reflected within Genesis, which Prewitt argues is fairly stable and homogeneous, especially considering the chronologically-varied and geographically-diverse nature of the source material.

circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual modifies and enhances traditional interpretations of Gen 34.

Previous Approaches to Genesis 34

Genesis 34 has proven to be one of the knottiest passages in to unravel,⁵ so much so that it has been described as possibly one of the most difficult passages in the whole Hexateuch.⁶ The origin of this enigmatic passage has been an alluring siren for

⁵ Genesis 34 has also provided considerable grist for other methods of biblical interpretation, namely narrative readings with little consideration for redactional history and feminist readings. For narrative readings of Gen 34, see, e.g., Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah," *JBL* 110 (1991): 193–211; Francis Fite, "Bearers of a Narrative of Listening in the Age of Testimony: Determining Meaning for Genesis 34," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2009); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 441–81. For feminist readings of Gen 34, see esp. Caroline Blyth, "Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence: A Feminist Re-Reading of Dinah's Voicelessness in Genesis 34," *BibInt* 17 (2009): 483–506; Susanne Scholz, *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34* (SBL 13; New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 134–69.

⁶ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 309.

scholars of Genesis, seemingly within reach but always remaining outside the grasp of certainty. These difficulties, however, have not prevented scholars from offering various theories about the redactional history of Gen 34.⁷ I have two more modest goals in my discussion of the redactional history of Gen 34: (1) to show that the role

⁷ Martin Noth believed that Gen 34 was comprised of a core J narrative (vv. 1–3, 5, 7, 11–14, 18–19, 24–26, and 29–31) with supplementary additions that changed the focus from the single marriage of Shechem and Dinah to multiple marriages and introduced Hamor as the mediator of marriage negotiations (vv. 4, 6, 8–10, 15–17, 20–23, and 27–28). See Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. Bernhard W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 30. In contrast to Noth, Gerhard von Rad considered the additional material of Gen 34 to be a parallel variant rather than supplemental additions. One major difference between the two variants is that in one version Simeon and Levi are the primary protagonists; in the other version all the sons of Jacob are complicit. See von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 330. Claus Westermann believed the final redactor of Gen 34 transformed an earlier family narrative about peaceful settlement into a narrative about the murder and plunder of an entire city. He, along with others, saw an allusion to the Deuteronomic prohibition of intermarriage and call for extermination of the Canaanites in Deut 7:5. See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 535–7.

of circumcision remains constant regardless of source divisions, and (2) to argue that it is unnecessary to posit a postexilic, late fifth c. BCE redaction of the text.

There are a number of reasons that have led many scholars to posit that Gen 34 is a composite text, primarily the use of Priestly language, the ancillary roles of the fathers Hamor and Jacob in the story, and narrative inconsistencies and redundancies, such as a proposed doublet of marriage negotiations (Gen 34:8–12). Those who argue for multiple sources, however, do not necessarily agree on the specific nature or divisions of the sources used to compose Gen 34.⁸ As noted above, there is no shortage of theories about the sources and historical development of Gen 34, but in the main, two general theories predominate: Gen 34 is either the product of a combination of two parallel variants, or it is one primary source that has been supplemented and redacted a number of times.⁹ Traditionally, one of the parallel

⁸ Part of the reason may be that even those who argue that Gen 34 is a composite text admit that the sources are seamlessly integrated, and suggested doublets are less conspicuous compared to the examples of the Flood narrative in Gen 6–9 or the paradigmatic Abrahamic “wife-sister stories.”

⁹ See, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen Books, 1926), 302–8; Joel S. Baden, “The Violent Origins of the Levites: Text and Tradition,” in *Levites and Priest in Biblical History and Tradition* (ed. Mark A. Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 103–16, esp. 107–9; John Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 417–22; Julius Wellhausen,

sources or the core of the narrative has been regarded as a predominantly Yahwist text,¹⁰ either with supplemental additions¹¹ or with a parallel variant,¹² but recent interpreters, following the tradition established by Abraham Kuenen, have tended to regard Gen 34 as a composite P and non-P text (and a very late one at that), reflecting two very different historical situations.¹³ Kuenen was among the first to

Die Composition des Hexateuchs (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963), 45–47;

Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 535–45.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 310.

¹¹ See n. 7 above.

¹² In the minority, Skinner considers Gen 34 to be a composite of J and E sources. See also Julian Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1966), 56. Von Rad (*Genesis*, 330), in contrast to Noth, preferred to speak in terms of a “parallel variant” rather than a supplementary addition.

¹³ Possible examples where P and non-P are combined in similar fashion include Gen 28; 46–50; Exod 5–7; 13–14; Num 13; 16. It must be admitted, however, that even in these cases, P and non-P are not as integrated as in the proposed instances of Gen 6–9 and Gen 34.

distinguish two layers within the narrative of Gen 34.¹⁴ According to his reconstruction, in the earlier version of the story, referred to as the “Shechem tradition,” a family-centered narrative revolves around the potential union of a single couple, Shechem and Dinah, and Simeon and Levi are alone responsible for the massacre of the city of Shechem. In the later, updated version, referred to as the “Hamor tradition,” a tribal-centered narrative considers the possibility of national marriage alliances (vv. 13, 18, 24, and 26), and the offense of intermarriage leads to genocide in which all the sons of Jacob are complicit.

For the purposes of my study, it is important to note at this point that circumcision plays the same role in the story, regardless of which source-critical division that one follows. Every “original” version of Gen 34 proposed by scholars includes Simeon and Levi’s circumcision ruse, and in every version, circumcision ostensibly allows for intermarriage between two different tribes. Whether the “original” story involved only Dinah and Shechem or involved the whole tribes of Israelites and Shechemites, circumcision has the same kinship-generating function in each version. While I acknowledge that the present text of Gen 34 likely has a complex pre-history, it is not necessary to parse out its particulars in order to appreciate the function of circumcision as a kinship ritual in the story.

¹⁴ Abraham Kuenen, “Beitrage zur Hexateuchkritik: VI. Dina und Sichem (Gen. 34),” in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur biblischen Wissenschaft* (Leipzig: Mohr Siebeck, 1894), 255–76.

Whereas earlier attempts to determine the divisions of Gen 34 assumed its antiquity, more recent interpreters have argued that Gen 34 reflects later historical circumstances. The passage supposedly contains postexilic language and themes that betray its provenance in the fifth c. BCE instead of any earlier time period in Israelite history. Alexander Rofé offers a sustained defense of the Priestly elements in Gen 34, which he divides into four categories: linguistic, legal, theological, and literary.¹⁵ Linguistically, Rofé claims that one of the hallmarks of the Priestly editing of Gen 34 is its description of Shechem's actions toward Dinah as *ṭm'*, a term which Rofé believes "positively belongs to Priestly diction."¹⁶ Rofé neglects, however, all of the occurrences of *ṭm'* outside of the Priestly literature (e.g., Deut 24:4; 2 Kgs 23:10; Is 52:1; Jer 2:23; Hos 5:3; Ps 106:39), which are numerous enough to cast doubt on its presence as evidence for a Priestly origin of Gen 34.¹⁷ As for the legal and

¹⁵ Alexander Rofé, "Defilement of Virgins in Biblical Law and the Case of Dinah (Genesis 34)," *Bib* 86 (2005): 369–75.

¹⁶ Rofé, "Defilement of Virgins," 371. The term *ṭm'* occurs in Gen 34:5, 13, 27. Interestingly, in vs. 5 and 13, Shechem is the one who defiles Dinah, and in v. 27 it is the entire city who defiles Dinah.

¹⁷ It is true that the term *ṭm'* does not occur anywhere else in the book of Genesis, but its absence in the rest of the book may be due to the nature of the subject matter rather than a later editorial hand. The question one needs to ask is whether there

theological evidence of Priestly editing, according to Rofé, a virgin, that is, a woman who is neither betrothed nor married, cannot be “defiled” (in a legal sense) by illicit sexual intercourse based on the laws of Exod 22 and Deut 22. This language of “defilement” (Heb. *ṭm’*), however, is used to describe Dinah three times (Gen 34:5, 13, 27). Based on this usage, Rofé connects Gen 34 to the *ṭm’* of the nations of the land in Ezra 6:21, placing the final redaction of Gen 34 firmly within the context of the Restoration community of the early fourth c. BCE. According to Rofé, during this time, intermarriage is forbidden, and the concept of the impurity of the Gentiles is beginning to develop. In response to Rofé on this point, there are multiple warnings against intermarriage with non-Israelites throughout the Hebrew Bible, and they are not all connected to the “Foreign Marriage Crisis.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Jacob Milgrom

are other instances in the book of Genesis where a different word than *ṭm’* is used to convey the same idea.

¹⁸ Rofé exhibits the tendency to attribute any biblical discussion about prohibitions against marriage with non-Israelites to the “Foreign Marriage Crisis,” perhaps because it is the only known historical referent dealing with this topic. This tendency is even more common when it is suspected that the text in question has a postexilic origin, such as Gen 34. Simply because the “Foreign Marriage Crisis” is the only known historical situation involving the question of marriage to non-Israelites, there is no evidence that Gen 34 arose as a direct response to that situation. One important thing also to remember is that whereas Ezra 9:1–2 only refers to the

argues that the Priestly sources (H and P) “express neither opposition to nor prohibition of intermarriage. Endogamy is not a prerequisite for holiness [in H and P].”¹⁹ In terms of literary elements, Rofé argues that P’s “fondness for detailing

marriage of Israelite men with non-Israelite women, Gen 34 involves the courtship of a non-Israelite male with an Israelite woman. In the postexilic instances of biblical polemic against intermarriage like Ezra 9, it is Israelite men who are criticized for marrying foreign women. If the story is meant to be a thinly-veiled foil regarding intermarriage between Israelite men and non-Israelite women, then why is Dinah’s status the focus of the story? If the final postexilic editing of Gen 34 is concerned about intermarriage, then why does the plot revolve around the possible marriage of Israelite women? There does not seem to be reason to believe that marriage rules surrounding daughters were as stringent as those involving sons, but common sense dictates that daughters would be beneficial for creating alliances. Therefore, the tenor of Gen 34 seems to align more closely with the concerns in Gen 12–36 rather than as a postexilic intrusion. For more on the dangers of making too clear a correspondence between the “Foreign Marriage Crisis” and texts in Genesis, see Katherine E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105–8.

¹⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (AB 3a; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1584–85.

See also Jan Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: An Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17–26* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 85.

which sounds superfluous” is evident in narrative flourishes like the narrator’s description of Dinah as the daughter of Leah whom she bore to Jacob (Gen 34:1).²⁰ Although it may seem “superfluous” at first glance, in Gen 12–36, the status of women and their suitability for marriage is dependent upon their parentage. Not only that, but it is crucial within the narrative to establish that Dinah is the sister of Simeon and Levi specifically, Jacob’s sons through Leah. Ultimately, Rofé fails to conclusively prove the postexilic provenance of Gen 34.

Circumcision has not been a major focus of biblical scholarship on Gen 34, as most previous studies have focused on the redactional issues above or on defining the nature of Dinah’s sexual encounter with Shechem and questioning whether it should be classified as rape.²¹ Despite its relative insignificance in the scholarly

²⁰ Ibid., 373.

²¹ Biblical scholarship reflects a broad spectrum of opinions on the issue of whether Shechem’s treatment of Dinah would qualify as rape in the modern sense. For a sampling of the dominant, traditional view that Shechem’s act qualifies as rape, see Fewell and Gunn, “Tipping the Balance,” 193–211; Scholz, *Rape Plots*; Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 262–68; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 441–81; von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 329–35; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 307, 310, 317. For the minority view that Shechem’s actions might not qualify as rape, see Lyn Bechtel, “What if Dinah is Not Raped? (Genesis 34),” *JSOT* 62 (1994): 19–36; Tivka

literature, there have been a variety of interpretations offered about the function of circumcision within the passage. The majority position considers Gen 34 as biblical evidence of a connection between circumcision and marriage, possibly as either an apotropaic or fertility rite.²² I believe that, contrary to the majority view, circumcision in this passage is not a marriage or fertility rite. First, no other texts from the Bible explicitly mention any type of ancient Israelite marriage or wedding ritual.²³ Of course, the ancient Israelites undoubtedly had rituals connected with

Frymer-Kensky, "Virginity in the Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Victor H. Matthews et al.; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 86–91; Ellen van Wolde, "The Dinah Story: Rape or Worse?" *OTE* 15 (2000): 225–39; "Does *'innâ* Denote Rape? A Semantic Analysis of a Controversial Word," *VT* 52 (2002): 528–44; Wyatt, "The Story of Dinah and Shechem," 435–6.

²² See, e.g., King, "Circumcision," 51; William H. Propp, "The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel," *HAR* 11 (1987): 355–70 (359).

²³ See Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). Note, however, the unique presence of a fish sacrifice after Tobit and Sarah's wedding but before the consummation of the marriage in Tobit 8:1–4. For more on the relationship between the literary sacrifice in Tobit and actual wedding practices, see Jordan Rosenblum, "Home is Where the Hearth Is? A Consideration of Jewish Household Sacrifice in Antiquity," in *The One Who Sows Bountifully": Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers* (ed. Saul M. Olyan, Caroline

marriage, but they are never mentioned in the biblical text. Second, if circumcision were a marriage rite, then why would all of Jacob's kin have already been circumcised? Likewise, why would all of the Shechemites have to be circumcised en masse rather than just Shechem? If circumcision were a marriage rite, then the occasion for the circumcision of each of the other Shechemite males should be before his own wedding and not before Shechem's wedding. Circumcision may be a pre-requisite for Israelite marriage, but that is different from claiming that it is a marriage rite, properly speaking. In the narrative, it just so happens to be Shechem's impending wedding with Dinah that provides the impetus for the mass circumcision of the Shechemites. There is no *necessary* connection between circumcision and marriage in the chapter. I argue that rather than a marriage rite, the mass circumcision functions to unite the two peoples into a kinship relationship, which allows for intermarriage between the two groups.

Others view circumcision in Gen 34 merely as a cruel and arbitrary demand intended to render the Shechemites physically weak and unable to defend themselves.²⁴ Stephen Geller believes that the motif of circumcision is "a brilliant example of that favorite biblical narrative device 'measure for measure.' As Shechem

Johnson Hodge, and Daniel Ullucci; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), 153–63.

²⁴ See, e.g., Paul Noble, "A 'Balanced' Reading of the Rape of Dinah: Some Exegetical and Methodological Observations," *BibInt* 4 (1995): 173–203 (192).

sinned through sex so he is brought low by a rite involving a wound to his sex ... circumcision as the 'sign' of the Abrahamic covenant, is emblematic of the sense of moral propriety outraged by Shechem's crime."²⁵ Walter Brueggemann considers circumcision as a means of "social control and exploitation."²⁶ Angela Wagner views circumcision as a "ritual accompaniment to the making of peace."²⁷ Similarly, Lyn Bechtel understands circumcision as "an act of initiation into the covenant community which creates blood bonding or a 'mark of belonging' for those whose allegiance is inside the group. As a 'mark of belonging' it forms a strong boundary that distinguishes the circumcised insiders from the uncircumcised outsiders."²⁸ In a similar vein, Harvey Goldberg writes, "Circumcision appears to be associated with the voluntary creation of ties which then become kin-like, whether expressed in marriage or not."²⁹ Out of all of these views, I most closely align with Goldberg's

²⁵ Stephen A. Geller, "The Sack of Shechem: The Use of Typology in Biblical Covenant Religion," *Proof* 10 (1990): 1–15 (2).

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982), 278.

²⁷ Angela Wagner, "Considerations on the Politico-Juridical Proceedings of Genesis 34," *JSOT* (2013): 145–61 (159).

²⁸ Bechtel, "What if Dinah is Not Raped? (Genesis 34)," 33.

²⁹ Harvey E. Goldberg, "Cambridge in the Land of Canaan: Descent, Alliance, Circumcision, and Instruction in the Bible," *JANES* 24 (1996): 9–34 (21).

view and will now consider how this understanding of circumcision participates in the discourse surrounding kinship in the book of Genesis.

Kinship in the Book of Genesis

My reading of Gen 34 reveals that even though circumcision is not featured prominently in Gen 34, it plays a crucial role within the narrative as a kinship ritual. The argument for circumcision as a kinship marker becomes even stronger if we consider the importance of kinship and marriage preferences in the patriarchal narratives, which are framed by the genealogies of Terah (Gen 11:27) and Esau/Edom (Gen 36:1–43). Genesis 34 is part of the narrator’s constant preoccupation with defining true Israel, a task which Robert. A. Oden has called the main concern of Gen 12–36.³⁰ The function of circumcision as a kinship marker helps to explain the otherwise curious placement of Gen 34 in its present context. In addition, one can productively utilize the anthropological discourse around ritual, kinship, and marriage prescriptions and preferences to inform and supplement the admittedly limited presentation of circumcision in Gen 34. In contrast to Cohen, I argue that circumcision in Gen 34 is highly pertinent to issues like paternity and land, which is seen even more clearly through an examination of the narrative’s larger context within the book of Genesis and the relevant anthropological literature.

³⁰ Oden Jr., “Jacob as Father, Husband and Nephew,” 196.

As noted in the introduction of this chapter, my interpretive framework for this study of Gen 34 is more aligned with Prewitt's "sociology of Judah" than a traditional "history of Israel." Beginning in the early 1980s, there was a rise in various sociological approaches to the study of the Hebrew Bible as scholars began to integrate developments from social anthropology with the study of the biblical text and world. The book of Genesis in particular was one of the main foci of this shift. Making a similar point to Prewitt about the previous scholarly pre-occupation with history over sociology, Oden writes that eminent commentators on Genesis such as Hermann Gunkel, Gerhard von Rad, and Claus Westermann had all noted the "family-centered nature of the narratives [of Gen 12–36], but they did so in order to show that these stories came from an early stage in Israel's prehistory, before there were tribes and before there was a state."³¹ Oden, however, argues that the issues of continuing importance in Genesis are its expressions of kinship relations and lineage, which are incompatible with or at the very least irrelevant to the hypothetical historical reconstructions of previous commentators. Oden argues that overall Genesis 12–36 is concerned with *defining* Israel not as a historical state but rather as a sociological entity.³²

Without denying the legitimacy of other methodological approaches to the book of Genesis, my interpretation focuses on the kinship implications of Gen 34 set

³¹ Ibid., 192.

³² Ibid., 196.

within the context of the patriarchal narratives of Gen 11:27–36:43. In reference to the author’s attempt to define true Israel by narrating significant episodes in the Abrahamic lineage, Julian Pitt-Rivers notes, “The essential problem with which Genesis is concerned is that of endogamy and land rights.”³³ His distillation of the book of Genesis into the dual concerns of endogamy and land rights is at its core the anthropological expression of the common theological formulation of the Abrahamic promise of divine blessing in the patriarchal narratives. The Abrahamic promise, based primarily on Gen 12, 15, 17, and 22, centers on the hope of future progeny and land. These are not two separate promises but two related elements of the same overarching promise, as descendants and land are intertwined in the ancient Israelite mindset.³⁴ The blessings of descendants and land, though separate, are intimately connected in the ancient Israelite mindset because patrilineal inheritance is inherently tied to continual possession of a particular plot of land, whether real or

³³ Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 139. See also Edmund Leach, “The Legitimacy of Solomon: Some Structural Aspects of Old Testament History,” *EJS* 7 (1966): 58–101.

³⁴ See Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East.” *JAOS* (1970): 184–203.

imagined, both on the micro, family-tribal level and later on the macro, ethno-national level.³⁵

Pitt-Rivers's re-conceptualization of the Abrahamic promise of descendants as a concern about endogamy reflects the fact that the narrative trajectory of Genesis reveals the importance of proper marriages for the Abrahamic lineage.³⁶ He notes that the "limits of endogamy and exogamy are debated throughout the length of Genesis."³⁷ Who is allowed to marry whom, and how do those marriage dynamics affect the Abrahamic promises of seed and land? This concern helps to explain one of the book of Genesis's most curious features. One of the characteristics of the material in Genesis that has been long recognized is the prominent role that female figures play within the narrative, so much so that Richard E. Friedman speculates

³⁵ The focus of this chapter is more about descendants than land, but in the ancient world, land was as important as progeny. In addition to the importance of the promise (and later justification) of land in Genesis, David Vanderhooft has shown that the *mišpāḥā(h)*, the fundament unit of Israelite kinship, is tied to specific units of land. See chapter 2, n. 90.

³⁶ Donaldson ("Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives," 87–88) argues that the story of Genesis is a story of increasingly "correct" marriages, culminating in the proper marriage of Jacob with Leah and Rachel after the relationally-ambiguous marriages of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah.

³⁷ Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem*, 154.

that the Yahwist may possibly even have been a woman.³⁸ Such a claim is of course impossible to prove, but it is not necessary to posit a female author if one understands why women play such central roles within the Genesis story. As Prewitt writes, “Women are included in the accounts everywhere because they are critical to the ‘ideal’ relational system which is represented through the sources.”³⁹ The ideal relational system that Prewitt alludes to is endogamy, in which preferred wives come from within the same lineage, and much of the relational conflict in Genesis stems from this preference for endogamy in situations where it is either difficult or impractical. Despite the clarity of the endogamous marriage preference, the precise relationship of many of the patriarchs and their wives is difficult to define. This ambiguity has traditionally been explained by variation in sources, but another possibility is that the ambiguity reflects the narrator’s purposes in establishing ideal marriage pairs. Oden uses this ambiguity to highlight the unique portrayal of Jacob’s lineage, in which he, unlike his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, has a clearly defined kinship relationship with each of his wives. Another possibility presented here is that the ambiguity reflects an inherent tension between patrilineal social organization and the Semitic preference for endogamic marriage.

³⁸ Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987). This view is also shared by Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

³⁹ Prewitt, “Kinship Structures and Genesis Genealogies,” 91.

One of the central contradictions in Israelite kinship is the relationship between patrilineality and endogamy, a contradiction which was introduced into scholarship by Robert F. Murphy and Leonard Kasdan in reference to Arab Bedouin kinship and applied to ancient Israel by Nathaniel Wander.⁴⁰ Wander points out four specific aspects of Semitic cultures that contribute to social and political instability:

⁴⁰ Robert F. Murphy and Leonard Kasdan, "The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage," *Am. Anthropol* 61 (1959): 17–29; idem, "Agnation and Endogamy: Some Further Considerations," *S.J. Anthropol* 23 (1967): 1–14; Nathaniel Wander, "Structure, Contradiction, and 'Resolution' in Mythology: Father's Brother's Daughter's Marriage and the Treatment of Women in Genesis 11–50," *JANES* 13 (1981): 75–99. Wander was the first to comprehensively apply the ideas of Murphy and Kasdan to the biblical text, and his study, although almost forty years old, remains the most thorough and important application of this approach. One possible reason for the resiliency of Wander's work is that within anthropology as a scholarly discipline, kinship studies fell out of favor after the descent and alliance debates of the 1960s and 70s. Scholars like David M. Schneider questioned the very premise of kinship as a productive cultural category and challenged the suitability of comparing kinship systems across various cultures. See his article "Some Muddles in the Models: Or, How the System Really Works," *Hau J. Ethnogr. Theory* 1 (2011): 451–92. Recently, kinship studies has experienced a renaissance of sorts, but its focus has mostly been on how new developments in biomedical technology and

1) a peculiar form of ingroup marriage—that of a man and his father’s brother’s daughter (FBD); 2) a definition of group membership based upon kinship relations between males (patrilineal descent); 3) an ideology of patriarchal authority (patripotestality); 4) the use of genealogy to order relationships between groups.⁴¹

Thus, within Semitic cultures, a preference for parallel cousin endogamy⁴² combined with kinship relations centered on patrilineal descent tends to undermine the

changes in human relationships have affected kinship dynamics in the modern world.

