1927 V-17

# THE STORY OF CIRCUMCISION*

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It is probable that circumcision has been thought of by the majority of people, as it was by myself, to have been a religious rite peculiar only to the Hebrews. This is not so, but the great antiquity of the practice has obscured its real origin and object.

Strictly speaking, the term "circumcision" is applied to a nationally wide-spread operation for the ablation of the male prepuce, though a looser application of the term has been made to include simple incision of the prepuce, and two operations upon the female genitals—clitoridectomy and ablation of the labia minora. Female circumcision has been comparatively rarely performed and will not be described.

The operation upon males is a very common one, not only among primitive, but also among highly civilized peoples. Its use, however, as a therapeutic measure is a very modern one, and is not a satisfactory explanation of its ultimate origin.

A great deal has been written as to the antiquity of the practice, but in it all there is very little conclusive evidence and much speculation. It is a curious fact that few peoples practising this rite have any legend or theory as to its origin; they do it because their fathers before them did it. The sources of information are so meagre that it is not to be wondered at that many divergent opinions are held as to its origin. The Old Testament, Egyptian monuments, and the writings of early historians, undoubtedly influenced by the traditions and superstitions of the people among whom they

* Read before the Canadian Society for the Study of Diseases of Children at the annual meeting, Toronto June, 1927.

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lived, are our only sources of information on the subject.

The Hebrews for nearly 4,000 years have claimed that it was a divine institution in the beginning, and that the Chaldeans, Phœnicians, Egyptians and others copied the practice from them.

It is claimed by the Egyptians that circumcision was an evolution of the phallic worship instituted by Isis after the tragic end of her husband, Osiris. The earliest direct evidence of Egyptian circumcision consists in the discovery at Saqqarah of an authentic representation of the operation dating from the VIth dynasty. In it, the child is standing before the operator, his hands securely held in front of his eyes by a man behind him. The operator says, "Hold him that he may not faint away," and the assistant replied, "Do your best." The operator then kneeling in front of the boy does his best with a small, oval-shaped blade, probably made from stone or flint.

One of the chief arguments of the Hebrews that theirs was an independent custom is that they circumcised at eight days while the Egyptian rite was performed at puberty. However, the first Jew to be circumcised, Ishmael, the son of Abraham, was operated upon at the age of thirteen. It was at a great deal later period that they began to practice the rite in infancy.

While there is no way of knowing how natives in the western world of Africa, Australia, and America began the practice, it is probable that they copied it from Europe and Asia.

There is some evidence that in very early times there was a land connection between the two hemispheres. Other circumstances, besides circumcision, would indicate that there must bave been some means of intercourse. For example, central America has cities bearing the same names as cities in Armenia; pyramids exist in central America as well as in Egypt, and there is a marked resemblance between the architecture of the Phœnicians and that of the Incas and Aztecs. Thus it is probable that the early peoples in the western world copied the rite of circumcision from what we call the old world.

Attempts have been made by studying the etymology of the word used for circumcision among various peoples to learn its meaning and import.

Among the early Arabs, the word seemed to bear relation to other words refering to the preparation for the marital state. Among the later Arabs and Hebrews, corresponding words meant "to purify". This probably accounts for the later religious application of the rite.

The most rudimentary form of circumcision is a simple gash in the prepuce. In Tonga and among certain African tribes, it is torn with the fingers, with a mussel shell, or a splinter of bamboo. The Marolongs of South Africa formerly used a fire stone, that is, a meteorite, but now use an assegai. Other tribes, such as the Somali and Kikuyu, make a single cut through the dorsum of the prepuce and extend it into the glans. The Tartars excise a wedge-shaped piece from the prepuce.

Certain Arab tribes not only ablate the prepuce, but also make an incision in the skin on the dorsum of the penis throughout its whole length and also remove a piece of skin from the abdomen. Jewish circumcision showed a noteworthy deviation. In early days, they simply removed a portion of the prepuce. Some of the tribes of Israel, not wishing to appear different from the uncircumcised neighbours, performed such a plastic operation upon what was left of the prepuce as to make it appear longer and thus covered the fact of the circumcision. It thus became imperative that the mucous membrane should be split and stripped from the glans so it should lie bare. According to this regulation, if any fringes of the foreskin remain, the operation is inefficacious. In central Australia the operation was originally performed with a fire stick, but owing to the high mortality, probably from septicæmia, a stone knife was substituted. Some of the Hindus use a wooden knife in the mock ceremony which represents the ritual survival of Mahommedan circumcision. And to-day, in our own country, there would seem to be just as wide variation in the kind of operation, as in the choice of instruments used to perform it.

