

REREADING CIRCUMCISION AS AN IDENTITY MARKER (GN 17:9-14): CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON MALE GENITAL MUTILATION AMONGST XHOSA COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

During biblical times in the Near Eastern world, circumcision was a common practice. Reasons for conducting the operation varied. In biblical times, only males were circumcised. This essay attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What was the significance of circumcision in the ancient Near East? (2) Can one say with certainty that circumcision amongst Xhosa communities was influenced by the biblical text? This article commences by examining circumcision in the ancient Near East. The study will then explore the rise of circumcision in ancient Israel when Yahweh commanded Abraham to circumcise all males in his household as a sign of keeping the covenant with Yahweh (cf. Gn 17:9-14). Next, the ideology of excluding women from being circumcised during biblical times is discussed. Thereafter, circumcision conducted in our modern postbiblical world – contemporary perspectives on circumcision, also known as male genital mutilation (hereafter, MGM) – is examined in terms of the following four themes: (1) the role of culture amongst Xhosa communities in motivating MGM, (2) the emergence of female genital mutilation (hereafter, FGM) in Africa, (3) the theory that circumcision reduces transmission of HIV which causes AIDS, and (4) the theory that a circumcised penis enhances orgasm during sex. Next, MGM in South Africa is explained as a violation of human rights. Lastly, this research concludes with possible solutions towards mitigating fatalities of MGM amongst Xhosa communities in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In the Near Eastern world, circumcision was a common practice.¹ During the biblical period, only males were circumcised (Gn 17:10b).² The circumcised man was to

¹ It appears circumcision was already practised in Egypt at an early stage. For a more

identify himself as a member of Israel – the people Yahweh “chose for his inheritance” (Psa 33:12; 105:43). Yahweh had chosen Israel “out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Dt 7:6). Circumcision served as a covenant between Yahweh and Abraham and the Jewish descendants, including bought slaves and foreigners born in Abraham’s household (17:12-13). The covenant-making account in Genesis (17:1-5, 9-14) in relation to circumcision was a reaffirmation of an earlier account of covenant-making in relation to possession of land (12:1). Since Yahweh had fulfilled his promise to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan to be their own (17:8), Yahweh commanded that all males amongst his people be circumcised. From the time of the first patriarch onwards, the Jews were enjoined to circumcise their male infants at the age of eight days (Gn 17:12; Sasson 1966:474).

In our contemporary context, circumcision is also practised as a marker of identity. In this discourse, MGM amongst Xhosa communities in South Africa will be investigated as a case study. Amongst the Xhosa communities male circumcision remains a very important ritual (Papu and Verster 2006:178). The article also argues that MGM practised by traditional “surgeons” on young people amongst Xhosa communities is a violation of human rights.³ Some initiates (usually young men between 15 and 25)⁴ are reported either ending up in hospital due to infection of their sexual organs or dying as a result of the operation undertaken by ill-trained traditional “surgeons”. To begin with, terminology and definitions examined in the following section will be explained.

detailed account, see Sasson (1966:473) and Isaac (1964:444-456).

² In order to further substantiate the claim that circumcision was a common practice during biblical times, the following passages will also be discussed: Genesis 21:4; 34:15-24; Exodus 12:44-48; Leviticus 12:3; Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Joshua 5:2-8; Judges 14:3; 15:18; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Samuel 1:20; 1 Chronicles 10:4; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25.

³ This article will look at the legal implication and statutory instruments (if any) constituted to protect initiation schools from continuing to exist as “murder camps,” as opposed to being *training institutions* as they are sometimes portrayed.

⁴ See Meintjies (1998:7).

TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

The Hebrew term for “circumcision” which is employed in Genesis 17:11 derives from the root word *nâmal* (which means “to become clipped” or “circumcised”). A different root word *mûwl* (meaning “to cut short” or “curtail”) used in other Old Testament passages (cf. Gn 17:10, 12-14, 24-26, 21:4; 34:15-17, 22-24; Ex 4:26; 12:44-48; Lv 12:3; Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jsh 5:2-8; Jr 4:4; 9:25) still carries the same meaning (“to circumcise”; it can also be defined as “to blunt” or “to destroy”). In Latin, circumcision is defined in terms of two terms: *circum* (meaning “around”) and *caedere* (meaning “to cut”) (Morrison 1995:1). In view of the above definitions, it follows that circumcision refers to the operation whereby part or the entire foreskin which covers the glans of the penis is removed. The foreskin is the sexually sensitive sleeve of tissue covering the head of the penis. In scientific terms, circumcision is described as the “surgical removal of the foreskin (prepuce) from the human penis” (Lissauer 2011:352-353). Kanake (2007:88) has also concurred that most of the world’s circumcision rituals involve cutting off the foreskin exposing the glans of the penis. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the procedure is either elected for religious reasons or for personal preferences (WHO 2007). In our contemporary context, both therapeutic and prophylactic reasons – such as urinary tract infections (UTIs) and poor general health (Rudolph et al. 2011:188) – are also indicated for carrying out the procedure by different people and cultures. In this manuscript, the term “circumcision” will be defined as referring to both male genital mutilations (MGM) and female genital mutilations (FGM). The term “identity” used in this paper connotes the idea of uniqueness, characteristic or distinctiveness. A known culture or tradition of a people remains their identity marker (cf. Ratheiser 2007:460). During biblical times, Jews were characterised by identity markers such as activities (keeping the Sabbath), institutions (the Temple), religious practices (monotheism), or a ritual of cutting penile flesh (circumcision) (cf. Rugwiji 2013:58). Circumcision as an identity marker bestows on the circumcised “graduates” some individual characteristic by which they are known. Xhosa communities – amongst other ethnic groups in South Africa – are known for their belief in the practice of “male circumcision as a rite of passage to manhood” (Nkosi 2013:119). The following section discusses the methodological approach employed in this debate.