⁴¹ Wander, “Structure, Contradiction, and ‘Resolution’ in Mythology,” 76.

⁴² There is a question of whether endogamy was a necessity or merely a preference in ancient Israel. See Prewitt, “Kinship Structures and Genesis Genealogies,” 92 for a clarifying discussion about how the way that lineal relations are drawn to apical ancestors introduces *endogamous preference* into the marriage system. In his words, in ancient Israel, “men should marry within some primary patrilineal association, but marriages outside this association may be justified if patrilineal ties of the group providing the woman are not too distant.” For other views on the issue of endogamy in Genesis, see also Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000); Donaldson, “Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives,” 77–87; Oden, “Jacob as Father, Husband and Nephew,” 189–205; Naomi A. Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); idem, “Alliance or Descent? The Function of Marriage in Genesis,” *JSOT* 51 (1991): 45–55.

benefits of social organization through patrilineal descent and creates an instability in the social and political structure.⁴³

Exogamous marriage practices are preferable within patrilineal societies because marriage “within the family” obscures clear lines of descent, since sons are genealogically related to both their mother and father’s ancestral lines. It would not be an uncommon situation to find that your mother’s brother’s daughter and your paternal grandfather’s daughter’s daughter are the same person. Fredrik Barth offers the example of the Marri Baluch, in which a woman is given in marriage by her closest adult male agnate or agnates.⁴⁴ In return, the extended family gives a bride price. Because the marriage preference is for the father’s brother’s children (close agnates), then often the one who receives the bride price will also both pay the bride price *and* receive shares in it. As a result, Barth writes, “the concrete

⁴³ Wander (“Structure, Contradiction, and ‘Resolution’ in Mythology,” 81, n. 26) specifically notes the benefits of “the creation of corporate resource holding ... the structuring of relations of power, authority, and succession within lineages, and the creation of alliances between lineages through marriage and other forms of exchange.” Endogamous marriage “can potentially obscure lineality, impair incorporation, and turn the smaller segments of a larger structure back on themselves.”

⁴⁴ Fredrik Barth, “Descent and Marriage Reconsidered,” in *The Character of Kinship* (ed. Jack Goody; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 3–20.

counterpart of distinct groups will often fail to emerge, because persons belong equally to both categories; likewise, the most elementary distinctions of kinship between agnates, matrilineals, and affines will be confounded through the practice of such marriages.”⁴⁵ In other words, genealogies quickly fold in upon themselves and obligations based on kin relationships become unclear and difficult to differentiate. Ancient Israelite kinship obligations are thus, by necessity, very broad, and this vagueness is reflected in Israelite kinship terminology, in which there is no specific term for “cousin,” but instead all “brothers” (Heb. *’ah*) are “kinsmen.”

Genealogy is one of the primary ways that Semitic cultures, including ancient Israel, orders power, authority, succession, and inheritance, but genealogical structuring becomes more susceptible to challenge when it reflects reality less accurately. Additionally, as Wander writes, “the potential for conflict between groups is exacerbated and since marriages are largely confined within single groups, the value of marriage for making alliances between groups is limited.”⁴⁶ Of course, “fictive kinship” has long been recognized as an aspect of ancient Israelite kinship structures, but other means besides “fictive kinship” are necessary to resolve the tension between patrilineal social order and endogamous marriage practices. As Wander writes, “Anthropologists have suggested that a need to control women was both a cause and a consequence of this contradictory state of affairs and worse, that

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁶ Wander, “Structure, Contradiction, and ‘Resolution,’” 81.

one attempt to resolve (or better, to obfuscate) this contradiction was through the exercise of a further kind of control over women: veiling them, secluding them, dropping their names from genealogical records and otherwise attempting to disguise or deny their importance and identity as individuals.”⁴⁷ Murphy and Kasdan, who were the first to acknowledge this contradiction in scholarly literature, similarly write that the contradiction is resolved in two ways in Bedouin society: (1) “the continual warfare, feuding, and raiding that takes place among the Bedouin,” and (2) the suppression of female names in the genealogies.⁴⁸ In addition to these methods of suppression and resolution, I would like to propose that various rituals, including circumcision and blood sacrifice, reinforce the patrilineal structure of society. From this perspective, the patriarchal narratives of Gen 11:27–36:18 can be seen as an attempt to navigate this contradiction within ancient Israel’s social and political organization. Circumcision takes on an even more important role in kinship creation in light of this inherent tension within Israelite society.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁸ Murphy and Kasdan, “Agnation and Endogamy,” 13. As noted above, the Abrahamic narrative is framed by the genealogies at the end of Gen 11 and Gen 36. Although perhaps not divergent from typical biblical genealogies in this respect, it should be noted that despite the prominent role of women within the narratives themselves, they are conspicuously absent from the genealogies.

Circumcision as Kinship Ritual

Genesis 34 participates in this tension within the ancient Israelite system of kinship relationships, legitimate marriages, and potential alliances. The passage clearly shares the biblical marriage preference for endogamy, that is, marriage within the kin group rather than outside. If exogamy were the normal practice, then it would not have posed any issues for Shechem to marry Dinah, notwithstanding the defiling nature of their initial union.⁴⁹ In fact, all else being equal, it would seem that a marriage between Dinah and Shechem would have been welcomed by Jacob and his sons, for Shechem was the most esteemed of all his father's sons (Gen 34:19). If Shechem had not violated Dinah and instead pursued the traditional path of courtship, would her brothers still have been so outraged? Would Shechem have been able to marry Dinah without being circumcised? Admittedly, such a counter-factual argument cannot be definitively answered, but the tone of the story and our knowledge of ancient Israelite marriage practices suggest that even if Shechem had not defiled Dinah, her brothers likely would still not have approved of their union.

⁴⁹ Wagner considers Shechem's primary offense to be his status as an ethnic outsider proposing marriage with an Israelite woman ("Politico-Juridical Proceedings of Genesis 34," 145–61). Dinah's "humiliation" (Heb. *'innâ*) serves as the catalyst for the remainder of the story, which is more concerned about kinship and marriage preferences than appropriate sexual relations per se.

As it stands now, Gen 34 is the story of the sons of Jacob's revenge on the Shechemites for the eponymous Shechem's sexual defilement of their sister Dinah. Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, has sexual relations with Dinah and afterwards desires to marry her. This violation of Dinah's sexual purity (and perhaps their authority over it) tremendously upsets her brothers, and they devise a sinister plot of revenge. Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers from the same mother Leah, disingenuously agree to allow Shechem to marry Dinah on the condition that he and the rest of the men of his city first be circumcised.⁵⁰ Once the Shechemites

⁵⁰ The fact that the Shechemites are not already circumcised in Gen 34 should at least give pause to those who argue that circumcision was a pan-West Semitic practice and thus could not externally distinguish the ancient Israelite from any of his close ethnic neighbors. Most commentators consider Jer 9:25 to be evidence that at least the Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites were circumcised. See, e.g., Philip J. King, "Circumcision: Who did it, who didn't and why," *BAR* 32 (2006): 48–55, esp. 50. However, it is not clear whether Jeremiah's words are an accurate reflection of reality or merely serve a rhetorical purpose. It could also reflect a period during which the Israelites were circumcised but at least some West Semitic neighbors were not. In addition, although the Philistines are commonly described in the Bible as the "uncircumcised," according to the Greek Karnak Inscription, three of the other Sea Peoples—from whom the Philistines are believed to have come—were circumcised. This distinction between the Philistines and other Sea Peoples shows

have been circumcised and are in a state of “security,” Simeon and Levi kill all the males of Shechem and together with the other sons of Jacob plunder their wives, children, and possessions, to the dismay of their father Jacob.

There are a number of indications that circumcision plays a significant role within the passage and functions to establish the contours of the boundaries between the two peoples. First, after finding out that all the Shechemites would have to be circumcised in order for Shechem to marry Dinah, the narrator declares, “Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem” (Gen 34:18). Taken alone at face value, this would be a mystifying statement. A clue to unlocking the meaning of this passage though is found in Gen 34:23. In attempting to convince their fellow Shechemites to undergo circumcision, Hamor and his son Shechem implore their kinsmen, “Will not their livestock, their property, and all their beasts be ours?” The Shechemites understand their participation in the ritual act of circumcision as a transfer of the property of the sons of Jacob to themselves, even though the primary event is only the marriage of Dinah and Shechem. Although this could possibly be a case of Hamor and his son Shechem overstating their case to the other Shechemites in order to convince them to agree to the painful terms, I believe it is more likely that the common understanding is that circumcision would effectively make the two

that ethnic groups that are closely related can have different practices related to circumcision, an analogy that may be applicable to the relationship between the Israelites and other West Semitic peoples.

groups kin, with all that relationship implies, including intermarriage and land and property ties.

Furthermore, the first half of Gen 34:25 describes the Shechemites' physical condition as a result of their circumcision as "painful" (Heb. root *k'b*) three days after their surgery. The second half of that verse then states that Simeon and Levi come upon the city while it felt "secure" (Heb. root *bṭḥ*). This root connotes a sense of confidence, security, or trust. Here in Gen 34:25, *bṭḥ* conveys a sense of trust that the Shechemites expressed toward the Israelites. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the root is often used to express a sense of the feeling or lack of the feeling of security in the land (Lev 25:18; 26:5; Deut 12:10). In Deut 28:52, Yahweh chastises the Israelites for trusting in their high and fortified walls, which will ultimately fail to protect them. It is clear that *bṭḥ* is used the same way in Gen 34:25. The second half of the verse is not synonymous with the first. The narrator gives two reasons why the attack of the Israelites was met with so little resistance. First, the Shechemites were in physical pain and weakness as a result of their circumcision and unable to defend themselves adequately. Second, the Shechemites did not expect an attack from the Israelites. Because of their circumcision, which they believed effectively united them as kinsmen with the Israelites, the Shechemites felt "secure" and at peace with the Israelites. I contend that the narrator highlights that the Shechemites felt "secure" precisely because they have entered into an agreement by the act of their circumcision that makes them kin with Jacob and his sons. As noted in the previous chapter, Nancy Jay emphasizes the performative nature of sacrifice: it

accomplishes what it states.⁵¹ So too with circumcision here. Even though it was initiated with malicious intent by the sons of Jacob, the act of circumcision by the Shechemites should be viewed as effectively uniting the Shechemites with the patrilineage of Jacob and his sons. The deceitful nature of Simeon and Levi's proposal does not disqualify the understanding of the Shechemites that circumcision would make them "one people" (Gen 34:16, 22).⁵² For instance, even though the Gibeonites deceive Joshua and the Israelites in Josh 9 by pretending not to be natives of the land, the Israelites still honor the terms of the covenant between them (Josh 9:19–21). Thus, the horrific nature of Simeon and Levi's actions is emphasized even more. Their subterfuge was essentially carried out on their own kin, which was an action that warranted condemnation and disqualified them from their rightful inheritance in the patrilineal line (Gen 49:5–7).

⁵¹ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 37.

⁵² This language of one-ness is evidence of the unifying nature of the circumcision ritual. Paul Kalluveettill's neglected work *Declaration and Covenant* is a summary of the covenant formula in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. In it, he writes about the language of "we are all one" as a signifier of a covenant relationship. See Paul Kalluveettill, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (AnBib 88; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982).

Last, in response to his sons' actions, Jacob laments that as a result of their cruelty, he has become a stench to the other inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites (Gen 34:30). Although it may seem obvious, we should consider why the other inhabitants of the land might retaliate against the Israelites. Are Jacob and his sons considered a stench among the other inhabitants of the land because they massacred the Shechemites or because of the deceptive way in which they did it?

From my analysis of Gen 34, we have seen that circumcision in Gen 34 is more than simply a physical mark or tribal habit. Traditional interpretations of Gen 34 do not adequately appreciate the significance of circumcision in kinship construction. The short summary of the current scholarship on Gen 34 reveals that circumcision within Gen 34 has been treated as an afterthought, if it is treated at all. This observation is not meant as an indictment of previous studies of Gen 34, for I am not claiming that circumcision is the most significant or even one of the most significant themes within the passage. To the contrary, its secondary status makes it all the more compelling. Rather than being a product of the narrator's deliberate framing, circumcision seems as if it is a minor detail that only plays a small role in the story. Because of this, it is more likely to retain the same significance within the narrative that it has in the real world outside the narrative.

Circumcision functions in a typical way in Gen 34 as a kinship ritual, yet its result of binding the two groups together is flipped on its head by the actions of the sons of Jacob led by Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi. They deceitfully use

circumcision as part of their ploy for retribution against Shechem's defilement of their sister Dinah. Their disingenuous appropriation of an acceptable means of kinship creation furthers the plot of the story, but it does not invalidate the function of circumcision in Gen 34 as a rite that effectively makes the Israelites and Shechemites "one people." This understanding of circumcision brings further condemnation on Simeon and Levi's actions, and no amount of pandering on their part about the nobility of their actions as protectors of their sister's honor and chastity can rescue them.

In the next chapter, I will look at the kinship-generating function of circumcision in one of the most opaque passages in the Hebrew Bible, Exod 4:24–26. There, the ritual of circumcision still helps to set the boundaries of legitimate kinship relationships and who can be a part of the people of Yahweh. Circumcision helps to transform Moses from a man without a secure social status into Yahweh's chosen man to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

Chapter 4: Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual in Exodus 4:24–26

Ḥātan dāmîm! With this perplexing interjection, often ambiguously translated as “bridegroom of blood” in Exod 4:26, Zipporah, the Midianite wife of Moses, concludes the brief narrative episode that describes Moses’s wilderness return from Midian back to Egypt after being commissioned by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod 3:15–22).¹ Interpreters have offered innumerable explanations of Zipporah’s words, but the precise meaning and significance of her words remain obscure. This question about the meaning of *ḥātan dāmîm* is merely the last question in a series of questions that Exod 4:24–26 has raised for interpreters throughout the ages.² These questions, while important, are ultimately

¹ Although the narrative vacillates between the ethnic designations of “people of Israel” and “Hebrews,” I will predominantly use the terms “Israel” and “Israelites” for the sake of consistency.

² Some of the most common questions include the following: Is the passage Israelite or non-Israelite in origin? Whom did Yahweh attack and seek to kill, and why? If Moses, as traditionally thought, why would Yahweh seek to kill the person whom he has just commissioned to lead his people out of Egypt? If one of Moses’s sons, which one, and what, if anything, had he done to warrant God’s anger? Whose *regel* did Zipporah touch with the just-removed foreskin (Moses’s, Moses’s son, or Yahweh), and what does *regel* even refer to (feet, genitals, or something else entirely)?

ancillary to the main question of this study, namely the function of circumcision in non-Priestly narratives. Before proceeding further, I will quote this brief passage:

24 Then at a lodging place along the way, Yahweh met him and sought to kill him. 25 So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and

touched his feet,³ and she said, “You are a *ḥātan dāmîm*⁴ to me.”⁵ 26 So he left him alone after she had said “*ḥātan dāmîm*” on account of the circumcision.⁶

³ Some interpret *ragla(y)w* here as a euphemism for genitals, as in Isa 7:20; Ezek 16:25; Deut 28:57. See, e.g., John Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 53.

⁴ The *crux* of the passage is the phrase *ḥātan dāmîm*, which has typically been rendered as ‘bridegroom of blood’ or ‘bloody bridegroom.’ Syntactically, the closest parallel to *ḥātan dāmîm* is 2 Sam 16:8: *’iš dāmîm ’attā(h)* (“You are a man of blood”), but this example indicates little other than that the noun construct phrase itself is fairly unremarkable. See also Ps 5:6; 26:9; 55:23; 59:2; 139:19; Prov 29:10; Ezek 7:23; Nah 3:1. The word *ḥātān* in the Hebrew Bible most commonly refers to a ‘son-in-law’ (Gen 19:12, 14; Judg 15:6; 19:5; 1 Sam 18:18; 22:14; Neh 6:18; 13:28) or by extension a ‘bridegroom’ (Isa 61:10; 62:5; Jer 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Joel 2:16; Ps 19:6), since a bridegroom is a future son-in-law. It is perhaps significant that a bridegroom is conceived of in relationship with the bride’s father. The plural noun *dāmîm* usually indicates blood shed as a result of violence (e.g., Exod 22:2; Deut 19:10; Is 1:15; Mic 3:10; Hab 2:12). As Serge Frolov notes, “With a noun standing in construct to it and denoting a person or a group of people, *dāmîm* never implies anything but his or their evil deeds or intentions” (“The Hero as Bloody Bridegroom: On the Meaning and Origin of Exodus 4:26,” *Bib* 77 (1996): 520–3). Frolov captures this semantic field of intentional violence in his translation of *ḥātan dāmîm* as

“bridegroom deserving death for a first-degree murder.” Although I do not agree with Frolov’s interpretation of Exod 4:24–26 as an adaptation of an anti-Davidic taunt, his translation does accurately reflect the violent nature of occurrences of *dāmîm* in the Hebrew Bible.

⁵ The Old Greek (OG) renders the end of v. 25 as *‘estē to haima tēs peritomēs tou paidious mou* (“The blood of my son’s circumcision has stopped.”), suggesting that the OG is operating from a different Vorlage than the MT. This possibility is reinforced by the Vulgate and the Syriac, which both agree with the MT against the OG. There have been a number of unsuccessful attempts to offer text-critical explanations for this substantial difference between the MT and OG. See William Dumbrell, “Exodus 4:24–26: A Textual Re-Examination,” *HTR* 65 (1972): 285–90; Johannes Hehn, “Der ‘Blutsbräutigam’ Ex 4 24–26,” *ZAW* 50 (1932): 1–8; Hubert Junker, “Der Blutbräutigam: eine textkritische und exegetische Studie zu Ex. 4. 24–26,” in *Alttestamentliche Studien: Friedrich Nötscher zum Sechzigsten Geburtstag, 19. Juli 1950, Gewidmet von Kollegenn, Freunden und Schülern* (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1950), 120–8, esp. 123.

⁶ I have rendered the anomalous form *mûlôt* as a plural of abstraction. See William H. Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (AB 2a; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 220; Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch; trans. A. E. Cowley; London: Clarendon, 1910), §124d. The form *mûlôt* is normally taken as a feminine plural because of the *-ôt* ending, but there is no ostensible reason why the word should be feminine plural.

In this short narrative section of Exod 4:24–26, while many details are unclear, the function of circumcision in this narrative is not: it is, as I will argue in this chapter, a kinship-generating ritual that symbolically marks Moses as a true Israelite, ritually prepared to join his brother Aaron to lead the Israelites out from slavery and oppression in Egypt.⁷

Frolov (“The Hero as Bloody Bridegroom,” 521) argues that “it is preferable to regard *mûlôt* as a standard plural of **mûlah*, ‘circumcision,’” but that form is not attested anywhere else. There is the possibility that *mûlôt* could be a survival of the older absolute singular ‘t’ form, but these forms are typically segholated in the MT. Dumbrell explains the form as a text-critical error, partially on the basis of the OG: “The Greek addition of *tou paidiou* makes it probable, however, that *mwlt* is a feminine singular form which had been in construct to a following *benô*, which in its turn had been lost by haplography arising from homoioteleuton, or else is the survival of an originally suffixed form *mûlâtô*, the final vowel of which had gone by haplography again” (“Exodus 4:24–26,” 289). Although haplography is a possibility, the presence of *tou paidiou* in v. 26 is better explained by either its presence in v. 25 or a different Vorlage as suggested in n. 56.

⁷ The other issues that have commonly attracted interpreters’ attention, such as the passage’s origins and redactional history, will only be discussed in detail in what

In the previous three chapters I have advanced the claim that circumcision can be understood as a kinship ritual that generates and maintains patrilineal lineage to the ritual exclusion of women, analogous to Nancy Jay's formulation of the function of blood sacrifice in pre-modern societies. Here in this chapter, I will modify and nuance this claim, since even a cursory glance over the passage in question raises the difficulty that it is the woman Zipporah who is the ritual expert who performs the circumcision act. One of Jay's central contentions is that women (especially mothers and women of child-bearing age) do not participate in (or have only very limited participation in) blood sacrificial rituals. How then can circumcision function analogously to blood sacrifice, as I have been arguing, if it is performed by a woman? There are reasons to believe, however, that Zipporah's actions should not be considered normative, and these reasons will be discussed in depth later in the chapter. Notwithstanding the uncertainty surrounding Zipporah as the person who performs the circumcision, the act of circumcision in Exod 4:24–26 plays a major role in clarifying and even transforming Moses's kinship identity.

As I acknowledged in Chapter 1, circumcision is a multivalent ritual latent with many potential meanings and significances, especially considering its common status as a rite of passage in many cultures. My study focuses on the kinship-generating aspect of circumcision but not to the exclusion of other legitimate

follows when they are relevant to the discussion of the function of circumcision as a kinship-generating ritual.

possibilities. In each of the biblical passages under consideration, other functions besides kinship generation and kinship maintenance may also be present. Here in Exod 4:24–26, the apotropaic function of circumcision is fairly obvious and one of the few certainties that interpreters use as a starting point for other less secure hypotheses about the more opaque aspects of the story. Taken in isolation, it is easy to see how Exod 4:24–26 reflects an apotropaic function of circumcision, but a simply apotropaic ritual does not fit very well in the context of Exodus. One could argue that this dissonance is one more reason to view the passage as secondary in its context, but there must have been a reason why the writer or editor of Exodus included the passage in its specific context. While acknowledging the apotropaic function of circumcision in the story, I would like to highlight instead in this chapter the kinship-generating aspect of circumcision, a function that appreciates the broader view of Exodus and is often is either entirely ignored or relegated to secondary status in the scholarly literature.⁸

⁸ There are a few notable exceptions within biblical scholarship. Bonna Devora Haberman makes a very similar claim to my own in a chapter entitled “Foreskin Sacrifice: Zipporah’s Ritual and the Bloody Bridegroom,” in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite* (ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark; Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 18–29. Already in the title of her chapter, we can see her equation of Zipporah’s ritual circumcision of her unnamed son with blood sacrifice. In her very first sentence, she calls circumcision an

In the first part of this chapter, I review the broad history of interpretation of Exod 4:24–26 and establish why kinship is an appropriate, if not better, lens to examine the function and significance of circumcision in Exod 4:24–26. The strength of my argument primarily lies in its explanatory power to situate the short pericope within its larger narrative context. At the outset, I admit that my argument does not conclusively prove that the main function of circumcision in Exod 4:24–26 is kinship generation. My proposal, like those of other scholars, is limited by the laconic nature of the passage and the uncertainty of its original provenance. In my defense, however, in the absence of any concrete evidence to serve as a ballast, any argument, including mine, must proceed indirectly, and my claims about Exod 4 are just as, if not more, plausible than other claims. In the second part of the chapter, I will note the emphasis on kinship in the early chapters of Exodus, proceeding in ever-narrowing concentric circles until we arrive at our main passage in discussion.