The ablated prepuce was disposed of in many and curious ways. The tribe of Levi, who alone kept up the practice during the exodus, piled up the foreskins in the wilderness and covered them with earth. The East Africans buried it in the ground in front of the boy just circumcised. In West Africa it is soaked in brandy and swallowed by the victim. In Madagascar it was formerly wrapped in a banana skin and fed to a calf; now it is loaded into a gun and fired into the sky.

The Australian tribes have also some curious customs as to its disposal. In some parts it is buried beside a pond to make the water lilies grow. In other instances, it is swallowed by a younger brother to make him tall and strong. During one year of the great war, I used to save the ablated prepuces from my hospital for the women who staffed the Endel St. Military Hospital. They used them as skin grafts.

A few of the theories that have been suggested as the reason for its origin are:—

1.Hygienic.—This is a very old explanation, and is given by Herodotus as the one used for the practice of the rite among the Egyptians.

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However, the lack of hygienic concepts among primitive peoples renders this explanation as a general one highly improbable. The only modern people giving this as a specific reason as the Samoan. In hot countries, the penis is perculiarly liable to disease from the retention of smegma behind the glans. Therefore "to cut around" and "to purify" may have had reference to hygienic considerations originally, and then have become a religious observance. Its acceptance by the popular mind now is probably due to modern surgical and therapeutic reasons for its performance.

2. Several reasons exist for considering the theory that it was a preparation for the marital state, a probable one. For example, two Arabian words having the same root mean in one instance "to circumcise," and in the other "to become akin to someone through his wife." Then again the widespread practice of the operation at or before the age of puberty is significant. The African tribes, Central and South Americans, Mexicans, Egyptians, Hindus, Turks and Mahommedans, all performed the rite at ages varying from two to twelve; only an isolated tribe in east Africa performs it as late as the 17th year. The sole exception is among the Hebrews who circumcise and name their boys on the 8th day. But even with them there is some evidence that the rite was at one time performed much later and had some relation to the preparation for marriage. For example, in Genesis 34, is chronicled the refusal of Jacob to allow his daughter, Dinah, to wed Shechem the Hittite, until he had been circumcised. And again in Exodus 4 is related the fact that even the son of Moses was not circumcised until he was quite a lad. And again, in Joshua 5, is the story of how all the young men born in the wilderness were circumcised. The operations were performed at Gilgal and marked the removal of the Egyptian reproach from the people of Israel. From this circumstance also has been argued the priority of the Egyptian practice of the rite.

3. It is a test of endurance among some tribes. This is especially so in Arabia and Africa. Among certain of the former, the subject being operated on is required to hold in his hand a lance with the butt resting upon his foot. He must not show the slightest expression of pain or the least quiver of the lance. On the Loango coast, at the least expression of pain on the part of the victim, his intended bride who is present at the ceremony, breaks the engagement.

All this, however, does not make circumcision an endurance test *par excellence*. It was simply one of the trials the young man had to undergo before entering upon man's estate, when he would be permitted to bear arms and sit in council.

That it was a form of sacrifice seems to explain the practice among the Americans, especially the Mexicans. Very early, the man himself was offered as a sacrifice. Later on, simply part of him or the spilling of his blood was acceptable. And still later on, as has been mentioned, are found some who perform a mock ceremony of circumcision with a wooden knife. If the rite was an evolution of phallic worship in Egypt, the sacrificial character of the ceremony is evident. Occasionally also, among the Hebrews, the practice would appear to have had this significance. The circumcision of Gershon, the son of Moses, referred to in Exodus 4, seems to have been performed with the hope of ransoming his father from the wrath of Jehovah; although another interpretation of this incident is the influence of Moses' Midianitish wife, among whose people the boys were circumcised about puberty.

In by far the great majority of cases, circumcision appears to be initiatory in character. Whether it is a preparation for the married state, an effort to avert sexual peril, a test of endurance, or a tribal mark, all these factors are necessary for the complete life of manhood. Thus the rite naturally would be performed about puberty. The realization among some of the natives that the operation became more painful and more dangerous the longer it was delayed resulted in the gradual lowering of the age at which it was performed.

Among the ancient Egyptians and Aztecs it was a mark of social distinction, in that only the ritual priests and leaders were circumcised. As opposed to this, there are a few African tribes where the leaders only escape the mutilation. Apparently there is no one reason which will satisfactorily explain the circumcision in all instances. Even the plea that it was hygienic cannot explain the practice among primitive peoples. Crawley, in "The Mystic Rose," claims that, to the primitive mind all matters connected with the reproductive functions are essentially connected with religion, and all rites of initiation are primarily religious. In summing up all the evidence available, James Hastings concludes that circumcision in its inception and late into its development was fundamentally religious and connected with sacrifice.

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