METHODOLOGY

“Research method” refers to the approach used in an argument to determine the direction the discussion will take. Frankel, Devers and Kelly (2000:5) have observed that the most useful guidelines for selecting a research method is based on the research questions one is asking and the extent to which the method will inform the research questions. This treatise attempts to answer the following three research questions:

- What was the significance of circumcision in the ancient Near East?
- Can one say with certainty that circumcision amongst Xhosa communities was influenced by the biblical text?
- Does modern scientific research support the theories that circumcision reduces HIV transmission and that a circumcised penis enhances orgasm?

This research employs a literary-rhetorical approach which uses the narrative or story on circumcision within the biblical text in exploring MGM in our contemporary context. Because it is generally believed that the job of the narrative researcher is to interpret the stories people tell (Riessman 1993), this investigation employs a literary-rhetorical approach in exploring the biblical narrative on circumcision and then “appropriates” it in the (South) African context.

The present discussion derives from my previous discourse (see Rugwiji 2013, §6.7) on circumcision as an identity marker amongst ancient Jewish communities as depicted in the biblical text. The rite of circumcision both in ancient Israel and amongst modern postbiblical Xhosa communities cannot be appropriated or compared “head-for-head” because the two contexts are different and are also separated by both space and time.

Discussion on male circumcision in South Africa, particularly amongst the Xhosa ethnic group, is not a virgin field. To date, numerous works on circumcision have been published (e.g., Soga 1931; Ngxamngxa 1971; Pauw 1975; Meintjies 1998; Papu and Verster 2006, amongst others). These sources, as well as the Internet, articles from periodicals, theses and dissertations, have been consulted and they contributed immensely in the development of the present discussion. The present investigation does not claim to be exhaustive in its findings; further research is required as new developments unfold when legal implications are brought into perspective regarding the rite of circumcision in South Africa. However, some differences need to be noted between the present investigation and works on circumcision that have previously been published, of which some representative examples were cited above. Three main

reasons have emerged regarding the significance of this study.

First, in my view, previous publications have not adequately utilised the biblical literature on circumcision in an attempt to relate the ancient biblical context to the contemporary situation. In contrast, the present text traces the origin of circumcision from the biblical perspective. Second, previous researches have neither provided statistical data on the deaths of initiates emanating from initiation schools in South Africa (e.g., in the Eastern Cape and amongst the Xhosas) nor moved further to suggest solutions towards mitigating these fatalities, which the present article does in view of recent developments. Third, this article also contributes to scholarship. It is anticipated that arguments raised in this paper will provoke the readership on the significance of circumcision in our modern postbiblical societies, especially in view of two main theories: (1) that circumcision reduces HIV transmission, and (2) that a circumcised penis enhances orgasm. The latter two ideas for now are contested by many scholars. However, in my investigation of the rite of circumcision, how it was practised during biblical times, and how the practice emerged amongst modern postbiblical societies – including some theories surrounding it – I will maintain my openness to the views of other scholars who have done extensive research on circumcision.

The next section examines the rise of the rite of circumcision in the ancient Near East.

CIRCUMCISION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Various theories have emerged on the rise of circumcision in ancient Israel. It is probable that the rite of circumcision which became popular amongst biblical societies might have been borrowed from other cultures outside Israel such as the Euphrates, Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia or Egypt, with which the Jewish patriarchs (e.g. Terah or Abraham), had interacted. Sasson supports this view when he writes that the rite of circumcision was known to the inhabitants of North Syria during the early third millennium B.C.E. The practice may have been introduced there by a group which entered, apparently peaceably, the ^oAmuq region sometime around 3200 B.C.E. (Sasson 1966:473-475).