“enduring remnant of the act of sacrifice” (Ibid., 18). Christopher B. Hays (“‘Lest Ye Perish in the Way’: Ritual and Kinship in Exodus 4:24–26,” *HS* 48 [2007]: 39–54) likewise makes a similar argument. One of the main differences between their studies and my own is that I focus more on a narrative reading of the literary context whereas they rely primarily on ancient Near Eastern backgrounds (Hays) and early Jewish and Rabbinic interpretations (Haberman) of the passage in question. For my purposes, those ancient Near Eastern backgrounds and early Jewish and Rabbinic interpretations are confirmatory rather than foundational.

It is unlikely that a close reading of the three verses of Exod 4:24–26 in isolation will yield a convincing interpretation, but an appreciation of the literary context of the first four chapters of Exodus will clarify the kinship-generating function of circumcision in Exod 4:24–26.

Previous Approaches to Exodus 4:24–26

Unlike the scholarship regarding Gen 34, which was surveyed in the previous chapter, the discourse surrounding Exod 4:24–26 typically views circumcision as the primary event in the story, and much of the scholarship revolves around questions about the function and significance of circumcision.⁹ It will be helpful to identify a number of the more common and influential approaches in which circumcision has been understood in Exod 4:24–26. The main way that circumcision in Exod 4:24–26 has been interpreted has been as an apotropaic premarital rite, with some interpreters emphasizing the apotropaic nature of the ritual and others emphasizing its timing as a premarital rite.

⁹ John T. Willis (*Yahweh and Moses in Conflict: The Role of Exodus 4:24–26 in the Book of Exodus* [Bern: Peter Lang, 2010]) does an admirable job categorizing and summarizing the multitude of hermeneutical methods that various scholars have used to approach the meaning and significance of Exod 4:24–26. Willis’s review is comprehensive, but our focus will only be on those interpreters who focus on circumcision as a significant element in the story.

The bulk of the commentary about circumcision in Exod 4:24–26 has viewed it as an apotropaic ritual that wards off danger or evil. In his commentary on Exodus, Martin Noth understands circumcision in Exod 4:24–26 simply as an apotropaic act that averts a nocturnal threat.¹⁰ Noth is followed by Yitzhak Avishur, who compares specific Near Eastern parallels to the precarious situation that Moses finds himself in Exod 4. Avishur connects the midrashic interpretation of Exod 4:24–26 that depicts Moses being swallowed by desert demons up to his genitals with Phoenician amulets that portray the same kind of scene.¹¹ These amulets and the inscriptions contained therein are thought to be apotropaic, offering a potential analogy for the function of circumcision in Exod 4:24–26. One of the other main lines of argument for understanding circumcision as an apotropaic rite relates not only to the act of circumcision but also to the associated presence and manipulation of blood, which both cross-culturally and within the Bible has an apotropaic function. Even within the book of Exodus, the blood on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite dwellings had apotropaic effects in protecting Israelites from the Angel

¹⁰ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 49–50.

¹¹ Yitzhak Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative: Style, Structure, and the Ancient Near Eastern Literary Background* (Jerusalem: Graphit, 1999), 137–58. Avishur also notes the additional example of Babylonian incantation tablets that contain descriptions of demons who attack desert travelers.

of Death during Passover (Exod 12:7–12), a passage that many commentators have noted has many resonances with Exod 4:24–26.¹²

Connected with the idea of circumcision as a ritual that wards away evil or danger, William Propp argues that circumcision has a purifying or expiatory function in the passage.¹³ In his interpretation, Yahweh threatens Moses's life as punishment for his manslaughter of the Egyptian overseer in Exod 2. Before he can return to Egypt, Moses requires atonement in order to escape Yahweh's just punishment. In Propp's view, Moses's son is circumcised because, in the Yahwist's day, the term *ḥātān* could refer to either a "relative by marriage" or a "circumcised boy," so the story reflects the semantic transitional period by combining a new husband with a circumcised child, namely Moses and his son.

The apotropaic function of circumcision is difficult to deny in this passage. There is a simplistic causality in the connection between circumcision and its immediate consequences. Yahweh seeks to kill Moses; Zipporah performs a circumcision on Moses's son and touches either the recently circumcised child or

¹² See, e.g., Terence. E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (ed. J. L. Mays; IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 79–80; Joh de Groot, "The Story of the Bloody Husband (Exodus IV 24–26)," *OTS* 2 (1943): 10–17, esp. 14–16; Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), 110–22; H. P. Smith, "Ethnological Parallels to Exodus iv. 24–26," *JBL* 25 (1906): 14–24.

¹³ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 236–37.

Moses with the foreskin (or possibly even Yahweh's own *regel*); Yahweh does not kill Moses. Since nothing else occurs within the narrative that might have caused Yahweh to relent, the natural assumption is that Zipporah's act of circumcision is effectively apotropaic.¹⁴ Only attributing apotropaic effects to circumcision, however, minimizes the significance of circumcision in the larger context of Exodus. If one takes seriously the final form of the text, which I do, then the question arises as to how the episode in Exod 4:24–26 fits within the broader context of Exodus. Does circumcision have any other function in Exodus besides its apotropaic function?¹⁵ The bulk of the rest of this chapter is my attempt to give and support an affirmative answer to that question.

¹⁴ This "simplistic causality" is also the reason why many consider the reason for Yahweh's night attack on Moses—which is not explicitly mentioned in the text—to be the lack of circumcision on the part of either Moses or one of his sons. See, e.g., Michael V. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly 'ôt Etiologies," *RB* 81 (1974): 557–96, esp. 592–3.

¹⁵ As mentioned above in n. 3, Hays reaches conclusions similar to mine, although by different means. He acknowledges the apotropaic nature of circumcision but also recognizes its inherent connection with matters of kinship. By a comparison with ancient of ritual practices and kinship relations, Hays concludes that circumcision functions as "an apotropaic blood rite that invokes her family's kinship to Yahweh, the Divine Kinsman" ("Lest Ye Perish in the Way," 54). One crucial difference

Second, other interpreters emphasize the timing of circumcision as a premarital rite. As noted in Chapter 1, circumcision is commonly thought to have originally been a puberty or marriage rite based largely on cross-cultural, anthropological data. As for the biblical evidence, many interpreters point to Exod 4:26 because they understand *ḥātān* in the passage as a reference to Moses as Zipporah's "bridegroom," which is a well-established meaning of *ḥātān* in the Hebrew Bible (Is 61:10; 62:5; Jer 7:34; Joel 2:16). T. C. Mitchell does not take a definitive stance on the meaning of *ḥātān* in the passage, but he notes that the translation of 'bridegroom' is not the only possibility.¹⁶ Although unlikely in my estimation, it may also be possible that *ḥātān* here means "circumciser" on the basis of the Arabic *ḥatanu*, "to circumcise."¹⁷ In this reading, *ḥātan dāmîm* would mean

between our conclusions is that I focus much more on the kinship identity of Moses rather than that of Zipporah.

¹⁶ T. C. Mitchell, "The Meaning of the Noun *ḥtn* in the Old Testament," *VT* 19 (1969): 93–112 (98–99).

¹⁷ If you posit a foreign origin for the pericope, it becomes much easier to appeal to other possible Semitic cognates of the Hebrew root *ḥtn*, most commonly either Arabic ('to circumcise') or Akkadian ('to protect'). The argument then proceeds rather simply: *ḥātan dāmîm* originally had a different meaning in its original context, but when the story was imported into Exodus, then the meaning changed depending on the cultural-linguistic environment of the reader.

something like “circumciser of blood” or “bloody circumciser,” although it is unclear how *ḥātān* could be a semantic loan from Arabic. Mitchell sees strengths in each view but ultimately thinks that *ḥātān* is a broad classificatory term that means something like “relation by marriage.”¹⁸ The main problem with viewing circumcision as a premarital rite in this instance is that Moses and Zipporah are already married with children, and Moses is not technically Zipporah’s “bridegroom.” If *ḥātān* means something more like “relation by marriage,” as Mitchell believes, then there is little justification to view circumcision as a standard premarital rite within the Exodus narrative.¹⁹

¹⁸ See also Allen Guenther, “A Typology of Israelite Marriage: Kinship, Socio-Economic, and Religious Factors,” *JSOT* 29 (2005): 387–407, esp. 390–8. Guenther, however, restricts the usage of *ḥātān* to requests or offers to contract a marriage with *outsiders* (emphasis mine), whether people outside the tribe or cultural group or people outside one’s social or economic stratum.

¹⁹ Julius Wellhausen (*Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* [New York: Meridian Books, 1957], 340) believed that circumcision was originally a premarital rite and that this story in Exodus functions as an etiology for why circumcision is practiced in infancy rather than puberty in ancient Israel. In his view, Exod 4:24–26 functions as a kind of alternative etiology to the Priestly writer’s version in Gen 17 for infant circumcision. Wellhausen bases his views on the dual meanings of *ḥātān* as relating to both “circumcision” and “bridegroom.” From these data, Propp

Many of these previous attempts to understand circumcision as an apotropaic premarital rite seek sincerely to situate the pericope within its larger context, albeit with varying degrees of success. One of the keys to a coherent reading that is often overlooked is to view the narrative of the early chapters of Exodus as both the chronological and thematic continuation of the narrative in Genesis, particularly in its focus and emphasis on kinship relationships.²⁰ The main

similarly concludes that the episode in Exod 4:24–26 is a literary expression of the semantic (and possibly cultural) shift from premarital to infant circumcision. See also Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (SBT 27; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1960), 58–63; Hermann Gunkel, “Über die Beschneidung im alten Testament,” *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 2 (1902): 4–31, esp. 17–19. For a detailed refutation of this view, see G. Richter, “Zwei alttestamentliche Studien. I. Der Blutbräutigam,” *ZAW* 39 (1921): 123–38.

²⁰ The movement of the book of Exodus is from a people in slavery who are redeemed and set apart as Yahweh’s own son to receive the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises of seed and blessing. The book of Exodus begins with a declaration that despite living in a foreign land, the people of Israel were already experiencing a (partial) fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of seed. Exodus 1:7 echoes the “be fruitful and multiply” language of Genesis (1:28; 8:17; 9:1, 7: 35:11; 47:27), describing the Israelites as “fruitful” and “increasing greatly”; they “multiplied” and “grew exceedingly strong.” However, this is only one half of the

difference is that whereas the kinship relationships in Genesis center on the entire Abrahamic lineage (and proper marriage relationships within that lineage), the focus on kinship relationships in Exodus is entirely centered on one man, Moses. In the previous chapter, I explored the ways in which circumcision functioned as a kinship-generating ritual between two peoples, the Israelites and the Shechemites. In this chapter, I will reflect on Moses's kinship identity—how it is revealed, challenged, modified, and ultimately affirmed—and its central role in the book of Exodus, particularly Exod 1–4. Accordingly, my argument in this chapter is built upon two fundamental tenets: (1) Moses is a symbolic representation for all Israel, and (2) Moses is a man out-of-place.

Moses is traditionally portrayed as the Israelites' representative before the king of Egypt, and that is the way that the biblical text overtly describes Moses's mission: "Come, I [Yahweh] will send you [Moses] to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exod 3:10). Moses's representative function, however, goes much deeper than simply his role as political spokesperson. Isaiah 8:18 provides the interpretive key for how we are to understand the personal

promise that Yahweh gave to Abraham. As we saw in chapter 3, Yahweh promised to Abraham both seed *and* land, so the reader's expectation from the very beginning is that now that Yahweh has fulfilled the seed aspect of his promise, the land aspect of his promise will come next. The land was filled with the Israelites, but it was not the Israelites' own land. They were living in a *foreign* land.

lives of the prophets, and it applies to Moses equally because Moses is the prophet *par excellence* and the mold from which later biblical prophets are cast: “I [Isaiah] and the children whom Yahweh has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from Yahweh of hosts.”²¹ The correspondences between the experiences of Moses the individual and the experiences of corporate Israel in the book of Exodus are too close to be coincidental. In the first four chapters of Exodus, Moses is portrayed in similar fashion to Israel and proleptically experiences what Israel will later experience. As Moshe Greenberg writes, Moses’s experiences “turn out to be premonitions of things to come depicted in intensely personal terms.”²² For example, Moses is content to dwell in Midian as a shepherd (Exod 2:21); Israel is resigned to remain in Egypt as slaves (Exod 6:9). Although not exactly the same, both Moses and Israel are unwilling to alter the status quo, albeit for different reasons. Especially relevant for this study, Moses’s wilderness journey in Exod 4 foreshadows Israel’s later wilderness journey. Thomas B. Dozeman likewise recognizes Moses’s representative status with respect to the wilderness journey: “His early life experience with the Midianites in the wilderness foreshadows Israel’s

²¹ See also Ezek 12:6.

²² Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus: A Holistic Commentary on Exodus 1–11* (2nd ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 93. See also Susan Ackerman, “Why is Miriam also among the Prophets? (And is Zipporah among the Priests?),” *JBL* 121 (2002): 47–80, esp. 71–76.

experience in the second half of Exodus.”²³ Before the Israelites are able to cross from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land and before they are able to traverse the treacherous wilderness, Moses, as their covenant mediator and representative, must first secure his status as a true Israelite. Thus, Moses stands in for the Israelites: not only is he a covenant mediator but, like the later prophets, his life is a symbolic representation of the greater life of Israel. Just as Israel needed a time of purification before entering the Promised Land (i.e., the wilderness experience), so too Moses required transformation before leading Israel out of the land of Egypt. Moses’s need for transformation leads us to the second fundamental feature for my argument: Moses is a man out-of-place.

The first thing that we learn about Moses is that he is born into a Levite family. There is no doubt about his ethnic background, and one cannot be more paradigmatically Israelite than the son of a Levitical priest and a woman from a Levitical family. Moses’s pedigree is pristine. Yet, as the narrative progresses, it is clear that Moses does not belong among the Israelites, and his pristine pedigree is superseded by his upbringing within the Egyptian royal household. Concurrently, he is never truly accepted as Egyptian either, even though he is raised as Pharaoh’s daughter’s own son and (apparently) takes upon the physical appearance of an Egyptian.

²³ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 47.

The question of Moses's kinship identity will be thoroughly explored further below, but at this point in the argument, it is sufficient to note on a broad level how Moses is a man out-of-place throughout most of the early chapters of Exodus.²⁴ The field of kinship studies and my study up to this point have underscored the cultural basis of kinship formation, underneath and sometimes even in contrast to biology. This preference for culture over biology in kinship construction is clear in Exodus. Moses is biologically an Israelite, yet his kinship status is in flux and remains so for the first few chapters in Exodus. His geographical movements within the book mirror his crisis in kinship status: from Egypt to Midian and back to Egypt via the wilderness. In Egypt, Moses is half-Israelite and half-Egyptian. In Midian, Yahweh interrupts his pastoral life and calls him back to his own people. In his return to Egypt, he is an Israelite who has undergone symbolic and vicarious circumcision through his son. Ritual is required to definitively establish Moses's Israelite kinship identity, and the workings of that ritual—circumcision—are found in Exod 4:24–26.²⁵

²⁴ Propp (*Exodus 1–18*, 176–7) makes a similar argument.

²⁵ Propp (*Exodus 1–18*, 236) uses similar logic to argue that Zipporah's circumcision has an expiating or purifying function, which was necessary to absolve Moses from his bloodguilt for killing the Egyptian overseer in Exod 2. See also P. Middlekoop, "The Significance of the Story of the 'Bloody Husband' (Ex. 4:24–26)," *SEAJT* 8 (1966/1967): 34–38. Middlekoop argues that Moses had to be reconciled to Yahweh

Kinship in the Book of Exodus

Just as we saw in the previous chapter that issues of kinship are at the forefront of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, kinship is also a primary concern of Exodus, particularly the kinship of Moses in the early chapters of Exodus. Exodus 4:24–26 belongs squarely within the first four chapters of Exodus. One of the main purposes of these first four chapters is to establish the true Israelite-ness of Moses, the deliverer of Israel.²⁶ Understandably, the credibility of Moses's ethnic identity is in question. Exodus 2 portrays Moses as a divided man, half-Egyptian and half-Hebrew. First, take note of his mixed upbringing. As the narrative in Exod 2 recounts, Moses is born into a Levitical family but found by Pharaoh's daughter in the river. He is then nursed by his own Hebrew mother but ultimately raised as Pharaoh's daughter's son. Second, take note of his name Moses, which shares Egyptian

in order to fulfill his function as leader of God's people. His emphasis, like Propp's, is more on expiation; my emphasis is on kinship.

²⁶ Rather than Exod 4:24–26 being out of place in its present context, one could just as naturally argue it is the previous verses of Exod 4:21–23 that seem to be the alien intrusion into the narrative. Exodus 4:24 follows Exod 4:20 quite naturally and smoothly, so it is premature to immediately assume an original, foreign context for these three verses. The motivation for the placement of Exod 4:21–23 seems to be to place Exod 4:24 within the context of the narrative about Pharaoh's son and the foreshadowing of the tenth and final plague, the death of the firstborn.

elements with the names of famous Egyptian pharaohs like Thutmose and Ramses yet is disguised with a Hebrew etymology—from an Egyptian’s lips no less!—by the narrator: “She [Pharaoh’s daughter] named him Moses, ‘Because,’ she said, ‘I drew him out of the water’” (Exod 2:10).²⁷ Third, consider the event that ultimately drives Moses out of Egypt. One day, Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and in response, Moses strikes down that Egyptian and buries him in the sand. The next day, he attempts to mediate a dispute between two fighting Israelites, but they do not accept his authority over them. One of them responds to him, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us” (Exod 2:14)? The episode in which Moses strikes and kills an Egyptian overlord reflects the ambivalence or perhaps even animosity that Israelites have toward Moses at the beginning of Exodus and before his formal ascent to leadership. The question that Moses is asked by the instigator, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us?” is a revealing one. At this point in the story, the answer is no one, for Yahweh has not yet appeared to Moses and commissioned him as Israel’s mediator. The Israelite raised as Pharaoh’s daughter’s son has no standing in the Israelite community in Egypt; Moses has no credibility as an outsider of the Israelite community. In addition, he is no longer welcome in the Egyptian royal household either, as Pharaoh seeks Moses’s life when he hears about the murder he has committed. The narrator goes to painstaking lengths to portray

²⁷ For the Egyptian origins of Moses’s name, see J. Gwyn Griffiths, “The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses,” *JNES* 12 (1953): 225–31.

Moses as equally Israelite and Egyptian, but now, Moses the divided man, half-Egyptian and half-Israelite, is accepted by neither. He is an anomaly.²⁸

Moses, the divided man, the man out-of-place, the man lacking a concrete kinship identity, cannot stay in Egypt and escapes to nearby Midian in the Sinai desert where he meets the daughters of Reuel/Jethro at a well. Interestingly, the daughters of Reuel identify Moses as an Egyptian (Exod 2:19), although it is not clear whether a Midianite would have identified an Israelite who lived in Egypt as an Israelite or as an Egyptian. Israelites (or Semitic people generally) were physically set apart from Egyptians, so this recognition of Moses as an Egyptian may be an indication that Moses, despite his Israelite heritage, physically maintained an Egyptian appearance.²⁹ To the untrained Midianite eye, Moses is functionally an

²⁸ See Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 160–70.

²⁹ One of the primary evidences of the differences in physical appearances between Egyptians and Israelites is from a painted scene in the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Has(s)an. His tomb contains a scene of a procession of foreigners that includes eight men, four women, three children, and two donkeys preceded by two Egyptian officials. These foreigners, who are often described as West Semitic Asiatics, differ from Egyptians, according to Janice Kamrin, in their clothing, sandals, hairstyles, and belongings (“The Aamu of Shu in the Tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan,” *JAEL* 1 [2009]: 22–36 [23]). See also idem, “The Procession of ‘Asiatics’ at Beni Hasan,” in *Cultures in Contact: From*

Egyptian. Yet to the Egyptians, Moses is a fugitive Israelite. And at this point in the story, to the Israelites, it is not at all clear who Moses is. Perhaps there is some animosity toward him since he likely did not grow up as a slave but as the child of the daughter of Pharaoh. Their experiences could not have been more different from each other. Even if Moses were willing to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, it is not clear to the Israelites why they should trust him.

The narrative's manipulation of time also emphasizes the portrayal of Moses as a divided man. One of the most powerful tools of narrative is its ability to either compress or expand time.³⁰ The narrator is able to traverse hundreds of years in a single sentence or home in on a single moment for pages on end. The way in which

Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C. [ed. Joan Aruz, Sarah B. Graff, and Yelena Rakic; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013], 156–69; Phyllis Saretta, *Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt: Perceptions and Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 43–108. Although the Aamu peoples depicted at Beni Has(s)an are not Israelites per se, Kamrin notes that the “bulk of scholarly opinion would ... place the homeland of the Aamu of Shu in the southern Levant, more specifically somewhere in the area just east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea” (“The Aamu of Shu in the Tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan,” 25), making it likely that the Israelites’ appearance and material culture would be far more similar to that of the West Semitic Asiatics than to that of the Egyptians.

³⁰ See H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–12, esp. 3–6.

the narrator manipulates time is a clue for the reader to discern the main emphases, themes, and purposes of the text. We can perceive why the narrator in Exodus focuses on particular events in Moses's life, many years apart. In Exodus, we learn nothing about specific details of Moses's upbringing in between the time of his entrance into the Egyptian royal household and the time of his spontaneous outbreak of vigilante justice against the Egyptian overlord. We do not even know an approximation of how many years have passed, only that Moses had "grown up" (Heb. *gdI*) and is presumably at least a young man at this stage in the story. As readers, we are naturally curious about what it would have been like for Moses, the rescued Israelite, to grow up as Pharaoh's daughter's own son, but we are given no information about his experience in the royal household. We are curious, but the narrator does not consider these details to be salient to the story at hand. Instead, the narrator's purpose in these early chapters of Exodus is to portray Moses as a man out-of-place. The author's manipulation of time has a two-fold effect: (1) it establishes the primary conflict in the early chapters of Exodus, which revolves around the confused kinship identity of Moses, and (2) it introduces the central event that drives Moses out of Egypt and into Midian where Moses will receive his call from Yahweh to return to Egypt and leave Egypt for a second time. This second escape from Egypt will be completely different from the first. Rather than escaping Egypt as a fugitive Israelite rejected by Egyptians and Israelites alike, he will lead the Israelites out of Egypt as their God-appointed deliverer and representative before Pharaoh.

By analyzing the pivotal events that the narrator focuses on in the early chapters of Exodus, we can see how central Moses's identity is within the narrative. The central conflict established in these chapters is that Moses is a divided man, half-Egyptian and half-Hebrew, and content to spend his days as a shepherd in Midian. Given this family history with Israelite, Egyptian, and Midianite allegiances all mixed up together, it is not surprising that the book of Exodus would be concerned with establishing Moses's Israelite identity. The general arc of my argument corresponds with Dozeman's framing of the wilderness journey in Exod 4. Dozeman writes, "The overall aim of the author in fashioning the multiple images of family in 4:19–31 is to reestablish Moses' Israelite identity. The goal is achieved through the motif of a journey conceived as a rite of passage from Moses' Midianite family to his Israelite family. The central event in the rite of passage is the attack by Yahweh (4:24–26)."³¹ This central event that Dozeman highlights is the circumcision of Moses's son, and it plays an essential role in Moses's identity formation. When Yahweh calls him to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery, he is a reluctant hero. This story of Moses's return from Midian through the wilderness, which is sandwiched in between his first commissioning (3:1–4:18) and his initial confrontation with Pharaoh (5:1–6:1), is the pivotal episode that transforms Moses from reluctant hero to bold leader.

³¹ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 149–50.

Before moving to talk more directly about the role of circumcision in the passage, we also need to comment on the appropriateness of the passage's current placement in Exodus. Julian Morgenstern represents the common view concerning the alien nature of the passage in its present canonical context. He writes, "It [Exod 4:24–26] has no immediate narrative or literary connection whatever with either the passages which immediately precede or which follow in the biblical text."³² Even if the passage was originally from a different context,³³ we are still right to ask why it was re-located to its present location. Despite the views of Morgenstern, I would argue that the editorial motivation for its current placement is the thematic (both narrative and literary) connection with Yahweh's threat to Pharaoh that Yahweh will kill his firstborn son if he does not let Israel go to serve him, a threat that is to

³² Julian Morgenstern, "The Bloody Husband" (?) (Exod. 4:24–26) Once Again," *HUCA* 34 (1963): 35–70 [38].

³³ Some interpreters believe that the passage originally concerned the attack of an unnamed night demon on someone other than Moses. See Adolf Allwohn, "Die Interpretation der religiösen Symbole, erläutert an der Beschneidung," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 8 (1956): 32–40, esp. 38–39; Hans Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," *VT* 12 (1962): 14–28; H. Schmid, "Mose, der Blutbräutigam: Erwägungen zu Ex 4, 24–26," *Judaica* 22 (1966): 113–8.

be relayed to Pharaoh by Moses (Exod 4:22–23).³⁴ The identification of Israel as Yahweh’s “firstborn son” strengthens the connection.³⁵ The immediate cause for the pericope’s current placement is the preceding verses concerning the intimate relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Israel as Yahweh’s firstborn, the foreshadowed death of Pharaoh’s firstborn, and the circumcision of Moses’s firstborn), but the reason for the inclusion of this narrative kernel in its current location is its contribution to the filling out of the character of Moses. Those who divorce the episode in Exod 4:24–26 from its present context and attempt to discern its “original” meaning posit a non-Israelite origin of the story that is unrelated to Moses and only possibly related to Yahweh at all, often depending on whether one accepts the Midianite origins of Yahwism. The significance of the passage then becomes more about the non-Israelite origins of circumcision than the function of circumcision in ancient Israel.³⁶ Based on the surrounding context of Exodus,

³⁴ Even those who believe that Exod 4:24–26 is not original to its present context sometimes concede that there is a “certain appropriateness in the context into which the two passages [Exod 4:21–23 and Exod 4:24–26] have been introduced” (Bernard P. Robinson, “Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus 4:24–26,” *VT* 36 [1986]: 447–61, here 450).

³⁵ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 153. See also Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 195–96.

³⁶ See, e.g., Julian Morgenstern, “The Bloody Husband,” 66–70; Kosmala, “The ‘Bloody Husband,’” 14–28.

however, I contend that Exod 4:24–26 is concerned with Moses’s kinship, regardless of its original provenance.³⁷

The entry point for understanding Moses’s wilderness journey as concerned with establishing his kinship is the biblical motif of the wilderness as a place of testing and trial, which anthropologists and biblical scholars, following Victor W. Turner, have termed as a liminal space or period.³⁸ In particular, I will analyze Moses’s wilderness journey in Exod 4 through the lens of Victor W. Turner’s theory of the liminal period during rites of passage, which I have already discussed more fully in chapter 2.³⁹ There are two aspects of the liminal period that Turner

³⁷ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 238, also argues for the integration of Exod 4:24–26 by noting its connections with Exod 2:11–12 in the Yahwist narrative.

³⁸ See, e.g. Laura Feldt, “Wilderness and Hebrew Bible Religion — fertility, apostasy and religious transformation in the Pentateuch,” in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature* (ed. Laura Feldt; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 55–94; Dozeman, *Exodus*, esp. 341–8; B. J. Oropeza, “Apostasy in the Wilderness: Paul’s Message to the Corinthians in a State of Eschatological Liminality,” *JSNT* 75 (1999): 69–86.

³⁹ Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–111. The *locus classicus* for study of rites of passage is certainly Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); trans. of *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1909), and

highlights which may have relevance to Exod 4:24–26. First, he notes that “the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically ‘invisible.’”⁴⁰ Many commentators have noted that Moses is unnamed throughout the entire episode; further, some of the personal pronouns are ambiguous. Some take this as evidence of the foreign origins of the passage, but Turner’s suggestion opens the possibility that Moses is not named because of his “invisibility” during this liminal period. Second, according to Turner, society cannot tolerate a “not-boy-not-man, which is what a novice in a male puberty rite is.”⁴¹ In an analogous way, the biblical account cannot tolerate Moses as a man of uncertain identity if he is to

Turner is often credited with popularizing and advancing Van Gennep’s analysis of rites of passage. Whereas Van Gennep speaks of the rites of passage in terms of three separate stages of separation, margin (or liminality), and aggregation, Turner uses the concepts of structure and anti-structure, in which anti-structure is not non-structure but rather the mirror image of structure. The liminality period is fundamentally characterized by anti-structure. Additionally, although traditionally understood as revolving around the common life stages of birth, puberty, marriage, and death, rites of passage are not confined to such “culturally defined life crises but may accompany any change from one state to another” (Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 94–95).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁴¹ Ibid.

properly fulfill God's mission. His status as a mixed Egyptian-Israelite-Midianite is untenable and must be resolved by means of the kinship-generating ritual of circumcision.

Circumcision as Kinship Ritual

I am certainly not the first to make this argument about Moses's liminal experience in the wilderness. Propp notes, "Moses' symbolic circumcision on the way back to liberate Israel is his own personal rite of passage."⁴² Seth D. Kunin likewise notes the symbolic death and rebirth that Moses experiences during his wilderness journey, a common theme in many rites of passage.⁴³ Through a journey in the wilderness, Moses must be transformed from a man out-of-place to the true Israelite who will be ready to fulfill God's calling to deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh's oppression. My primary contention is that before the wilderness journey, of which circumcision is the primary event, Moses was a man out-of-place. After the wilderness journey, he is ready to confront Pharaoh, which is a complete turnaround from his earlier disposition. The circumcision performed by Zipporah, then, in some way transformed Moses from an outsider into a true Israelite who is able to fulfill the mission first given to him in Exod 3. In this way, circumcision

⁴² Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 240.

⁴³ Seth D. Kunin, "The Bridegroom of Blood: A Structuralist Analysis," *JSOT* 70 (1996): 3-16.

functions to establish Moses as the proper leader for his people. Although he was biologically an Israelite as the son of two Levites (Exod 2:1-2), he was not truly considered as an insider by the other Israelites in Egypt until after his liminal experiences in Midian and the wilderness. One potential stumbling block to my interpretation, however, is that Moses is not the one who was circumcised during the wilderness journey; it was his son (Exod 4:25).

In response, Karen Ericksen Paige and Jeffery M. Paige, who write about the political dimensions of reproductive rituals, have shown that in patrilineal societies circumcision ceremonies are public affairs intended to resolve social dilemmas, meaning that circumcision is as important for the father and the community at large as it is for the boy being circumcised.⁴⁴ Paige and Paige argue that circumcision is a “ceremonial solution to the dilemma of fission in strong fraternal interest group societies,”⁴⁵ in which fission is defined as the “contraction of the domestic group as formerly dependent children split off to form their own households.”⁴⁶ In patrimonial societies in which land ownership is tied to patrilineal descent, the circumcision ceremony is a public ritual that “allows a man both to assess and to

⁴⁴ Karen Ericksen Paige and Jeffery M. Paige, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 122-66.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 124.

influence the opinions of important political allies or enemies.”⁴⁷ Thus, the identity of the son who is circumcised is not even that important because “the boy who is circumcised is not himself the object of the [circumcision] ceremony, which is, in fact, conducted to impress others.”⁴⁸ Put another way, the circumcision of Gershom, Moses’s son, communicates Moses’s loyalty and enduring commitment to both Yahweh and the Israelite community, loyalties that may have been questioned before this point. Through his son’s circumcision, Yahweh shows Moses the depth of the commitment that he requires; it is also a sign to the Israelite community that Moses is fully committed to the difficult task ahead.

While the narrator does not discuss the identity of this son, it is safe to assume that the son in view is Gershom, since even though there are multiple sons on the journey from Midian to Egypt (Exod 4:20), only Gershom has been named at this point in the narrative. That fact, along with his status as Moses’s firstborn son, in light of Yahweh’s threat to Pharaoh’s firstborn and Yahweh’s declaration of Israel as his own firstborn son, makes it fairly certain that Gershom is under the knife, so to speak, in this passage.⁴⁹ One of the keys to understanding the function of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁹ There are a fair number of scholars, however, who consider Moses’s son Eliezer to be the unnamed son in Exod 4:24–26. For a summary of views in favor of either

circumcision in this passage is to understand the vital role that Gershom plays for Moses's identity construction in the book of Exodus. Gershom is a symbol of Moses's kinship identity, both for Exodus as a whole and for the Yahwistic texts specifically, meaning that his symbolic value is well-established whether the reader operates from the final form of the book of Exodus or takes a source-critical view. We will first look at the symbolic importance of children's names in the prophetic literature before zeroing in on Gershom's significance in Exodus generally and Yahwistic texts specifically. In the classical prophetic literature, the private lives of prophets are only revealed insofar as they relate to their prophetic missions.

There are two other noteworthy examples of this phenomenon of named prophetic children in the Hebrew Bible, one in Hosea and the other in Isaiah. Perhaps the most personal of all the prophetic accounts, the first chapters of the book of Hosea recount Hosea's courtship and tumultuous marriage with Gomer. Yahweh commands Hosea to name his first-born son Jezreel because he intends to punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and he will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel (Hos 1:4). Second Kings 10:11 records the complete and excessive extermination of the house of Ahab in Jezreel orchestrated by Jehu. In light of this association with the downfall of Ahab's lineage, Hosea's son Jezreel is symbolic of the coming judgment against both the house of Jehu and the kingdom of

Eliezer or Gershom as the unnamed son, see Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict*, 104–23.

Israel, to be carried out in the Valley of Jezreel. Yahweh then commands Hosea to name his daughter No-Mercy, for he will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel, and he will not save them from the attacks of their enemies, in contrast with his saving mercy reserved for the house of Judah (Hos 1:6). Thus, in Hosea, the names of Hosea's children represent Yahweh's relationship with the northern kingdom of Israel and his plans for their destruction. What is most significant for our purposes is that the children do not reappear in the rest of the book of Hosea. They do not participate in the narrative apart from the significance that is given to their names and how they symbolize Yahweh's relationship with Israel and Judah.

In the book of Isaiah, Yahweh gives King Ahaz a sign in the form of Isaiah's son, according to Isa 7:14–17. The prophet states,

“The pregnant young women will bear a son and call his name Immanuel. Curds and honey he will eat so that he will know to reject the evil and choose the right. For before the boy knows how to reject the evil and choose the right, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. Yahweh will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!”

Isaiah's son Immanuel is a sign to King Ahaz of the coming geopolitical realities that Yahweh will bring upon his kingdom. Isaiah's second son Maher-shalal-hashbaz plays a similar function, specifically representing the despoiling and destruction of Damascus and Samaria by the king of Assyria (Isa 8:3). Again, similar to the examples in Hosea above, we do not learn anything else about Isaiah's children. Their names are their complete significance.

Moses has two named sons in Exodus, Gershom and Eliezer, and they only appear in the narratives in Exod 2, 4, and 18. Eliezer, who represents God's deliverance from the sword of Pharaoh, does not play a significant role in the pre-exodus identity of Moses. Exodus 2 then highlights the foreign status of Moses not only by explaining the meaning of Gershom's name but also through the exclusion of Eliezer. Significantly, the family of Moses is practically invisible for the remainder of the Exodus narrative. Gershom, Moses's first-born son, is only named in the narrative of his birth in Exod 2:22 and the episode involving Jethro and the nascent Israelite administrative structure in Exod 18. Importantly, in both instances, the etymological meaning of Gershom's name is mentioned, highlighting Moses's sojourning in a foreign land at the time of his birth. Gershom, it could be said, is a physical representation of Moses's foreign status in the land of Midian. Despite his willingness to live and marry in Midian, he never shed the status of foreigner and remained a man out-of-place. As the physical manifestation of Moses's foreign-ness, Gershom's circumcision in Exod 4:25 represents Moses's transformation of identity and re-integration into Israelite society. The significance of Gershom's circumcision holds true whether Zipporah touches Moses's or Gershom's "feet" and whether "feet" (Heb. *rgl*) represents literal feet or genitals. If it is indeed Moses's genitals that are touched by Gershom's foreskin, the symbolic value of the ritual act is even more pronounced.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the only action Zipporah performs in the biblical text is to circumcise Gershom, and the only things that Gershom does of any

significance are to be born and be circumcised. Very little information is given about Moses's family life and lineage. What information is given is sparse but highly significant in that it only relates to birth and circumcision. The episode is included only because it is important to the kinship formation of Moses, the main figure in the narrative at this point. The narrator is not concerned about Zipporah and Gershom outside of their relationship to Moses and how they reflect his status and condition.⁵⁰ The abrupt disappearance of Moses's Midianite family after Exod 4:24–26 argues against those who assert that Moses's family is ritually integrated into the community of Israel via Zipporah's circumcision of her son.⁵¹ Instead, Gershom is a reminder of Moses's foreign status in Midian until he is circumcised, through which he is transformed from a symbol of exclusion and foreign-ness to one of inclusion.

⁵⁰ F. Blumenthal ("The Circumcision Performed by Zipporah," *JBQ* 35 [2007]: 255–9), argues that Zipporah's circumcision of her sons ends their symbolic status as a connecting link to Midian in Moses's life and transforms her from a symbol of Midianite religion to a companion with Moses in his liberating mission. There are parallels in my argument about the symbolic status of Moses's family relationships, but I do not see the link to Midian specifically but more to a foreign status in general.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Otto Kaiser, "*Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus*: Three Difficult Narratives in the Pentateuch," in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (ed. D. Penchansky and P. L. Redditt; Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 73–88.

Propp writes, “by applying and removing Gershom’s foreskin, Zipporah *symbolically* circumcises her husband.”⁵² Propp believes that Zipporah’s act has a purifying effect, which is related to the common apotropaic function, but the symbolic value of Zipporah’s circumcision of Gershom applies equally well to my argument of circumcision as a kinship ritual.

As I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the most ostensibly troubling fact for my argument is that Zipporah and not Moses is the one who performs the circumcision on her son. Willis poses a related question, “How did Zipporah know that the way to prevent Yahweh from killing Moses was to circumcise her son and touch Moses’ feet (legs, genitals) with the bloody foreskin?”⁵³ His response is fairly prosaic, yet remarkable at the same time. It is worth quoting in full.

I would conjecture that since Zipporah seems to have done what she did immediately without giving it a second thought, either her cultural environment in Midian and the surrounding region assumed that blood smeared on a person or an object protected that person or object from danger, or she and Moses had had conflictual discussions about circumcision and smearing blood because they came from cultures which differed on these matters in one or more ways and this was a matter of serious religious difference between them that troubled their relationship.⁵⁴

⁵² de Groot, “The Story of the Bloody Husband,” 14–15; Cornelius Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26 and Its Interpretation,” *JNSL* 11 (1983): 81–105, esp. 98; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 236–37.

⁵³ Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict*, 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

Besides the caution that Willis's conjecture is entirely hypothetical, which he himself admits, it is debatable whether such a question should even be asked in the first place. Willis, and he is far from unique in this respect, attempts to make sense of a bewildering passage by imagining scenarios in which what is written becomes more plausible. Yet, I wonder if the more we do this, the farther away we get from the meaning of the passage. Perhaps the proper response to the question of how Zipporah knows to circumcise her son is that it does not matter how Zipporah knows what to do. The tendency to look for logical explanations is rooted in the belief that the text records a real-world event. Once we untether ourselves from this assumption, then we are free to allow the natural ambiguities within the text to remain.

If we admit that we cannot know how Zipporah knew to circumcise her son to avoid Yahweh's wrath against her husband, then what recourse remains to understand the meaning of Zipporah's actions? My argument is that circumcision should be viewed as analogous to blood sacrifice, particularly in its function as a kinship-generating and kinship-maintaining ritual. If circumcision is viewed as a sacrifice, though, and blood sacrifice is typically confined to the male domain, as I noted in chapter 2, what is the significance that Zipporah circumcises her son and not Moses or some other male, priestly figure such as Jethro, Zipporah's Midianite priest-father? There are two ways in which the circumcision performed by Zipporah has been traditionally understood. The first is that Exod 4:24–26 reflects early Israelite practice, during which circumcision was originally performed by the

mother. Later, the Priestly source changed the person who performed the circumcision from the mother to the father, in line with its overall project of elevating patrilineal kinship at the expense of women and mothers.⁵⁵ Second, Exod 4:24–26 is also thought to be indicative of the Midianite origins of circumcision. In this view, Zipporah is a ritual expert who passes on Midianite ritual knowledge to the Israelites vis-à-vis the ritual circumcision of Moses’s half-Israelite son. For example, Dozeman, from whose insights I have benefited greatly, gives one common explanation for Zipporah as the ritual expert: “What is clear in the story is that Zipporah, a Midianite, performs the proper ritual to appease the Deity and to protect her family. In the process she passes on the ritual knowledge to Moses and hence to the Israelites ... As a cultic legend, the story tells of a transfer of circumcision from the religious practices of the Midianites to the Israelites through Zipporah, the Midianite wife of Moses.”⁵⁶ Why it is Zipporah who passes down this knowledge rather than her father is attributed to the (speculated) practice of female circumcisers in Midianite culture. Exodus 4:24–26, then, is the literary re-imagining of the circumstances of the transfer of Midianite practices to ancient Israel, which in some reconstructions also includes knowledge and worship of Yahweh himself.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., George. A. Barton, “Circumcision (Semitic),” *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* 3:679.

⁵⁶ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 156.

I believe, however, that basing such speculations on this brief text is unwarranted for several reasons. First, the passage fits squarely within a theme that is present all throughout the early chapters of Exodus: the rescue of Moses by women. Consider all of the women who have been used to protect Moses: Moses's mother, Moses's sister, and Pharaoh's daughter.⁵⁷ In fact, Karen Winslow calls Zipporah's circumcision of her son "the climax of a pattern in which females thwart attacks on endangered males."⁵⁸ Second, the liminal nature of the wilderness journey, which was alluded to above, cautions us from interpreting Zipporah's actions as normative. During liminal periods, traditional social roles are upended and often completely reversed; this reversal reflects the fluid nature of the transitory state. According to religious theorists, liminal periods are characterized by an in-between-ness, such as ambiguity of gender and life-and-death symbolism. This uncertain status creates the environment out of which myths and rituals are generated.⁵⁹

Building on the basis of a fuller picture of the prominent narratological concern for establishing Moses's proper kinship in the first four chapters of the book

⁵⁷ One could also include the Israelite midwives, although they are not directly relevant to Moses's life.

⁵⁸ Karen Strand Winslow, "Ethnicity, Exogamy, and Zipporah," *Women in Judaism* 4 (2000): 1–13, here 1.

⁵⁹ See, e.g. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 93–111.

of Exodus, I have clarified how the prominence of kinship concerns in Exodus. On that basis, I have also showed how circumcision is the central ritual act that establishes Moses's Israelite identity after questionable origins. Circumcision is the primary, defining act that transforms Moses from a man out-of-place, unwilling and unable to fulfill God's mission, to a true Israelite ready to face Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt. One of the interesting points that we encountered in this chapter was the way in which Moses is portrayed as a representative of all Israel, and this theme is also reflected in the book of Joshua, which records the end of Israel's wilderness wandering, which Moses experienced proleptically in his own wilderness experience. All Israel is circumcised before entering the Promised Land in Josh 5:2-9, and it is to this passage that we now turn.

Chapter 5: Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual in Joshua 5:2–9

In the previous two chapters, I considered how the conceptualization of circumcision as a kinship marker contributes to our understanding of non-Priestly biblical narratives in Gen 34 and Exod 4. In doing so, I showed that kinship construction is one of the main functions of circumcision in those texts. In chapter 3, I identified circumcision as a kinship marker between two tribes—the Israelites and the Shechemites—in Gen 34 that reveals the horrific nature of Simeon and Levi’s actions. In chapter 4, I suggested that the circumcision of Moses’s son acted as a symbolic kinship marker between Moses and the Israelites in Exod 4, transforming him from a man out-of-place to the anointed leader of the Israelites. Josh 5:2–9 is yet another non-Priestly narrative passage in the Hebrew Bible that refers to literal, physical circumcision and reflects the function of circumcision as a kinship marker.¹

¹ The focus of this dissertation is on circumcision in non-Priestly narratives, and although there may be some Priestly elements within the book of Joshua, most of Joshua and at the very least Josh 5:2–9 are not Priestly in origin. We would not expect the Priestly writer to assume that the second generation of Israelites were not circumcised in the wilderness according to the Priestly tradition of infant circumcision as a sign of the covenant (Gen 17). There is a case to be made, however, that Josh 5:10–12 may have been the work of a Priestly editor. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Structure of P,” *CBQ* 38 (1976): 275–92, esp. 288–9. While I acknowledge that Priestly additions and revisions may sporadically appear in

Here, in this chapter, I analyze Josh 5:2–9 and reveal how circumcision functions as a kinship marker not in the horizontal dimension between people as in previous chapters but in the vertical dimension between a people and their god. In Josh 5:2–9, circumcision functions as one in a series of rituals intended to establish the kinship relationship between the second generation of Israelites and their Divine Kinsman Yahweh.

Any study of the book of Joshua must begin with deciding whether the book should primarily be read as the final book in the classic Hexateuch formulation (Genesis–Joshua), as championed by Noth, or as the first book in the Deuteronomistic History (DH; Joshua–Kings). Is the primary background the book of Deuteronomy or the later outworking of Deuteronomistic theology found in the DH? Of course, positive arguments can be made for both sides, and this is not the place to establish priority of the two prominent views. This choice between the two options (or some combination of the two) influences how one reads and understands the book of Joshua. I place the writing of the book of Joshua not within a historical time period but within the flow of historical thought in the Deuteronomistic History (DH). Although the passage does share affinities with Deuteronomic features—for example the immediate obedience of Joshua after Yahweh’s command in Josh 5:2–3—the overall sense of the book of Joshua fits better looking forward with the DH

Joshua, I do not see evidence of comprehensive Priestly editing of the book of Joshua. See also Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (HAT 7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953), 10–11.

rather than back to Deuteronomy. Although much has been made about the tendency in Joshua to be a fulfillment of Deuteronomy, the order in which the events occur in Joshua does not follow the pattern established in Deuteronomy. My choice to read Joshua largely with the DH not only accords with the contemporary majority view, but it helps to answer why the Israelites are circumcised right as they enter the land: the Israelite males need to confirm their status as Yahweh's rightful recipients of the land.

Translation of Joshua 5:2-9

2 At that time² Yahweh said to Joshua, “Make for yourself flint knives,³ and circumcise again⁴ the sons of Israel for a second time.”⁵ 3 So Joshua

² Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1997), 74, suggests that the prominent temporal markers in the passage seem to indicate redactional joints. See also Jacques Briand, “The Sources of the Deuteronomistic History: Research on Joshua 1–12,” in *Israel Constructs its History: Deuteronomistic Historiography in Recent Research* (ed. Albert de Pury, Thomas Römer, Jean-Daniel Macchi; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 360–86, esp. 363.

³ See also Exod 4:25. Some consider the command to use flint knives as evidence for the antiquity of the circumcision practice. See, e.g., J. Maxwell Miller and Gene M. Tucker, *Joshua* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 46; Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 99. However, Butler, *Joshua 1–12*, 332, notes that the command to use flint knives would only be necessary in an environment in which other tools, such as iron knives, would be readily available. Regardless, circumcision is likely a very ancient practice no matter what material implements were used for the surgical procedure. Thomas B. Dozeman believes that the use of primitive flint knives “devoid of technological manufacturing or sharpening symbolizes the rite of passage into a preurban, rural lifestyle in the promised land” (*Joshua 1–12* [AB 6b; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015], 36).

⁴ The Greek here presumes a *Vorlage* of *yšb* (‘sit down’) instead of MT *w-šwb* (‘again’). Related to that, the Greek also omits *šenît* (‘a second time’) at the end of the

verse. The textual history of the book of Joshua (which also includes important Qumran manuscripts such as 4QJosh^a) reflects the continual editorial activity during its transmission process. Joshua 5:2–9 is the first time in which the MT is significantly longer than the Old Greek, specifically Josh 5:4–6a. Leonard Greenspoon (“The Book of Joshua — Part 1: Texts and Versions,” *CBR* 3 [2005]: 229–61 [239]) explains the complexity of the situation: (1) Greek version pays more attention to the knives; (2) Greek says nothing about a “second time” circumcision; (3) Greek has most of the men coming from Egypt uncircumcised, while MT has all the men circumcised; (4) Greek has forty-two years in the wilderness, while MT has forty years; and (5) Greek does not have etiological explanation for Gilgal. The specific reasons for or implications of those differences need not be expounded here, but suffice it to say that the textual history of the book of Joshua is not straightforward, and there is currently no consensus position on the priority of one version over the other. Rather than attempting to establish the temporal priority of either the MT or the Greek, I will focus on the MT as the base text and consider how differences between the MT and the Greek inform our interpretation of the MT. For more information about the redaction and transmission history of Joshua, see Nelson, *Joshua*, 72–77; Michaël van der Meer, *Formation and Reformulation: The Redaction of the Book of Joshua in the Light of the Oldest Textual Witnesses* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Emanuel Tov, “Literary Development of the Book of Joshua as Reflected

made for himself flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gib'at-ha-'aralot. 4 Now this is the reason why Joshua circumcised⁶ all

in the MT, the LXX, and 4QJosh^a in *The Book of Joshua* (ed. E. Noort; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2012), 65–86.

⁵ Jack Sasson argues that Egyptian circumcision is a kind of partial or incomplete circumcision (“Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” *JBL* 85 [1966]: 473–76), but it seems unlikely in the context of Josh 5 that the circumcision of the first generation of Israelite males who died in the wilderness refers to some sort of partial Egyptian circumcision. It is more likely that the author of Josh 5 simply assumes that the first generation would already have been circumcised. The reason that the Israelites are commanded to circumcise for a “second time” is that the author considers the second generation of Israelite males to be functionally equivalent to the first generation of Israelites males. The first generation of Israelites were circumcised but disobedient; the second generation is now considered by the author as the replacement of the first.

⁶ In what is perhaps the most salient difference between the MT and the Greek with respect to my study, here the Greek reads “purified” instead of “circumcised,” revealing the Greek’s understanding of the function of circumcision as a kind of purificatory rite. According to Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12*, 268, “the LXX suggests an inner-biblical interpretation of the law on infant male circumcision in Lev 12:3. It also describes the rite of circumcision as purifying the person who undergoes the rite, which is absent in the MT.”

the people who came out from Egypt, with respect to the males. All the men of war had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. 5 Though all the people who had come out from Egypt were circumcised,⁷ yet all the people who had been born in the wilderness on the way after they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised. 6 For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt who did not obey the voice of Yahweh, to whom Yahweh had sworn that he would not let them see the land that Yahweh had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey, perished.⁸ 7

⁷ The Greek omits both Josh 5:4b referring to the death of all the men of war who came out of Egypt and Josh 5:5a referring to the circumcision of those aforementioned men of war. The Greek acknowledges that those who were uncircumcised coming out of Egypt were also circumcised by Joshua, thereby making the first generation of Israelites “directly responsible for the uncircumcised state of their sons” (van der Meer, *Formation and Reformulation*, 296), an attribution that is absent in the MT.

⁸ The phrase “flowing with milk and honey” belongs squarely within both the Priestly and Deuteronomic sources (see, e.g., Lev 20:24; Deut 27:3) and cannot be used as evidence for establishing the relative date or provenance of the passage. Its significance, however, extends beyond its potential usage for documentary dissection. In each of the occurrences of the biblical phrase, the usage speaks not simply to the abundant fertility of the land but to its natural, pre-agricultural state. Milk and honey are the products of pastoralists, not agriculturalists. The message is clear: the fecundity of the land will come without agriculture, and the implication is that the land's prosperity is dependent solely on Yahweh's provision of rain to the

So he raised up their children in their place; Joshua circumcised them, for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. 8 When the circumcision of the whole nation was complete, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.⁹ 9 And Yahweh said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.” And the name of that place is called Gilgal until this day.

Previous Approaches to Joshua 5

The function of circumcision in Josh 5:2–9 seems straightforward enough. It, along with the Passover feast that occurs afterward (Josh 5:10–12), is preparation for entrance into the land of Canaan that Yahweh has promised to the Israelites. Yet, like the narrator’s own explanation of the reason for the circumcision (Josh 5:7)—i.e., the Israelites were circumcised because they previously had not been circumcised—this apparent function of circumcision says less than it seems. As J. Alberto Soggin avers, “None of this [explanation] ... provides a satisfactory answer

land. For more on this term, see Etan Levine, “The Land of Milk and Honey,” *JOT* 87 (2000): 43–57; Philip D. Stern, “The Origin and Significance of ‘The Land Flowing with Milk and Honey,’” *VT* 42 (1992): 554–7.

⁹ In terms of military strategy, it seems far more prudent to wait until *after* one has at least established a basecamp in the land of Canaan before undergoing this painful procedure. Though the Israelite military strategies are atypical, to say the least, in the entire book of Joshua, this awareness hints at different explanations for why the Israelites needed to be circumcised.

to the question why the generation who travelled through the wilderness could not have been circumcised.”¹⁰ There is seemingly no need for the author to posit that the Israelites born in the wilderness had not been circumcised on the way. Thus, the important questions for us are *why* the Israelites have not been circumcised and why they need to be circumcised *before* fully entering the Promised Land. Before offering my own interpretation, I will first briefly survey a few representative interpretations of the passage at hand.

There have been two primary approaches toward establishing the function of circumcision in the passage, historical-critical and literary. From the historical-critical standpoint, many interpreters who adopt this perspective separate Josh 5:2–9 into two constituent parts, an earlier narrative composed of Josh 5:2–3, 8–9 and a later insertion composed of Josh 5:4–7, that were combined to place a traditional Gilgal circumcision narrative into a different literary setting.¹¹ Concerning the

¹⁰ J. Alberto Soggin, *Joshua: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1972), 71.

¹¹ See Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, 188; Miller and Tucker, *Joshua*, 46. Similarly, Butler (*Joshua 1–12*, 56) considers the original literary piece to have encompassed Josh 5:2–4, 7–8 because he considers both 5b and 7b and 4b and 6a to be doublets. Nelson (*Joshua*, 76) views the contrast between narrative and explanatory non-narrative syntax as evidence of redaction, and he is more specific in suggesting that at least Josh 5:5–6 is the result of a Deuteronomistic editor.

interpretation of circumcision in the passage, the most common position is that Josh 5 reflects a tradition of archaic mass circumcision festivals perhaps connected with an ancient cult in the Gilgal area.¹² In many cultures that practice circumcision, it is common for all eligible males of the appropriate age to be circumcised at the same time and to go through the rite of passage ceremony together. However, it must be admitted that the only “evidence” for such festivals in ancient Israel are these cross-cultural examples, and none of those examples come from cultures that are necessarily contiguous with ancient Israel, either temporally or geographically. While acknowledging the possibility that Josh 5:2–9 could reflect a Yahwistic adaptation of an originally pagan rite, Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright caution, “That adult circumcision at Gilgal was a recurring Israelite rite is to be seriously doubted, in the total absence of any hint of such practice elsewhere in the tradition.”¹³ There is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible that adult circumcision was

¹² See, e.g., Bernhard Stade, “Der ‘Hügel der Vorhäute’ Jos. 5,” *ZAW* 6 (1886): 132–43.

See also Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, 189; Roland Gradwohl, “Der ‘Hügel der Vorhäute’ (Josua V 3),” *VT* 26 (1976): 235–40; William H. Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 355–70, esp. 362; Wilcoxon, “Narrative Structure and Cult Legend,” 66. Butler (*Joshua 1–12*, 55, 58) sees the possibility of youths being circumcised in a communal ritual specifically from the Greek evidence.

¹³ Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, 189.

ever normative during the biblical period.

Soggin believes that circumcision and Passover were connected at an early stage.¹⁴ He writes that the narrative “refers to the practice of circumcising those who had not yet been circumcised before admitting them to the celebration of the Passover.”¹⁵ Soggin follows the traditional scholarly understanding of the trajectory of circumcision as an assumed puberty ritual that later became an infant rite, which he believes is supported by both Exod 4:24–26 and Josh 5:2–9. It is not clear how Soggin understands Exod 4:24–26 to reflect this transition, but concerning Josh 5:2–9, he writes, “Our passage is one of the numerous traces of a circumcision at the age of adulthood, whether there is a clear connection with Egyptian practice, if we read with the LXX that the person who carried out the rite sat.”¹⁶ Regarding the Egyptian evidence, Soggin suggests that “circumcision was a regular practice, particularly in the upper classes, but was not an obligatory custom and formed an initiation rite at puberty.”¹⁷ The difficulty with such a statement is clear from the outset. To speak of circumcision as a static, monolithic practice in ancient Egypt is overly simplistic, especially given the sporadic and circumstantial nature of the evidence. The available evidence for circumcision in ancient Egypt does not allow us to conclude

¹⁴ See also Wilcoxon, “Narrative Structure and Cult Legend,” 43–70.

¹⁵ Soggin, *Joshua*, 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

that it was a “regular practice” or an “initiation rite at puberty.” As Mary Knight writes, “The overall trend ... calls into doubt any historically comprehensive statement, such as Herodotus’s ... ‘the Egyptians circumcise.’”¹⁸ The most responsible conclusion is that even though circumcision was sometimes practiced in ancient Egypt (mostly among royals and priestly classes), it was not a very significant ritual that the Egyptians were self-conscious about, certainly nowhere near to the degree that circumcision achieves in the religion of ancient Israel.

A related explanation for circumcision in the pericope is that Josh 5:2–9 is an etiological narrative about Gilgal. J. Maxwell Miller and Gene M. Tucker write, “As the story now stands, it is an etiological tale; that is, it gives a narrative account of how the name Gilgal originated (verse 9).”¹⁹ In response to this view, however, Butler argues that the story is not really an etiology of the hill because the conclusion of the story does not come in Josh 5:3. Rather, the story concludes in his view with the healing from the circumcision in Josh 5:8.²⁰ Boling and Wright concur, “The story is not truly etiological. It explains neither the name ‘Foreskins Hill’ nor the rite of circumcision. It seems instead to be a wordplay (another sense of the verb [Heb. *gll*] is ‘to roll away’) using the name of an old and defunct cultic place as an aid

¹⁸ Knight, “Curing Cut or Ritual Mutilation?” 332.

¹⁹ Miller and Tucker, *Joshua*, 46.

²⁰ Butler, *Joshua 1–12*, 58.

in teaching the tradition and something of its value.”²¹ There is nothing in Josh 5:2–9 to indicate that it is an explanation for either the name of “Foreskins Hill” or the practice of circumcision in ancient Israel.²²

From the literary or narrative perspective, interpreters argue that circumcision is in some way “the divinely ordained preparation for going to war against the combined might of all the kings.”²³ In Butler’s words, “Only a circumcised Israel could become a conquering Israel.”²⁴ One possibility is that circumcision is a ritual purification rite, in that only cultically-consecrated people are allowed to remain in Yahweh’s land. Butler writes, “We see, then, that an original anecdote about Joshua bringing soreness upon the men of Israel has been taken up by the

²¹ Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, 190.

²² Friedemann W. Golka, following Noth (*Das Buch Josua*, 25), calls Josh 5:2–9 the “torso of an aetiological narrative” because the “beginning of this place-name aetiology ... has been omitted for unknown reasons by the ‘Collector’ (*Sammler*), who substituted for it the story of the circumcision of the Israelites” (“The Aetiologies in the Old Testament: Part 1,” *VT* 26 [1976]: 410–28 [417]). In Golka’s reconstruction, he considers circumcision to be a secondary addition that obscures the original etiological theme.

²³ *Ibid.*, 193; Butler, *Joshua 1–12*, 321, 324; J. Gordon Harris, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 40.

²⁴ Butler, *Joshua 1–12*, 328.

theological tradition to show that Israel under Joshua was theologically and culturally correct in its camp at Gilgal as it prepared to begin the conquest of Jericho.”²⁵ This theory’s strength is that it explains why the command to be circumcised “again” comes only immediately after the entrance into the Promised Land and no other time during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. There are two issues, however, that weaken the cultic purity view. First, from a literary-canonical perspective, there is no legislation that circumcision is required for holy war, according to either Deut 7:1–5 or any other passage. The assumption that cultic correctness for holy war requires circumcision is an *ad hoc* explanation and does not have any biblical warrant. Second, the Greek’s use of the verb “to purify” in Josh 5:4 rather than the MT’s “to circumcise” at least suggests that the Greek is more concerned about issues of purity than the MT.

Another literary explanation for the role of circumcision in Josh 5:2–9 is the parallel between Joshua and Moses in the book of Joshua. The narrator goes to great lengths to elevate Joshua as Moses’s legitimate successor in that Joshua does all of the things that Moses himself did, establishing Joshua as the true, divinely-appointed heir to Moses’s leadership role. For example, Joshua shares the dynamic of immediate obedience with Moses. Many times, Yahweh tells Moses to do something and the immediately following verses relate how Moses did the very thing that Yahweh commanded. Joshua shares with Moses this quality of immediate

²⁵ Ibid., 56.

and proper obedience. In Josh 5:2, Yahweh tells Joshua to “make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.” Immediately after this in Josh 5:3, it is related how “Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gib‘at-ha-‘aralot.” In this view, like Moses who symbolically shared in his son’s circumcision, Joshua too must participate in circumcision, the crucial difference being that all the males of Israel need to be circumcised rather than just the son of Moses. As Marten H. Woudstra writes,

The story of the circumcision presented here may have been intended as another parallel between the lives of Joshua and of Moses. Just as before fully entering upon his task as the people’s deliverer Moses was reminded of the need to circumcise one of his sons (Exod. 4:24–26), Joshua receives the command to circumcise all those who had not received this rite. This command precedes his role as the captain of the Lord’s people during the Conquest.²⁶

Yet, this literary explanation for the circumcision of the Israelites prior to entrance into the land of Canaan says little about the function of circumcision itself.

Undoubtedly, the book of Joshua presents Joshua as the divinely authorized successor to Moses, but the connection of the mass circumcision in Joshua with Exod 4:24–26 seems secondary to its function within the immediate context in Josh 5.

As much as there is a concern to establish Joshua as Moses’s proper successor *par excellence*, there is an equal or perhaps even greater necessity to establish the second generation of Israelite males as legitimate heirs to the promises of the previous generation. At the same time, the second generation must be more

²⁶ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, 99.

obedient than the last generation, not subject to the grumbling and faithlessness of those who died wandering in the wilderness. This need to confirm the status of the second generation of Israelites manifests itself in the series of rituals in Josh 4–6 by which the Israelites are transformed from “an itinerant people ‘on the way’ (vv. 5 and 7 [of Josh 5]) to a people settled in the land.”²⁷

Few of the theories reviewed thus far explain *why* the Israelites need to be circumcised. Certainly, there is no explicit command that one needs to be circumcised before entering the land of Canaan. The author of the book of Joshua seems to make a problem where there does not necessarily need to be one. Why assume that “all the people who had been born in the wilderness on the way after they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised” (Josh 5:5)? The underlying assumption of the narrative is that the previous generation of Israelites was circumcised in Egypt, but there is nothing within the earlier narratives in the Pentateuch or in Joshua that requires the second generation of Israelites to be uncircumcised. The traditions that the author of Joshua inherited never included any mention of circumcisions in the wilderness. This (perhaps unintentional) omission allowed the author to construct a narrative in which the lack of circumcision of the second generation of Israelites reflects their lack of secure relationship with Yahweh and provides an opportunity to ratify that relationship through the ritual practice of circumcision. Like the circumcision that established

²⁷ Nelson, *Joshua*, 77.

Moses's relationship with the Israelites in the previous chapter and prepared him for the exodus, so circumcision in Josh 5:2–9 establishes Israel's relationship with Yahweh and prepares them for entrance into the promised and long-awaited land of Canaan.

Kinship in the Book of Joshua

Trent C. Butler notes that some of the main questions driving the narrative of the entire book of Joshua concern the uncertain relationship between Yahweh and his people: "How do we know we are God's people? Or what defines membership in the people of God?"²⁸ Although it may seem obvious that the Israelites are Yahweh's people, especially in contrast to their sworn enemies the Canaanites, we must remember that here in Joshua we encounter the *second* generation of Israelite males coming out of Egypt, many of whom had never experienced life in Egypt and had only known life in the wilderness. This second generation, who we learn were not circumcised in the wilderness, did not experience Yahweh's protection during the first Passover, the deliverance from Pharaoh and his armies, and the establishment of the covenant with Yahweh at Sinai, events that not only gave psychological assurances to the first generation of Israelites that they were Yahweh's people but symbolically ratified the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people. Did

²⁸ Trent C. Butler, *Joshua 1–12* (2nd ed.; WBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 174.

Yahweh's promises and bequest of the land of Canaan apply as securely to the second generation of Israelites as the first?

The uncertain status of the second generation of Israelites prior to entry into the land of Canaan is amplified by the wilderness setting of the beginning of the book of Joshua. In the previous chapter, I noted that Moses's wilderness journey from Midian to Egypt foreshadowed Israel's own period of wandering in the wilderness before their entrance into the land of Canaan. Moses, as representative for greater Israel, proleptically experienced the kinship-identity transformation that all of Israel would later experience. In the same way that Moses's journey was a liminal period, so too the wilderness wandering can be viewed as a liminal period for the Israelites.²⁹ As Laura Feldt writes concerning the wilderness in the Hebrew Bible, "The wilderness stories bring out human survival as fragile and Israel's relation to the agricultural land as tenuous and contingent on *religious identity transformation*" (emphasis mine).³⁰ However, the wilderness wandering did not ultimately result in kinship identity transformation for the first generation of Israelites because of their lack of faith in Yahweh. Thus, the wilderness plays dual roles in the biblical literature, both as the place of judgment for the first generation

²⁹ See Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies* (AAR Studies in Religion; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

³⁰ Laura Feldt, "A Walk on the Wild Side with Yahweh: A Spatial Perspective on the Hebrew Deity in the National Epic," *SJOT* 28 (2014): 185–211 (211).

and the setting for kinship construction for the second generation.³¹ In Josh 5, the first generation of Israelites has passed away, and we arrive at the culmination of the Israelites' liminal period of wandering in the wilderness where the second generation of Israelites has the opportunity to take the land of Canaan.

Although the entirety of the forty-year wandering in the wilderness could possibly be considered a liminal period, there is an intensified two-week period structured around the crossing of the river Jordan as the seminal event.³² One

³¹ See Hindy Najman, "Towards a Study of the Uses of the Concept of Wilderness in Ancient Judaism," *DSD* 13 (2006): 99–113.

³² Jay A. Wilcoxon outlines a two-week period that is centered around the Jordan river crossing (Josh 3:14–4:19), which he considers the central event in the first five chapters of Joshua ("Narrative Structure and Cult Legend: A Study of Joshua, 1–6," in *Transitions in Biblical Scholarship* [ed. J. C. Rylaarsdam; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968], 43–70). Wilcoxon argues that the narrative structure of Josh 1–6 belies a cultic setting in which all the major events—the memorial of the twelve stones, the communal circumcision, the Jordan river crossing, and the capture of Jericho—were all combined into one legend. Rather than being put together piecemeal as a literary innovation of a later redactor, these events were originally all intended to be experienced together. Although I do not agree with his form-critical analysis, I appreciate his appeal for literary unity in the book of Joshua. Ultimately, the details of the redactional history of Joshua do not impinge upon my analysis.

reason to consider this two-week period as separate from the general forty years is that the duration of the forty-year period in the wilderness can be explained by the necessity of the passing away of the first generation of Israelites, those who had experienced Yahweh's deliverance from Egypt and the establishment of the covenant at Mt. Sinai but had ultimately died because of their lack of faith in Yahweh. Additionally, during the two-week period there are multiple rites of passage, which signify both the inward change of people and the external transformation of the social order.³³ As Thomas B. Dozeman writes, "The themes of salvation from Egypt, in combination with the prominent role of Yahweh in the ark, transform the natural topography of the Jordan River Valley into the setting for an extraordinary religious experience in which the sequence of events embodies a rite of passage."³⁴ That two-week period centered around the Jordan River crossing is a corporate rite of passage, transforming the people from a wandering people without a land to people of the land, prepared for Yahweh's Holy War against the Canaanites.

³³ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), esp. 102–6, 249. See also Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12*, 251. For Dozeman, however, the transformation of the social order is not a renewed kinship relationship with Yahweh but a "new social order that lacks kings and royal cities," which corresponds to Dozeman's views about the anti-urban polemic that pervades the book of Joshua.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

Circumcision thus fills a critical role in defining the people of Yahweh at the end of their wilderness period.

Thus, the questions posed by Butler, “How do we know we are God’s people? Or what defines membership in the people of God,” are particularly relevant for the Israelites who have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years. The final form of Joshua answers these questions with a series of rituals in Josh 4–6 intended to establish the kinship relationship between the second generation of Israelite males and their Divine Kinsman Yahweh, one of which is the corporate circumcision at Gilgal in Josh 5. This kinship-oriented nature of circumcision has already been alluded to by Seth Sanders. He argues that the circumcision in Josh 5 concludes the Israelites’ period of wandering in the wilderness. He goes on to describe the liminal period of that wilderness wandering, during which the Israelites were “neither here nor there” and stuck in uncertain relational status. He continues, “By being initiated into a new stage of existence [by means of circumcision], the males were made what they already were, but what slavery and wandering in the wilderness had prevented them from being.”³⁵ Sanders recognizes not only the importance of the wilderness

³⁵ Seth Sanders, “Parallel Literary Editions of Joshua and the Israelite Mythologization of Ritual,” in *Anthropology and Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (ed. Louise J. Lawrence and Mario I. Aguilar; Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005), 120–39 (133).

setting as a liminal period but also the role that circumcision plays in defining the relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites.

Since I have now established that Joshua as a whole is concerned with questions of kinship, it is now time to consider Josh 5 specifically. In Josh 5:2–9, the concern with questions of kinship in the book of Joshua is reflected in the prominent themes of Josh 5: patrimony, land, and covenant. Yahweh’s divine patrimony, bequest of the land, and covenant relationship with the Israelites form the backdrop to understanding the kinship-centric nature of circumcision in Josh 5:2–9. In this chapter, I will explore each of these three themes more in depth in order to show that the function of circumcision in Josh 5:2–9 is to confirm Yahweh’s kinship relationship with the second generation of Israelites.

Circumcision as Kinship Ritual

Yahweh as Divine Warrior in the exodus and conquest accounts receives a fair amount of scholarly attention,³⁶ but the related motif of Yahweh as Divine Kinsman

³⁶ See, e.g., Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989); Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); Nelson, “Divine Warrior Theology in Deuteronomy,” in *A God so Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 241–59; Charlie Trimm, *YHWH Fights for Them! The Divine Warrior in the Exodus Narrative*

is relatively neglected. The trope of the Divine Kinsman is not unique to ancient Israel. Throughout the ancient Near East and specifically in West Semitic tribes, the tribal deity is presented as a tribal leader who has a kinship relationship with his people that mirrors the social conventions and relationships present within the tribe at-large. Undoubtedly, the preeminent scholarly presentation of the Divine Kinsman in ancient Israel is Frank Moore Cross's *From Epic to Canon*, in which he outlines the tribal nature of ancient Israel and how its tribal origins are reflected in the Hebrew Bible.³⁷ According to Cross, "In the religious sphere, the intimate relationship with the family god, the 'God of the Fathers,' was expressed in the only language available to the members of a tribal society. Their god was the Divine Kinsman" who "leads in battle, redeems from slavery, loves his family, shares the land of his heritage, provides and protects ... the family of the deity rallies to his call to holy war, 'the wars of Yahweh,' keeps his cultus, obeys his patriarchal commands ... loves him with all their soul, calls on his name."³⁸ Mario Liverani shows how this understanding of the people's relationship with Yahweh fits within ancient Near Eastern political and religious ideology. He writes that just as the political

(Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2014); Manfred Weippert, "Heiliger Krieg in Israel und Assyrien," *ZAW* 84 (1972): 460-95.

³⁷ Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

relationships of the ancient Near East were an “enlargement of the mechanisms of mutual protection and support that [were] typical of the family and local community,” the religious relationships between Yahweh and his people were an even greater enlargement of that same mechanism.³⁹

One counter-argument against emphasizing the kinship-based social organization of West Semitic tribal groups is offered by those who argue that Joshua was written in the (late) monarchic period, during a time in which the tribal structure of society had supposedly long been superseded. J. David Schloen describes these arguments as misguided “attempts to restrict functioning kin-groups to the premonarchic period” to “the evolutionist assumption that kin-based social organization is incompatible with the territorial organization of a centralized ‘bureaucratic state.’”⁴⁰ A number of scholars, however, have shown that this assumption that kin-based social organization is antithetical to state administration is unwarranted.

For example, David Vanderhooft refutes the common assumption that the monarchy replaced the tribal, kinship-based society of early Israel based on an

³⁹ Mario Liverani, *International Relations in the Ancient Near East, 1600–1100 BC* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 128.

⁴⁰ J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 153, also 63–90, 136, 183.

examination of the use of the term *mišpāḥā(h)* in the Priestly literature.⁴¹

Vanderhooft's conclusions regarding the maintenance of tribal kinship bonds even during the monarchical period is based on the work of Schloen (as well as Lawrence E. Stager), who notes that "kinship does not disappear as an effective force with the advent of complex urban society."⁴² Schloen's larger project challenges the assumption that "bureaucratic societies" are a more advanced form of social organization that necessarily replace the patrimonial household model (PHM), in which government is structured on the pattern of the patrimonial household. In Schloen's words, "the metaphorical extension of kinship itself provides the administrative structure of the patrimonial state."⁴³ Thus, the development of the monarchy was not a linear evolution from tribe to state, and monarchic structures likely coexisted with "tribal" social organization throughout the entire period. There was no total eclipse of the traditional family kinship structures during the monarchy, although there were undoubtedly challenges to it and unavoidable

⁴¹ David S. Vanderhooft, "The Israelite Mišpāḥâ, the Priestly Writings, and Changing Valences in Israel's Kinship Terminology," in *Exploring the Longue Durée: Essays in honor of Lawrence E. Stager* (ed. J. David Schloen; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 485–96. See Lawrence E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985): 1–35.

⁴² Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol*, 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

tensions and necessary adaptations.⁴⁴ The salient point for this study, then, is that it is not necessary to establish a premonarchic or postmonarchic date for Josh 5:2–9 if the kinship structures from before the monarchic period persisted throughout the monarchic period. The social organization of West Semitic tribal groups was grounded in kinship. Consequently, kinship language also provided the conceptual framework for understanding the tribe’s relationship with its deity or deities, and therefore it should not be surprising that the same ritual—circumcision—would establish bonds both between people and between a people and their god. Joshua 5 is not only concerned with establishing Yahweh as Israel’s Divine Kinsman, but it also prepares the men of Israel for possession of the Promised Land.

Land is, first and foremost, an issue of kinship, and as noted by the quote of Cross above, one of the primary responsibilities of the Divine Kinsman is to share the land of his heritage. In the biblical worldview, the land of Canaan belongs to Yahweh, and as the Divine Kinsman, he has the right to give it to whomever he

⁴⁴ See also Baruch Halpern, “Jerusalem and the Lineages in the Seventh Century BCE: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability,” in *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel* (ed. Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson; JSOTSS 124; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 11–107, esp. 59–75; Mark Leuchter, “The ‘Prophets’ and the ‘Levites’ in Josiah’s Covenant Ceremony,” *ZAW* 121 (2009): 36–44; Stager, “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel,” 1–35, esp. 24.

chooses.⁴⁵ This understanding of divine patrimony of the land is not unique to ancient Israel. In a closely related example, it is also seen in the Mesha Stela, an eighth c. BCE royal building inscription of the Moabites, a West Semitic tribe closely related to ancient Israel.⁴⁶ In this inscription, Mesha, king of Moab, credits the procurement of the land to Chemosh, national patron deity of the Moabites. The ideology of the inscription suggests that Chemosh owns the land and determines what human party will rule over it, strikingly similar to the Yahwistic ideology of the Deuteronomistic History. The Divine Kinsman of the Moabites was Chemosh, and he chose to give his land to the Moabites.

⁴⁵ See Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East*, 141.

⁴⁶ In the biblical vernacular, Moab is the “half-sister” of the Israelites, born out of Lot’s incestuous relationship with one of his daughters. Linguistically, the Moabite language, of which the Mesha Stele comprises the majority of the extant witness, is a close relative of ancient Biblical Hebrew. See Andrew J. Dearman, ed., *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989); Nadav Na’aman, “King Mesha and the Foundation of the Moabite Monarchy,” *IEJ* 47 (1997): 83–92; Eveline J. van der Steen and Klaas A. D. Smelik, “King Mesha and the Tribe of Dibon,” *JOT* 32 (2007): 139–62; Philip D. Stern, “Of Kings and Moabites: History and Theology in 2 Kings 3 and the Mesha Inscription,” *HUCA* 64 (1993): 1–14.

From the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historian, however, it was Yahweh who owned the land and not Chemosh, and his ownership of the land extended even outside the bounds of the Israelites to include such peoples as the Moabites. The Deuteronomist makes this quite clear from the outset of the Book of Deuteronomy. In Deut 2:5, Yahweh commands Moses concerning the Edomites: “Do not provoke them [the descendants of Esau] to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. I have given Esau the hill country of Seir as his own.” In the same way that Yahweh has given the Israelites the land of Canaan, he has also given Esau and his descendants the hill country of Seir. The same holds true as well for the Moabites (Deut 2:9) and the Ammonites (Deut 2:19). In the view of the Deuteronomist, the Transjordan (and ultimately the Cisjordan as well) are Yahweh’s to give as he desires.⁴⁷

As we consider our original question of *why* the Israelites had to be circumcised before their entrance into the land, focusing on the land itself and Yahweh’s divine patrimony of the land provides us an eminently reasonable explanation. The reason that the Israelites must be circumcised before they enter the land is that circumcision ratifies the kinship relationship upon which Yahweh’s bequest of the land is predicated.⁴⁸ In other words, the land is available to the

⁴⁷ See also Nelson, “Divine Warrior Theology in Deuteronomy,” 254–5.

⁴⁸ The nature of the land as a gift from Yahweh can be seen in the difference between Priestly and Deuteronomic diction. In the Priestly vocabulary, the land of

Canaan is generally referred to as an *'aḥuzzā(h)* ('bequest'). See also Lev 14:34. Deuteronomy 32:49 does refer to the land of Canaan as an *'aḥuzzā(h)*, but Deut 32 (esp. 32:48–52) is considered by many to have a different author than the rest of Deuteronomy. See, e.g., Mark Leuchter, "Why is the Song of Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy?" *VT* 57 (2007): 295–317; Lothar Perlitt, "Priesterschrift im Deuteronomium?" *ZAW* 100 (1988): 65–88; Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). In the Priestly passage of Gen 17:8, which occurs in the context of the institution of Abrahamic circumcision on the eighth day, Yahweh promises Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an *'aḥuzzat 'ōlam* ('eternal possession'). See also Gen 48:4. The perpetuity of the *'aḥuzzā(h)* is also evident in its usage in the context of burial grounds (Gen 23:4, 9, 20; 49:30; 50:14), the Jubilee (Lev 25; 27), and the inheritance claims of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27). The emphasis of *'aḥuzzā(h)* seems to be its permanence. In contrast, in Deuteronomic parlance, the land of Canaan is primarily described as a *naḥalā(h)* ('inheritance'). What, if anything, is the significance of this distinction? Are the terms essentially synonymous and the difference merely synchronic? One indication that the difference is not merely synchronic is that *'aḥuzzā(h)* appears in both Nehemiah (11:3) and 1 and 2 Chronicles (1Chr 7:28; 9:2; 2Chr 11:14; 31:1), with no apparent change in meaning from earlier usage. The difference seems to be that the valence of *naḥalā(h)* ('inheritance') is that it is something that is given. The

Israelites only by virtue of their relationship with Yahweh, and circumcision ratifies that relationship. The Deuteronomic idea of divine patrimony is found in Deut 26. The Israelites' right to the land of Canaan is predicated upon their continued relationship with Yahweh, which in turn is dependent upon their continued obedience to Yahweh while in the land. The Deuteronomic legislation makes it very clear that the punishment for disobedience is exile, a forgoing of the land. Within the biblical storyline the second generation of Israelites prepared to enter the land of Canaan is completely set apart from the generation of the exodus, save for Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were rewarded for wholeheartedly following Yahweh. Against the majority of spies who entered the land, Joshua and Caleb expressed their faith in Yahweh's ability to overcome their enemies and inherit the land. As Miller points out, "The technical term for faith or trust, *he'emîn beyhwh*, literally, 'count the Lord as reliable/trustworthy,' appears only twice in the narrative of Deuteronomy. Both times it is in reference to the unwillingness to go into the land (1.32; 9.23)."⁴⁹

focus in Deuteronomy is that the land of Canaan is given by Yahweh to the Israelites.

See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 6.

⁴⁹ Patrick D. Miller, "The Wilderness Journey in Deuteronomy: Style, Structure, and Theology in Deuteronomy 1–3," in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 572–92 (589).

During the wilderness wandering, the Israelites have had no status, marked not only by their lack of circumcision but also by Yahweh's temporary provision of *manna* in the wilderness. Both of these bodily issues are addressed by the related rituals of circumcision and Passover. Once the people have been circumcised, then the manna ceases, and they begin to partake of the fruit of the land of Canaan. The center of the book of Joshua is the land of Canaan and the Israelites' attainment of it. Circumcision functions to ratify the kinship relationship realized in the bequest of the land.

The Israelites formally renew their covenant with Yahweh at Shechem near the very end of the book in Josh 24, but the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people underlies the entire Joshua narrative. Although the term *bərît* ('covenant') does not occur in Josh 5, there is no doubt that the concept of covenant provides the background for the relationship between Yahweh and his people, as we see later explicitly in Josh 8 and Josh 24. Covenant as the conceptual foundation of the book of Joshua can be seen especially in its close relationship with the preceding book of Deuteronomy.⁵⁰ As Sanders writes, "As a narrative about ritual, the task of the book [of Joshua] is to narrate the performance of commandments made in the book of Deuteronomy."⁵¹ Two things from Sanders's quote are noteworthy for my

⁵⁰ See, Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (Bloomington, Ind., IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 73–145.

argument: (1) Joshua is a narrative about *ritual*, of which circumcision is a primary example, and (2) there is a close relationship between Joshua and Deuteronomy.⁵²

Deuteronomy inscribes the parameters of the relationship between Yahweh and his people that the circumcision at Gilgal ratifies. The bulk of Deuteronomy is a covenantal speech that spans from Deut 5–26. After that speech ends, Moses, along with the elders of Israel, in Deut 27:1–8, gives the Israelites commands about what they are supposed to do after they have crossed the Jordan River and entered into the land of Canaan: establish large memorial stones inscribed with the words of the law and build an altar of uncut stones and offer sacrifices to Yahweh upon it.⁵³

Moses then makes the surprising claim that “today” the people have become Yahweh’s people: “Moses and the Levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of Yahweh your God: Heed Yahweh your God and observe His commandments and His laws, which I enjoin upon you this day!” (Deut 27:9–10; see also Exod 6:6–7; 19:5–6; Deut 4:20). The Israelites have become the people of Yahweh through acceptance of Yahweh’s terms of the

⁵¹ Sanders, “Parallel Literary Editions of Joshua,” 124.

⁵² Even though Sanders acknowledges the close relationship between Deuteronomy and Joshua, he is not naïve about it. He places both books within the larger Deuteronomistic History and recognizes that the tension in the narrative of the book of Joshua is whether and to what degree the laws of Deuteronomy will be followed.

⁵³ These commands from Deut 27 will be (partially) fulfilled in Josh 3–5.

relationship, one which was founded upon the Sinai covenant of the first generation of Israelites and modified and reiterated for the second generation in Deuteronomy. It is this covenant relationship that provides the backdrop for all of the actions in the book of Joshua.

In the same way that the institution of the covenant at Sinai functionally created the people of Israel, so too the renewal of that covenant by the mechanism of circumcision for the second generation of Israelites likewise makes them into the people of Yahweh. In this interpretation, the circumcision of Josh 5 should be seen as a covenant renewal ceremony or at least as one element of a larger covenant renewal complex, which also includes the re-inscription of the law, the crossing of the Jordan river, and the Passover meal that is shared after the Israelites have fully healed from their circumcision. The consequence of the covenantal renewal is not only that the Israelites are united as kinsmen with one another but also that they are united with the Divine Kinsman, the one who will fight on their behalf. This lesson, appropriately coming before the “Battle” of Jericho, reminds the people of Israel who it is who fights for them and whom they are associated with. The ending of Josh 5 marks a “decisive change” not only in Israel’s geographical position but also in its theological position. The men of Israel have, in the language of J. Gordon McConville

and Stephen Williams, “passed from a condition of disgrace, and they bear once again in themselves the marks of their covenant standing before God.”⁵⁴

Joshua 5:2–9 is the third of three non-Priestly narrative passages that shows the kinship-oriented function of circumcision in ancient Israel. The actions of the early parts of the book of Joshua, particularly Josh 1–6, concern the second generation of Israelites who have inherited the promises of land and blessing from the previous generation but lack a secure status before Yahweh. In response to the uncertainty of their relationship with Yahweh, Yahweh leads them through a series of covenant rituals in order establish the kinship bonds between Yahweh and his people. The author of the book of Joshua assumes the lack of circumcision among the second generation in order to present circumcision as a kinship ritual that ratifies the bequest of the land from their Divine Kinsman Yahweh. Circumcision, as a ritual, bonds the Israelite men together as well as the Israelite men with their god.

As noted above, the kinship-generation and kinship-maintaining function of circumcision in the non-Priestly narratives of the Hebrew Bible are reflected in the Priestly material as well. Contrary to the scholarly consensus, the Priestly texts do not innovate a new function for an old ritual. Certainly, the Priestly authors take an existing ritual and apply it to a new setting, but they do not transform the primary function of circumcision. It was and remains ultimately a ritual that determines and

⁵⁴ J. Gordon McConville and Stephen Williams, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 21.

defines kinship. The next chapter will explore how circumcision also functions as a kinship ritual in the Priestly writings.

Chapter 6: Circumcision as a Kinship Ritual in the Priestly Literature

The focus of this dissertation is the function of circumcision in the non-Priestly texts of the Hebrew Bible. In the past three chapters, I have established that circumcision served to generate, confirm, and extend kinship relationships in a variety of contexts in ancient Israel. As I noted in chapter 1, academic biblical scholarship bifurcates the discussion of circumcision in ancient Israel on either preexilic/postexilic or non-Priestly/Priestly lines. The prevailing assumption is that there is a fundamental dichotomy between the two, with circumcision only attaining a “religious” significance in its Priestly adaptation after the exile. My argument in this chapter, however, is that this separation is artificial and that circumcision fulfills the same function in both non-Priestly and Priestly texts. In this chapter, I will show that the Priestly conceptualization of circumcision participates in the same discourse of kinship construction and maintenance as the non-Priestly texts we have looked at.

For those ancient Israelites responsible for the Priestly literature, circumcision was the “sign of the covenant” (Gen 17:11), seemingly giving it an importance that belies its paucity within the Priestly corpus.¹ There is only one

¹ The Priestly narrative centered on Abraham’s circumcision in Gen 17 is one of the few self-contained Priestly narrative additions into Genesis, and it plays a central role within the Priestly history. See John A. Emerton, “The Priestly Writer in Genesis,” *JTS* 39 (1988): 381–400. For a description of the Priestly character of Gen

explicit command to circumcise in the Priestly legal codes, Lev 12:3, in which Israelites are obligated to circumcise their sons on the eighth day. Besides this command to circumcise a son on the eighth day of his life, there are no further instructions about circumcision, where or by whom it should take place, what instruments to use, or what words to say during the ritual. Given the symbolic

17 specifically, see Sean E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (AnBib 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971), esp. 19. In Hermann Gunkel's view, circumcision is for P "one of the most important commandments of the law" (*Genesis* [trans. M. Biddle; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997], 265). See also McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*, 178; Stanley Gervitz, "Circumcision in the Biblical Period," in *Berit Mila in the Reform Context* (ed. L. M. Barth; Los Angeles: Berit Mila Board, 1990), 93–103 (102).

importance of blood in the Priestly worldview,² as well as cross-culturally,³ one might expect some descriptions or prescriptions on what to do with the unavoidable yet potentially symbolic blood of circumcision. Yet, there are none. Most would quickly agree that circumcision is a kind of ritual, yet its praxis is not described in

² See, e.g., David Biale, *Blood and Belief* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 9–43; Stephen A. Geller, “Blood Cult: Toward a Literary Theology of the Priestly Work of the Pentateuch,” *Proof* 12 (1992): 97–124; Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Juda* (Bloomington, Ind., IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), esp. 163; William K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Dennis J. McCarthy, “The Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 166–76.

³ For general overviews of the symbolism of blood in multiples contexts, see Janet Carsten, “Substance and Relationality: Blood in Contexts,” *ARA* 40 (2011): 19–35; Melissa Meyer, *Thicker than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual* (London: Routledge, 2005); Michael Y. Nabofa, “Blood Symbolism in African Religion,” *RS* 21 (1985): 389–405. For selected examples of the significance of blood in particular cultures, see Francis Kolpai, “Towards a Contextual Theology of Blood, Ancestors and Spirits on Manus Island,” *MJT* 25 (2009): 48–86; Amy Langenberg, “Buddhist Blood Taboo: Mary Douglas, Female Impurity, and Classical Indian Buddhism,” *JAAR* 84 (2016): 157–91; Hillary Rodrigues, “Fluid Control: Orchestrating Blood Flow in Durgā Pūjā,” *SR* 38 (2009): 263–92.

any significant detail in the Priestly literature.

Despite this lack of any extended discussion within the Priestly literature, circumcision has long been viewed as one of the central symbols of the Priestly worldview. In fact, the only extended, monograph-length study of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, which was discussed more fully in chapter 1, focuses exclusively on circumcision in the Priestly corpus: David Bernat's *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition*.⁴ Bernat takes a decidedly agnostic position concerning the kinship function of circumcision in the Priestly literature, claiming that "circumcision in P is not a sacrifice, a rite of dedication, redemption, or purification, nor does it have any implications for fertility or sexual function. Additionally, from a Priestly perspective, circumcision is neither a sign of ethnicity nor a national or communal boundary marker."⁵ For Bernat, circumcision has a very restricted function within the Priestly corpus, namely, "as a sign of Israel's responsibility to follow the full battery of YHWH's commands."⁶ He denies the possibility of any other symbolic significance and even argues that the Priestly literature purposely avoids any ritualized elements in its presentation of circumcision in order to "cut off any link between circumcision and cultic practice,

⁴ David Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (AIL 3; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

infrastructure, and personnel.”⁷ Thus, for Bernat, the significance of circumcision is purely *theological*.

Bernat’s limited view of circumcision contrasts starkly with Howard Eilberg-Schwartz’s interpretation of circumcision as a rite eminently concerned with matters of “fertility, virility, maturity, and genealogy.”⁸ Eilberg-Schwartz readily acknowledges the kinship function of circumcision and argues that within the priestly community circumcision “symbolized the fertility of the initiate as well as his entrance into and ability to perpetuate a lineage of male descendants.”⁹ Both Bernat and Eilberg-Schwartz recognize the importance of circumcision as a central symbol of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, but Eilberg-Schwartz advances additional symbolic import within the Priestly worldview. He continues, “The themes of fertility, procreation, and intergenerational continuity between males are central” to ancient Israelite circumcision.¹⁰ As I noted in chapter 1, part of the explanation for their differing views is Bernat’s reticence to consider anthropological or cross-cultural data regarding circumcision; Eilberg-Schwartz,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 144. Eilberg-Schwartz is here specifically speaking of African circumcision rites, but he draws out parallels between the African and ancient Israelite practices throughout his work.

⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰ Ibid., 173.

however, eagerly probes anthropological and sociological research of both ancient and modern cultures for any data that may possibly be relevant to the practice and significance of ancient Israelite circumcision.

Methodologically, Bernat also hesitates to associate textual productions like the Priestly literature in the Bible with real-world, lived-out, embodied ritual practice.¹¹ The biblical text is neither a manual for ritual performance nor concerned with explaining the meaning or purpose of rituals. With respect to my own study, although I empathize with Bernat's cautions about the inherent disconnect between ideological, textual artifacts and practiced ritual, I do not believe that disconnect negates the possibility of discerning ritual meaning and significance from textual evidence.¹² Even if the presentation of circumcision within

¹¹ Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 4–5.

¹² A central assumption of this study is that the function of circumcision is unique within every culture but that similarities and affinities remain among the practice in various cultures. Circumcision is different in every culture but not so different that comparisons cannot be made. The validity of cross-cultural comparisons between biblical, Israelite culture and other cultures is not universally accepted. Those who are against cross-cultural comparisons rightly point out the inherent difficulties in comparing apples and oranges, two cultures sometimes separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years. Yet, without this cross-cultural evidence, then a scholar is left only with biblical evidence—itsself often debated—and not much else.

the Priestly literature only exists as an artificial construction divorced from its actual practice, it still indicates how the authors viewed its function within the whole legal and cultural system. I, like Eilberg-Schwartz, recognize the value of anthropological parallels, in large part because of their explanatory power for illuminating aspects of circumcision in the Priestly literature that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, Bernat does not offer any compelling reason for why circumcision specifically was chosen as the sign of Yahweh's covenant with Israel, and he outright rejects any explanation that connects circumcision with any notion of male fertility, intergenerational continuity, or patrilineal kinship. Eilberg-Schwartz, though, because of his openness to non-Israelite circumcision practices, explores these themes "fruitfully," as we will see below. Bernat claims that he does not "look for a single, fixed, inherent, or essential meaning for circumcision,"¹³ yet in practice he overly restricts the interpretation of circumcision in the Priestly literature to a single significance centered on the connection between circumcision and Yahweh's command-based covenant with Israel. His unwillingness to consider evidence from outside the Priestly corpus severely limits his interpretation of circumcision.

Rather than discarding all extra-biblical evidence, it is more prudent to examine the nature of each case and discriminately and cautiously compare it to the biblical text.

¹³ Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 5.

Not only does Bernat reject cross-cultural comparisons, he also isolates the Priestly view of circumcision from other biblical, non-Priestly views of circumcision. While acknowledging that scholars have “legitimately attributed” multiple valences to circumcision such as “fertility, expiatory or dedicatory sacrifice, and communal, festal celebration,” he denies any such possibilities for circumcision in the Priestly literature.¹⁴ His argument primarily rests on two bases: (1) the unique, historical placement of the command of circumcision in Gen 17 during the patriarchal period and not during the wilderness period, and (2) the lack of ritualized elements in the circumcision legislation within the Priestly legal codes. In response to these points, the presence of the command to circumcise in Gen 17 does connect circumcision to covenant, but this connection is not mutually exclusive with other significances of circumcision, as Eilberg-Schwartz has shown.¹⁵ Circumcision is a multi-valent

¹⁴ Ibid., 75. The two specific non-Priestly passages that Bernat mentions are Exod 4 and Josh 5, which I have examined in chapters 4 and 5, respectively. He does, however, tangentially acknowledge the kinship-centric nature of circumcision in the Priestly literature when he admits that there are both gender and social status implications for the circumcision rite, yet he unfortunately leaves these aspects unexplored (Ibid., 76).

¹⁵ On the contrary, covenant and kinship are frequently linked both within biblical literature as well as biblical scholarship. See, e.g., Richard J. Bauckham, *Glory and Power, Ritual and Relationship: The Sinai Covenant in the Postexilic Period* (London; T&T

ritual.¹⁶ There are also other possible explanations for the presence of circumcision in Gen 17, such as the importance of circumcision in introducing a disjunction in Abraham's genealogy.¹⁷ Secondly, the lack of ritualization is ultimately an argument from silence; the symbolic significance of circumcision lies not in the specific elements of its practice but in the practice in general.¹⁸

In this chapter, I will analyze the three main circumcision texts in the Priestly literature (Gen 17; Exod 12:43–49; Lev 12) much in the same way as I discussed the non-Priestly narratives, albeit in a briefer fashion. In each of the three previous chapters, I analyzed a single textual unit; here in this chapter, I will discuss three different biblical passages and the function of circumcision therein. Due to space limitations, I will not be able to examine each passage as closely as in previous chapters; these Priestly examples are also only supplementary to the main goal of

Clark, 2009); Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (AYBRL; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ See chapter 1, n. 4.

¹⁷ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 167.

¹⁸ The lack of any explicit instruction could also be due to the assumed general practice of circumcision. Most likely there was a pre-existing tradition and practice for circumcision at that time, which the authors of the Priestly literature did not feel the need to incorporate into the legal code.

this dissertation. My goal in this chapter is simply to show that, contrary to Bernat's thesis, circumcision in the Priestly texts also functions as a kinship ritual. The function of circumcision in the Priestly literature is not fundamentally different than the function of circumcision that we have already seen in the three non-Priestly texts of Gen 34; Exod 4:24–26; and Josh 5:2–9. There is more continuity in the significance of circumcision than typically acknowledged. The Priestly literature also adds a dimension that we heretofore have not seen, which is circumcision as a kinship-generating *sacrifice*, an innovation of the Priestly literature that is nascent but not as explicit in the non-Priestly literature.

The Priestly material allows for a clearer connection to be made between circumcision and sacrifice. Genesis 17 has literary resonances with Gen 15 and Gen 22, two biblical passages that are commonly depicted as sacrificial rituals. Exodus 12:43–49 connects circumcision and Passover, a kinship ritual that is called a “sacrifice” even within the biblical text (Exod 12:27). In Leviticus 12, circumcision occupies a conceptual space analogous to the sacrifice of eight-day-old animals. Circumcision can also be considered as analogous to blood sacrifice within the Priestly system because it fulfills the same function as blood sacrifice, that is, in the words of Nancy Jay it generates and maintains patrilineal lines of descent.¹⁹ It is not

¹⁹ Nancy Jay, “Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born a Woman,” in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (ed. Clarissa W.

a coincidence that in her attempt to show the implications of her theory of blood sacrifice for the Hebrew Bible, Jay focuses on Priestly literature, because that is where we see the most resonance between her theory and biblical ideology.²⁰ These Priestly texts reveal that circumcision was considered analogous to the kinship ritual of sacrifice within the Priestly worldview. Therefore, the difference between the non-Priestly and Priestly views of circumcision is a matter of degree and not of kind.

The first Priestly passage I will discuss is Gen 17, which comprises the substance of the Priestly version of the Abraham cycle and the core of the Priestly narrative of circumcision. The passage begins by noting Abram's advanced age, a stark reminder that thirteen years have passed since Ishmael's birth (cf. Gen 16:15) and nothing has happened, narratively speaking. Abraham (and, by extension, Sarah as well) is even older, and the fulfillment of God's promises from Gen 12 and Gen 15 seemingly falls on the shoulders of Ishmael, Abraham's son through the slave Hagar. Precisely during this time of uncertainty and human ingenuity, God intervenes with the only divine theophany to Abraham in the Priestly literature, again highlighting

Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret Ruth Miles; Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 283–309 (285).

²⁰ Jay, "Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs," *VT* 38 (1988): 52–70.

the central role that the passage plays in the thought of the Priestly writer.²¹ In this divine theophany, God speaks five different times (Gen 17:1–2, 4–8, 9–14, 15–16, 19–21) and Abraham only twice briefly (Gen 17:17, 18). The focus of the passage is thus on the divine initiative, determination, and guarantee of the covenantal relationship. Even Abraham’s obligations in the covenant, to walk before Yahweh, to be blameless, and to circumcise his household, speak primarily to his role as vassal in relation to the Great King. Ultimately, Abraham’s status is one of loyal submission to divine authority.

Genesis 17

9 Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you²² throughout their generations. 10

²¹ Not only that, but it is P Abraham’s first communication with Yahweh. See Blenkinsopp, “Abraham as Paradigm,” 236. For examples of other Abrahamic theophanies in Genesis, see Nevada Levi DeLapp, *Theophanic “Type-Scenes” in the Pentateuch: Visions of YHWH* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 17–28.

²² In Gen 17:2, God gives (Heb. *ntn*) the covenant to Abraham. In Gen 17:7, God extends the covenant promises to Abraham’s descendants for the first time (cf. Gen 13:15–16) and secures (Heb. *qwm*) the covenant for them using legal idiom. The language of “you and your offspring after you” (Heb. *zar’ākā ’aḥāre[y]kā*) occurs four other times in Gen 17 (Gen 17:8, 9, 10, 19) and is also characteristic of the Priestly literature as a whole (Gen 9:9; 35:12; 48:4; Num 25:13). This language is also found

This is my covenant that you will keep between me and you and your offspring after you: Circumcise every male among you. 11 You will be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 Eight-day olds must be circumcised among you. Every male throughout your generations, born in your household or bought with money from any foreigner who is not from your offspring—13 he must definitely be circumcised, the one born in your house or bought with your money. So my covenant will be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant. 14 And the uncircumcised male, whose foreskin is not circumcised, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Although Priestly literature is most commonly associated with legal material, with its focus on ritual, purity, and genealogy, it also contains a significant amount of narrative as well, reflecting the greater Pentateuch’s combination of both legal and narrative portions.²³ One of the most significant narrative portions in the Priestly literature is Gen 17. By most accounts, Gen 17 is the first and most complete standalone narrative Priestly passage in Genesis. The Flood account in Gen 6–9 is commonly regarded as the most extensive Priestly footprint in Genesis, but it is

in the legal documents of the Elephantine papyri regarding the devolution of property upon the death of the owner. See Yochanan Muffs, *Studies in the Aramaic Legal Papyri from Elephantine* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 179.

²³ For a recent analysis of narrative in the Priestly literature, see Suzanna Boorer, *The Vision of the Priestly Narrative: Its Genre and Hermeneutics of Time* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016).

interwoven with other non-Priestly accounts.²⁴ In contrast, Gen 17 offers a relatively

²⁴ There is scholarly debate as to whether the Priestly literature as a whole is a coherent document or an extensive redactional layer. Frank Moore Cross characterizes P as a “systematizing expansion” (i.e., redactional layer) of an already existent national epic JE (“The Priestly Work,” in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 293–325 [294]). Cross’s fundamental argument is that P omits narrative material that is presumed by or important for P’s overall story. For example, P does not deal with humanity’s sin before the flood; it presupposes human sin (Gen 6:13) but allows JE to tell the story of human violence. Surprisingly, P also lacks an account of the covenant ceremony at Sinai, meaning that the Priestly redactor assumed it would be known from the JE form of the story. On the other hand, Ernest W. Nicholson, following the tradition of Julius Wellhausen, argues that P is an independent and continuous narrative source that is later redacted with JE (*The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 196–221). His primary argument is that if P were simply a redactor, then he would not have left so much JE material that contradicts his own views. See also Emerton, “The Priestly Writer in Genesis,” 381–400; Nicholson, “P as an Originally Independent Source in the Pentateuch,” *IBS* 10 (1980): 192–206. However, it seems that ancient redactors were much more comfortable with “contradictions” and “inconsistencies” within their texts, perhaps based on a conservative principle of preservation. The two preceding views set the bounds for

coherent narrative with few or no redactional layers.²⁵

the modern discussion of the Documentary Hypothesis. For more recent examples, see Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (AYBRL; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 169–92; idem, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* (FAT 68; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz, eds., *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research* (FAT 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Jan C. Gertz et al., eds., *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America* (FAT 111; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016); Frederico Giuntoli and Konrad Schmid, eds., *The Post-Priestly Pentateuch: New Perspectives on its Redactional Development and Theological Profiles* (FAT 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015). Regardless, my argument is not dependent on any such theory concerning the composition or redaction of the Priestly literature.

²⁵ Contra Jakob Wöhrle, who argues that Gen 17:9–14, 23–27 belongs to the same editorial layer as Exod 12:43–49. He distinguishes the Holiness Code (H) from a separate Priestly source (P) and reduces P in Gen 17 to vs. 1–8 and 15–22 (“The Integrative Function of the Law of Circumcision,” in *The Foreigner and the Law: Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* [ed. R. Achenbach, R. Albertz, and J. Wöhrle; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011], 71–87). In my study, I have not attempted to differentiate H and P and treat the “final form” of the

Genesis 17 plays a central role within both the final form of Genesis and the Priestly worldview as a whole. With respect to the final form of Genesis, Walter Brueggemann notes that Gen 17 provides the divine solution to the central problem of barrenness in Genesis; with respect to the Priestly worldview, Gen 17 speaks to the trauma of exile and offers the possibility of hope and well-being.²⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp identifies Gen 17 as one of only “two junctures in the Abraham narrative at which we are given an extensive account complete with human interest and dialogue.”²⁷ He continues to note its importance as “one of the defining

Priestly literature (inclusive of H and P) as the textual basis of this chapter. For an introduction to the scholarly conversation surrounding H and P, see Sarah Shectman and Joel S. Baden, eds., *The Strata of the Priestly Writings: Contemporary Debate and Future Directions* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2009), especially the articles by Baruch J. Schwartz, Eckart Otto, and Jeffrey Stackert.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis 17:1–22,” *Interpretation* 45 (1991): 55–59 (55).

For more on the importance of Gen 17 in the Priestly narrative, see Joachim J. Krause, “Individualisierung des Bundesbruchs? Die neuere Deutung von Gen 17,14 im Licht der Vergleichsbelege,” *ZAW* 129 (2017): 194–204; Peter Weimar, “Gen 17 und die priesterschriftliche Abrahamgeschichte,” *ZAW* 100 (1988): 22–60.

²⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 225–41 (226). The other turning point Blenkinsopp identifies is Abraham’s purchase of a burial plot in Gen 23:1–20.

moments in the P History signified by the giving of new names to Abram and Sarai in preparation for the miraculous birth of a son in their old age.”²⁸ Additionally, the phrase *‘ešem hay-yôm haz-zeh* (‘that very day’; Gen 17:23, 26) marks critical junctures in the Priestly history (Gen 7:13; Exod 12:17, 41, 51; Lev 23:21, 28; Josh 5:11), further suggesting the importance of both circumcision in the Priestly worldview and the centrality of Gen 17 in the narrative of Genesis. The circumcisions of Abraham and Isaac (and Ishmael) mark a new stage in God’s relationship with his people, as they both confirm his covenant with Israel and serve as continual reminders of its everlasting nature.

Genesis 17 is the Priestly tradent’s version of God’s covenant with Abraham and is often compared to the Yahwist’s treatment of the same covenant in Gen 15.²⁹ Both passages contain God’s self-revelation (Gen 15:7; 17:1) and the general promises of land and offspring. Although Gen 17:1–8 mirrors the Yahwist’s covenant

²⁸ Ibid., 236. See also Joseph Fleishman, “On the Significance of a Name Change and Circumcision in Genesis 17,” *JANES* 28 (2001): 19–32.

²⁹ The connection between Gen 15 and Gen 17 has long been recognized, even by later biblical writers. Nehemiah 9:7 conflates both passages by connecting Abraham’s exit from Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 15:7) and the promise of the land of the Canaanites (Gen 15:8) with the change of name from Abram to Abraham (Gen 17:5).

between God and Abraham recorded in Gen 15, there are also notable differences.³⁰ As Bruce Waltke writes, “Although in chapter 15 Abraham was a passive partner to whom God unconditionally committed himself, this supplement calls Abraham into active partnership.”³¹ Another important difference is that Gen 17 focuses much more explicitly on the covenant between God and Abraham. This focus on the covenant in Gen 17 can be seen in the thirteen times that *bərît* is found in the short passage of twenty-seven verses. By contrast, although Gen 15 is widely considered to be about God’s covenant with Abraham, the word *bərît* only occurs once (Gen 15:18), further highlighting the central role of the covenant in Gen 17. Thus, Gen 17 can be viewed as a Priestly expansion or intensification of the covenant recorded in Gen 15.

The question that concerns us is why the Priestly author(s) inserts Gen 17 with its emphasis on covenant and the command to circumcise into the larger Genesis narrative. Nick Wyatt, among others, argues that Gen 17 is an etiology for circumcision as an infant rite as a “transformation of older patterns,” but he does not adequately explain the purpose or necessity of its inclusion at this specific point

³⁰ See Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* (1970): 184–203.

³¹ Bruce Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 263.

in the narrative.³² Within the Priestly narrative of Abraham, Abraham and his household are not previously circumcised, so the story may serve as an etiology for the practice of circumcision, as Wyatt contends, but it is much more than merely an etiology.³³ Bernat acknowledges that circumcision in Gen 17, particularly as it relates to Ishmael and Sarah, has implications for the Priestly conceptions of social status and gender, but his analysis is underdeveloped on these points.³⁴ In his view, Ishmael and Sarah are recipients of Yahweh's promise-blessings but not Yahweh's

³² Nick Wyatt, "Circumcision and Circumstance: Male Genital Mutilation in Ancient Israel and Ugarit," *JOT* 33 (2009): 405–31 (412). Although it is impossible to conclusively say if or when the rite changed to infancy, its connection with the eighth day is significant in the Priestly worldview (Exod 22:30; Lev 22:27). Although it is not known whether infant circumcision is an innovation of the Priestly author or whether it had always been an infant rite, there is no doubt that the Priestly author exploits the connections between the eighth day of circumcision and seven-day periods of taboo and impurity. See the discussion of Lev 12 below.

³³ More often than not, these etiologies do not provide justification for a new innovation but rather explanation for a pre-existing practice, meaning that unless we ascribe to the writers some sort of self-conscious deceptive purpose, the story of Abraham's circumcision had likely already attained some sort of cultural prominence by the time of its incorporation into the biblical text.

³⁴ Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 25, 32–34.

command-centered *bərîṭ*-blessings. The former includes the promise of offspring but neither land nor a special relationship with Yahweh. Bernat rightly notes the *bərîṭ*-centered nature of circumcision in Gen 17, but he ignores the kinship context in which covenants are established and maintained.

In chapter 3, I discussed the overarching concern in Genesis with matters of kinship. Genesis 17 fits in quite nicely with this consistent theme in Genesis. In the passage, *zera'* ('seed,' 'offspring') occurs seven times (Gen 17:7 [2x], 8, 9, 10, 12, 19), indicating the thematic focus on kinship. As alluded to above, circumcision is significant in Gen 17 because it introduces a disjunction between Abraham's line and the rest of his genealogy (cf. Gen 11:26–30). It does not matter that other peoples—for instance, the Ammonites and Moabites who descend from Abraham's nephew Lot according to biblical tradition (Gen 19:36–38)—may have also practiced circumcision. The Priestly author portrays circumcision as the sign that Yahweh gives Abraham to mark him and his offspring as Yahweh's chosen line, from which the Israelites would descend. Not only that but circumcision also allows for those outside of Abraham's kinship group to become part of it. Mark G. Brett observes that the first six instances of *zera'* in Gen 17 refer to Abraham's offspring; however, the seventh occurrence of *zera'* in Gen 17:12 refers to foreigners who categorically are *not* of Abraham's seed but instead "bought with money."³⁵ Brett

³⁵ Mark G. Brett, "The Priestly Dissemination of Abraham," *HBAI* 3 (2014): 87–107 (90).

also notes that this phrase “bought with money” (Heb. *miqnat kesep*) occurs only one other time in the Hebrew Bible outside of Gen 17: Exod 12:44. That verse states that every slave “bought with money” may partake of the Passover after he has been circumcised.³⁶ The command to circumcise is incumbent on Abraham’s entire kinship group and not only those who are technically of his *zera’*.

In my analysis of Josh 5:2–9 in the previous chapter, we also saw how circumcision can solidify the bonds not only between peoples but also between people and their deity; it seems that this is true in Gen 17 as well. Circumcision marks people as part of Abraham’s kinship group, yet it is also a “sign of the covenant” that marks Abraham (and those in his patrimonial household) as loyal to Yahweh and part of his kinship group.³⁷ Abraham’s confirmation as vassal to the Great King Yahweh is evidenced by his name change in Gen 17:5. Wyatt compares Abram’s name change to Abraham with the name change of ancient Near Eastern kings during royal ascension or enthronement rituals. In these rituals, the king

³⁶ See below for more discussion of Exod 12:43–49 and the connection between circumcision and Passover.

³⁷ See Hector Avalos, “Circumcision as a Slave Mark,” *PRS* 42 (2015): 259–74. Avalos argues that circumcision was a procedure whereby a master could be assured of a slave’s complete obedience. In his view, children were circumcised because they were considered part of the property of the divine master Yahweh.

would be ritually “reborn” and given a new name after a symbolic death.³⁸

Circumcision can be viewed as such a symbolic death,³⁹ and while Abraham was not reborn as a king, he is indeed established as a vassal to the Great King Yahweh and exemplifies kingly roles and responsibilities throughout the Genesis narrative.

Circumcision in Gen 17 is a kinship ritual that both establishes Abraham’s lineage as a separate branch and unites Abraham and his descendants with their Great King Yahweh.

My analysis of Gen 17 has established circumcision as a kinship ritual in one of the most significant Priestly narrative passages. This function of circumcision is reflected in Exod 12:43–49 as well, a passage which shares a number of lexical and thematic elements with Gen 17. Exodus 12:43–49 outlines the requirements for males to participate in the Passover meal, and there we also find circumcision functioning as a kinship ritual within Priestly legislation.

Exodus 12:43–49

43 Then Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the statute of the Passover: No foreigner shall eat it [i.e., the Passover offering], 44 but any slave who is bought with money may eat it after you have circumcised him. 45 No sojourner or hired worker may eat it. 46 It will be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the meat out of the house, and you shall not break its bones. 47 The whole congregation of

³⁸ Wyatt, “The Story of Dinah and Shechem,” *UF* 22 (1991): 433–58 (452).

³⁹ See, e.g., Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (trans. Willard R. Trask; New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 21–40.

Israel shall keep it. 48 And if a stranger lives with you and keeps the Passover to Yahweh, let every male in his household be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he will be as a native of the land. But no one who is uncircumcised may eat of it. 49 There is one law for the native and for the stranger who lives among you.

In the Priestly account of the institution of the Passover meal in the book of Exodus, no uncircumcised male is to eat of the Passover meal, whether native or foreigner. Exodus 12:43–49 establishes the law (Heb. *ḥuqqā[h]*) of the Passover meal and makes distinctions between the *nēkār* ('foreigner'), *tôšāb* ('sojourner'), and *śākîr* ('hired worker') on the one hand, and the *'ebed* ('slave') and *gēr* ('stranger') on the other hand. There are two important points to notice: (1) No uncircumcised person may eat of the Passover meal (Exod 12:48). (2) Both the *'ebed* and *gēr* may be circumcised and partake of the Passover if they so desire, but this option is foreclosed to the *nēkār*, *tôšāb*, and *śākîr*. What, then, is the rationale that prohibits uncircumcised males from eating of the Passover, and why are there different rules for these two sets of males?

Brett believes that the different rules for the two sets of males are based on their respective durations of residence within the community.⁴⁰ In this interpretation, whereas the *'ebed* and *gēr* are long-term residents of the community, the *nēkār*, *tôšāb*, and *śākîr* fail to meet this residence requirement. The *gēr* lives (Heb. *gwr*; Exod 12:48, 49) among the Israelites, while there is no mention of this with respect to the *nēkār* or the *śākîr*. Brett's explanation, however, is incomplete.

⁴⁰ Brett, "The Priestly Dissemination of Abraham," 92.

The *gēr* not only resides permanently in the land, but he has a status within the community. If we look at the other usages of *gēr* in the Priestly literature, we find that Exod 12:49 holds true: “There is one law for the *’ezrah* (‘native’) and for the *gēr*.”⁴¹ The implication of Exod 12:43–49 seems to be that the *nēkār*, *tôšāb*, and *śākîr* are not treated as natives because they can never become a part of the congregation of Israel. They temporarily work and live among the people of Yahweh but never become bonded by any kinship ties.⁴²

⁴¹ For more on the *gēr* in the Hebrew Bible, see Christophe Bultmann, *Der Fremde im antiken Juda: eine Untersuchung zum sozialen Typenbegriff "ger" und seinem Bedeutungswandel in der alttestamentlichen Gesetzgebung* (FRLANT 153; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992); José E. Ramirez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel: The גר in the Old Testament* (BZAW 283; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999); Theophile James Meek, “The Translation of *Gēr* in the Hexateuch and its Bearing on the Documentary Hypothesis,” *JBL* 49 (1930): 172–80; Pekka Pitkänen, “Ancient Israelite Population Economy: *Ger*, *Toshav*, *Nakri* and *Karat* as Settler Colonial Categories,” *JSOT* 42 (2017): 139–53; Rolf Rendtorff, “The *Gēr* in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 67–77; Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (JSOTSS 107; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

⁴² Mary Douglas offers an interesting proposal on the identity of the *gēr*: “My idea is simply that the *gēr* was one of the descendants of Jacob, not descended from Judah,

There have already been hints in the Exodus narrative regarding the kinship between Yahweh and his people. As mentioned in chapter 4, Israel is called Yahweh's *bānî bākōrî* ('my first-born son'; Exod 4:22). The care that he has for Israel mirrors and exceeds Pharaoh's love for his firstborn son. We also saw in chapter 2 the importance of eating and sharing meals for kinship construction. The Passover meal, of which the entire congregation of Israel is to participate (12:47), is nothing less than the kinship meal shared between Yahweh and his people. Once a *gēr* is circumcised, he becomes cultically equivalent to the *'ezrah* ('native') of the land. By the act of his circumcision, he is able to participate in Passover, the covenant renewal meal of the Israelites and Yahweh.

In the Passover meal, the whole kinship group eats the sacrifice. Many elements of the Exodus signify urgency, eating unleavened bread because you have no time to wait for the bread to rise and wearing sandals while you are eating because Egypt is no longer your home, and you need to be prepared to leave. The Passover meal itself, however, signifies something different, not the urgent need to leave but the special kinship relationship with Yahweh and the promise of the land

nor from Levi or Benjamin, but those other remnants of the twelve tribes who had been defeated and scattered by invaders and who still lived in Canaan during and after the exile in Babylon. His special status at law would be precisely that he was neither a foreigner nor a Jew" ("The Stranger in the Bible," *EJS* 35 [1994]: 283–98 [286, n. 1]).

that he is bestowing upon his people. The Passover meal is explicitly identified as a “sacrifice” (Heb. *zēbah*). When prompted by later generations to explain the meaning of the Passover meal, Moses commands the people to respond, “It is the sacrifice (Heb. *zēbah*) of Yahweh’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses” (Exod 12:27).

In the previous chapter, we noted the close connection between the Passover and circumcision. One common explanation for the association between circumcision and Passover in Josh 5 is that they are both “the divinely ordained preparation for going to war against the combined might of all the kings [of Canaan].”⁴³ Yet, this explanation regarding the pairing of circumcision and Passover fails to appreciate the underlying connection between circumcision and Passover. On the one hand, William H. Propp believes that the connection between circumcision and Passover is ancient and original. He writes, “It is likely, then, that both the Passover laws of P and the Gilgal pericope in Joshua derive from a premonarchic cult at Gilgal featuring periodic mass circumcision at the Hill of Foreskins as a prelude to the Passover.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, many scholars

⁴³ Robert G. Boling, and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua* (AB 6; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 193.

⁴⁴ William H. Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 355–70 (362). See also Jay A. Wilcoxon, “Narrative Structure and Cult Legend: A

consider Josh 5:10–12, which links Passover to the circumcision ceremony, to be a later, secondary addition. Both Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth consider not only circumcision and Passover to be unrelated originally, but they believe that the bulk of the events in Josh 1–6 were originally unconnected traditions centered around Gilgal and Jericho.⁴⁵

As I argued in chapter 5, it may not be possible to definitively establish the origin of the connection between circumcision and Passover; however, it is enough to note that there was a connection in both the Priestly writings in Exod 12 and the non-Priestly passage in Josh 5.⁴⁶ The close connection between sacrificial rituals and

Study of Joshua, 1–6,” in *Transitions in Biblical Scholarship* (ed. J. C. Rylaarsdam; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 43–70, esp. 64–67.

⁴⁵ Albrecht Alt, “Josua,” in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (vol. 2 of *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*; München: Beck, 1953), 176–92; Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua*, (HAT 7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953), 21.

⁴⁶ I am operating under the assumption that the author of Joshua was aware of Exod 12. Thomas B. Dozeman believes that “the MT (of Josh 5:2–9) is likely an inner-biblical interpretation on the Priestly law of circumcision in Exod 12:43–49 as a requirement for participating in the Passover” (*Joshua 1–12* [AB; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015], 268). In the previous chapter, I elected not to discuss Josh 5:10–12 because most scholars consider it to derive from different source material than the context surrounding it. Most consider it to be Priestly in origin.

communal meals manifests itself in the immediate partaking of the Passover ritual after the corporate circumcision in Josh 5. My interpretation of the events in question views circumcision as a sacrifice-like kinship ritual which is completed or made effective by a shared communal meal, Passover. Immediately prior to the entrance of the Israelites into the Promised Land, they participate in two related rituals that have apparently been neglected during the wilderness wandering, circumcision and Passover. Simply put, the Israelites in Josh 5:2–9 could not participate in the Passover meal unless they were first circumcised. According to Exod 12:43–49, this requirement explicitly applies to native and foreigner alike, meaning that in its priestly conception the kinship-generating aspect of circumcision was acknowledged.

The last passage we will discuss is the one that perhaps evidences the strongest connection between circumcision and sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Lev 12. Leviticus 12 conceives of circumcision as a kinship ritual analogous to sacrifice.

Leviticus 12

1 Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, ‘If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days; as the days of the impurity of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. 3 On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall

See Blenkinsopp, “Structure of P,” *CBQ* 38 (1976): 275–92, esp. 288–9. In its final form, however, and in its relationship with Josh 5:2–9, it seems to echo the connection also found in Exod 12.

be circumcised. 4 Then she shall remain in the blood of her purification for thirty-three days. She shall not touch any holy thing nor enter into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are complete. 5 But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean for two weeks, as during her menstruation. And she shall remain in the blood of her purification for sixty-six days. 6 And when the days of her purification are complete, whether for a son or a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, 7 and he shall offer it before Yahweh and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. 8 If she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.

Leviticus 12 is ostensibly concerned with matters of ritual purity surrounding childbirth, which would seem to be a natural context in which to discuss circumcision, but the reference to circumcision in Lev 12 is both brief and unadorned. Leviticus 12:3 is the only explicit law in the Priestly legal codes concerning circumcision: "On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." The command for eighth-day circumcision is so brief that some question whether it should even be treated as part of the passage and prefer to view it as more of a parenthetical aside that is only obliquely related to its surrounding material. In this view, Lev 12:3 is an outlier, and Lev 12 is only about childbirth and not circumcision. Is Lev 12, as Bernat claims, "patently unrelated to circumcision,"⁴⁷ or is there a reason why the injunction to circumcise sons on the eighth day is nestled within this passage centered on issues of female purity?

⁴⁷ Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 13.

Despite its brevity, the presence of circumcision in the context of laws concerning the impurity of childbirth in Lev 12 suggests a number of relevant points. According to Lev 12, if a woman gives birth to a son, then she is unclean for a week. Once her son is circumcised, she remains in the “blood of her purification” for thirty-three more days. If she gives birth to a daughter, then she is unclean for two weeks instead of one and remains in the “blood of her purification” for sixty-six days, double the time prescribed for the birth of a son. Unlike the impurity of childbirth that needs to be expiated by sacrifice, there is no mention of the blood of circumcision and no similar sacrifice prescribed for any impurity caused by circumcision. This omission suggests that the blood of circumcision is categorically different from the blood of childbirth (and again by analogy, menstruation). There may be some hint of this difference in that after a son is circumcised, then the purification period of a woman is halved to only thirty-three days as opposed to sixty-six days for the birth of a daughter. In the same way that the burnt offering and sin offering expiate and purify the woman from her flow of blood, might the circumcision of a son signify a decrease in the length of a mother’s impurity and possibly even his own purification?

The only prescription regarding circumcision is that it occurs on the eighth day. Bernat claims that the eighth day holds no special significance; it is merely the first day after seven days of ritual impurity. However, the fact that the only command regarding circumcision relates to its timing may be a clue that the time of circumcision is no coincidence; in fact, rather than signifying its *unimportance*, the

specific inclusion of the temporal command may point to its particular importance. It is important to recognize the parallel passage in Lev 22:27 (and Exod 22:29): “When an ox or sheep or goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother and from the eighth day, it shall be acceptable as an offering by fire to the Yahweh. In both Lev 12 and Lev 22, the (male) child is “with” its mother for seven days and then separated from her. As Shaye Cohen notes, “Eight-day-old animals are sacrificed, eight-day-old boys are circumcised. Circumcision is analogous to, and a surrogate for, sacrifice.”⁴⁸ The connection between circumcision and sacrifice in the Priestly worldview is made explicit by the similar timing of both acts.

Jay conceptualizes childbirth and blood sacrifice as two poles on a spectrum. She writes, “The only action that is as serious as giving birth, which can act as a counterbalance to it, is killing” and “unlike childbirth, sacrificial killing is deliberate, purposeful, ‘rational’ action, under perfect control. Both birth and killing are acts of power, but sacrificial ideology commonly construes childbirth as the quintessence of vulnerability, passivity, and powerless suffering.”⁴⁹ It is not difficult to see that childbirth has the same contrasts with circumcision as it does with blood sacrifice; indeed, circumcision may in some ways be a more obvious counterpoint to childbirth. Léonie Archer argues that “the blood of circumcision served as a

⁴⁸ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005), 20.

⁴⁹ Jay, “Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman,” 294.

symbolic surrogate for the blood of childbirth, and because it was shed voluntarily and in a *controlled* manner [note the similar language to Jay], it transcended the bounds of nature and the *passive* blood flow of the mother at delivery and during the preparatory cycle for pregnancy, menstruation.”⁵⁰ In addition, circumcision has symbolic import that sacrifice does not: the rite of circumcision is performed on the male sexual organ that is necessary for the continuation of the patrilineal line. As Eilberg-Schwartz writes, “As an operation on the male reproductive organ, circumcision symbolizes lines of descent. This is an especially powerful symbol in patrilineal societies, where descent is traced from father to son.”⁵¹ It is no surprise, then, that circumcision was chosen as the symbol of God’s covenant with Abraham in Gen 17, which is focused on the continuation and multiplication of his patrilineal line. Eilberg-Schwartz continues, “The priests regard the rite of circumcision as the physical inscription of God’s promise of genealogical proliferation on the body of all Abraham’s male descendants.”⁵² Circumcision functionally occupies the same space

⁵⁰ Léonie J. Archer, “Bound by Blood: Circumcision and Menstrual Taboo in Post-Exilic Judaism,” in *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Traditions* (ed. J. M. Soskice; London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), 38–61 (40).

⁵¹ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 145.

⁵² Eilberg-Schwartz, “The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book,” in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 23.

in the Priestly system as blood sacrifice. Both rituals serve to generate and maintain patrilineal lines of kinship.

The analysis of the three preceding Priestly passages shows that circumcision in the Priestly literatures shares the same kinship valence as circumcision in the three non-Priestly passages discussed in chapters 3–5. In both the Priestly and non-Priestly texts, circumcision functions as a kinship ritual, generating, maintaining, and strengthening kinship bonds between people and between people and their deity. Within the Priestly worldview, circumcision was conceptualized as analogous to blood sacrifice, another important kinship ritual.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Male circumcision, like every ritual, had its beginning. Whoever it was; wherever and however it may have occurred, there was one male (or perhaps a group of males) who was selected to have the foreskin of his penis purposefully and painfully removed. Undoubtedly an ancient, pre-historical practice, this first circumcision must have been a gruesome and bloody affair with only rudimentary tools available and no experienced surgeons. Why did this practice begin? What would have compelled this person (or group of people) to perform such a dangerous and painful operation? Such questions about origins have always fascinated scholars, yet the pursuit of answers to these kinds of questions has usually been either too fanciful or hopelessly fruitless, reflecting more the historical context of the interpreter than any historical reality of the practice. Rather than searching for the origins of a ritual that will likely never be found, it is far more productive to examine its function within a particular culture.¹

¹ One of the great insights of the ritual theorist Catherine Bell is that rituals do not inherently *mean* anything; instead rituals function at particular times, in particular places, and within particular cultures as strategies by which cultures distinguish one activity from other, more conventional activities. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); idem, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also Stanley A. Stowers, "Greeks who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Toward an Anthropology of

In the preceding pages, I have shown that circumcision in ancient Israel functioned as a kinship ritual in both non-Priestly and Priestly texts. Most previous studies of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible have begun with what is generally considered to be a Priestly passage, Gen 17, and then other biblical texts related to circumcision are interpreted in light of Gen 17, whether they follow or diverge from the “orthodox” conception of circumcision in Gen 17.² Genesis 17 itself describes the institution of circumcision as a “sign of the covenant” between Yahweh and Abraham. According to the traditional scholarly interpretation, it was written by the Priestly author to elevate circumcision during the exilic or postexilic period and imbue it with a new meaning for a new setting. This assumption of circumcision’s relative insignificance before the exile fails to appreciate the kinship-oriented function of circumcision found in non-Priestly narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible. The foundational perspective adopted in this study, however, is that circumcision is *not* a ritual that increased in importance only after priests co-opted and re-interpreted a pre-existing ritual during the Babylonian exile. Rather, its significance

Greek Religion,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 293–333, esp. 299.

² See, e.g., Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, & Identity in Ancient Judaism & Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

for kinship generation and maintenance is present even in the non-Priestly narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible. The belief that circumcision became significant only in the environment of an uncircumcised Babylonian majority is untenable in light of its importance in the non-Priestly texts of the Hebrew Bible.

In this dissertation, I have shown that neither the perceived dichotomy between the Priestly and non-Priestly writings and their respective understandings of circumcision nor the assumed insignificance of circumcision before the exile can be maintained. Through a fresh analysis of three non-Priestly passages related to physical circumcision in the Hebrew Bible—Gen 34; Exod 4:24–26; Josh 5:2–9—I have argued that circumcision functioned as a kinship ritual in ancient Israel outside of the circles associated with the Priestly writings as well. To be sure, the Priestly literature foregrounds and expands the kinship focus of circumcision, particularly in its more overt and explicit concerns with fertility, genealogy, and gender, but this development is more a result of specific Priestly concerns than a fundamental transformation in the function of circumcision itself.

Another standard belief about circumcision in the Hebrew Bible that I have argued against is the idea that each example of physical circumcision in the Bible is independent and unrelated to other instances of circumcision. Instead, I contend that there is continuity in the presentation of the function of circumcision both within the non-Priestly texts and between the non-Priestly and Priestly texts. As I have noted a number of times in this dissertation, circumcision is a multivalent ritual, but we should not assume that this inherent characteristic of religious ritual

eliminates the possibility of shared meaning and significance for circumcision in the Hebrew Bible. In each of the non-Priestly passages—Gen 34; Exod 4:24–26; Josh 5:2–9—circumcision had multiple functions but always included an important aspect of kinship creation and confirmation.

In Gen 34, circumcision is part of a cruel ruse on the part of Simeon and Levi, yet it also unites the Israelites and Shechemites as kin, allowing for intermarriage, trade, and land acquisition (Gen 34:9–10, 23). In effect, circumcision makes them “one people” (Gen 34:16). In Exod 4:24–26, circumcision functions as an apotropaic ritual intended to ward away evil and perhaps even demonic spirits in the wilderness, but it also functions to cement Moses’s status as a true Israelite. Up to that point in Exodus, Moses’s kinship identity is uncertain. Before he is able to fulfill the role that Yahweh has given him, he must first be established as an Israelite; circumcision serves to do so. In Josh 5:2–9, circumcision is often portrayed as a “purification” ritual in order to prepare the Israelites for “holy war,” but this understanding only tells half the story. Even before the onset of Yahweh’s “holy war,” the second generation of Israelite males must be confirmed as the proper recipients of Yahweh’s promises for success and rightful tenancy in the land. Circumcision (and the subsequent Passover) is a kinship ritual that establishes the second generation of Israelite males as Yahweh’s people. The kinship bonds created by circumcision relate to both the human and divine spheres.

After demonstrating the kinship valence of circumcision in the three non-Priestly passages, I looked at three Priestly passages—Gen 17; Exod 12:43–49; Lev

12—in order to confirm the connection between non-Priestly and Priestly circumcision. In Gen 17, circumcision is the “sign of the covenant” that distinguishes Abraham from his previous lineage and becomes the identifying symbol of Abraham’s patrilineal line. In Exod 12:43–49, circumcision functions to enable even non-Israelites to participate in the paradigmatic Israelite kinship ritual of Passover. In Lev 12, circumcision is presented as a type of sacrifice, analogous to the sacrifice of eight-day old animals in Lev 22. In each of the Priestly passages, circumcision shares features with blood sacrifice, a ritual that Nancy Jay has shown to be related to kinship in almost all agnatic (i.e., descent through males), non-industrial societies that we are aware of. Circumcision, in both Priestly and non-Priestly texts, functions as a kinship ritual in ancient Israel.

My contention that circumcision is, in biblical literature, a kinship-generating ritual analogous to sacrifice opens up at least two significant directions for future research: (1) circumcision and its place within the Israelite sacrificial system and (2) circumcision and its connection with the Sabbath ritual and exile. First, the study

of sacrifice has been one of the major concerns in anthropology,³ religious studies,⁴ and biblical studies.⁵ If my thesis is correct that circumcision functions in a way

³ See, e.g., M. F. C. Bourdillon and Meyer Fortes, eds., *Sacrifice* (London: Academic Press for the Royal Anthropological Institute, 1980); Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (trans. Peter Bing; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983); Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (trans. W. D. Halls; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), trans. of "Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice," *L'Année sociologique* 2 (1898): 29–139; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

⁴ See, e.g., Albert I. Baumgarten, ed., *Sacrifice in Religious Experience* (NBS 93; Leiden: Brill, 2002); Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Naomi Janowitz, "Inventing the Scapegoat: Theories of Sacrifice and Ritual," *JRS* 25 (2011): 15–24; Kathleen McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Ivan Strenski, "Between Theory and Speciality: Sacrifice in the 90s," *RSR* 22 (1996): 10–20.

⁵ See, e.g., Douglas Davies, "An Interpretation of Sacrifice," *ZAW* 89 (1977): 387–99; Ithamar Gruenwald, *Rituals and Ritual Theory in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 180–230; Ronald Hendel, "Sacrifice as a Cultural System: The Ritual Symbolism of

similar to sacrifice, then it is worth exploring its relationship to other features of the Israelite sacrificial system. It is important to situate rituals within the larger cultural context, for no ritual exists in a vacuum. The strength of structuralist interpretations of the Hebrew Bible is that they always seek to place various ritual practices in relation to the entire cultural system or worldview. The danger is attributing too much coherence in the system or an alien meaning to cultural symbols, but at the very least, rituals should not be treated in isolation. Thus, circumcision should be compared with and contrasted to other kinds of sacrifices in the Israelite sacrificial system. One of the strengths of explicitly identifying circumcision as a type of sacrifice is that it can then be compared not only with cross-cultural examples of circumcision as I have done in this dissertation, but it can also be compared to other sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible. It can contribute to the typology of sacrifice within the entire system, which will contribute to the understanding of its function within the sacrificial system and culture as a whole.

Second, another potential avenue of research is a fresh re-examination of the Sabbath ritual, since the Sabbath has traditionally been regarded as another ritual that developed out of the exilic experience in Babylon. I have questioned the rationale that assumes circumcision developed only as a result of the Babylonian context and tried to show that even if circumcision was practiced in exile, the

Exodus 24, 3–8," *ZAW* 101 (1989): 366–90; David Janzen, *The Social Meanings of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

groundwork had already been present before the exile. In chapter 1, I argued for the possibility that the exile may not have been as cataclysmic to ritual practices as sometimes thought; maybe everything did not change overnight. Circumcision seems to demonstrate continuity before and after the exile; perhaps the Sabbath does too.

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