It has been postulated that for a long time scholars have assumed a direct

relationship between the Egyptian and West Semitic worlds in one matter of personal hygiene and, probably, of religious rites (Sasson 1966:473; Isaac 1964:444-456). The oldest documentary evidence for the practice of circumcision comes from ancient Egypt (WHO 2007). The surgical cutting for Jewish circumcision matches the ancient artistic drawings of Egyptian adult men found in Ankh-Mahor Tomb at Sakkara in Egypt (Kanake 2007:83). It has been discovered that in Egypt, some seven texts from the age of the pyramids to that of Piankhi, make mention of the ritual (Jonckheere 1951:212). Following up on Jonckheere's assertion above, Sasson's (1966:476) observation is also illuminating when he acknowledges that

It may be appropriate to point out that the Egyptian word for the term "foreskin" (*qrn.t*) is beyond doubt a phonetic rendering of the Semitic (*grit*), and Hebrew (*corläh*). This in itself may be an indication that the concept of circumcision travelled from the north to the south, and not the other way round.

Sasson further explains that "in this manner, the residents of those areas were to see the growth of the Jewish patriarch Abraham, who possibly became acquainted with the rite" (1966:476). Jonckheere's and Sasson's findings are also confirmed by Jean Capart's findings which revealed that the earliest Egyptian document to shed light on circumcision is a palette, now in the British Museum, from the pre-dynastic, Late Gerzean era (Capart 2011:179). Sasson (1966:473) further states:

A Naga-ed-Dër stele begins with the pronouncement of one chieftain: 'When I was circumcised, together with one hundred and twenty men.' This is reminiscent of Gn 17:23, where Abraham orders the rite to be performed on his retinue the same day as that of his own circumcision.

Although the above views could be understood as individual scholarly opinions deriving from research findings, they tend to throw some light on the probability that to some greater extent Abraham might have borrowed this ritual from surrounding cultures, such as in Egypt where Abraham went to sojourn when famine in Canaan became severe (Gn 12:10).

However, when Yahweh introduced the rite of circumcision to Abraham and commanded him to practise it in his household (Gn 12:10-14), Yahweh might have been affirming the rite which was common in other cultures, but not yet practised by

Jewish patriarchs. Of the ancient religious literature we have to date, the gods are presented as ratifying the cultural and ethical patterns of livelihood amongst communities. On the one hand – as shall be probed in detail below – the biblical text portrays Yahweh as commanding the patriarchs to practise circumcision in Israel. On the other hand, it is also claimed that the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* describes the sun god *Ra* as having circumcised himself (Alanis and Lucidi 2004:379-95). This belief of Ra circumcising himself might probably have influenced the devout adherents to Ra to begin circumcising all converts to the god Ra in Egypt. If the theory of the patriarchs borrowing the rite of circumcision from Egypt stands, Yahwism (or Judaism) as a religion might have emerged as a response to authenticate religious practices premised on the recurrence of a theological rhetoric of “Yahweh commanded that”, a motif which is prominent in the biblical text.

Next, this work discusses the significance of male circumcision in ancient Israel.

MALE CIRCUMCISION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

It has been explored above that the rite of circumcision which became popular amongst the Jewish patriarchs was a common practice amongst ancient Near Eastern societies. Although the Jewish rite may have differed from circumcision practised by other cultures, the characteristics and function it served were almost identical. However, the distinctiveness of the Jewish circumcision marks a Jew as Jew and has the power to make a gentile into a Jew (Schwartz 1990:141-176). Jewish circumcision was part of the *brit milah* ritual, to be performed by a specialist ritual circumciser (a *moהל*) on the eighth day of a newborn son’s life (Glass 1999:17-21). Glass (1999:17-21) further reveals that the Jewish law required that the circumcision leave the glans bare when the penis is flaccid. Converts to Judaism were also required to be circumcised. Those who were already circumcised would undergo a symbolic circumcision ritual. Scholars have proposed other dimensions that Jewish patriarchs and their followers adopted circumcision to make penile hygiene easier in hot and sandy climates, as well as a rite of passage into adulthood, or as a form of blood sacrifice (cf. Doyle 2005:279-285; Gollaher 2000:1). However, the Jewish patriarchs began practising the rite of circumcision as an observance of the “covenant commandment” by Yahweh (Gn 12:9-14). The following sections will provide: (1) an

exegesis of Genesis 17:9-14 and (2) an analysis of other circumcision passages in order to put into perspective the emergence of circumcision in ancient Israel.

Exegesis of Genesis 17:9-14

The first announcement of the Abrahamic covenant recorded in Genesis 12:1 is reaffirmed when Yahweh tells Abraham that this covenant would be for the “generations to come” (Gn 17:9). This covenant was sealed by circumcision where “every male amongst you shall be circumcised” (17:10b). The Israelite men would be distinguished from men of other cultures by the fact that they were circumcised. According to Jewish culture, only males were to be circumcised. Male circumcision was a sign of the covenant that Yahweh made with Abraham and also became a sign of the Jewish people’s allegiance to the Law of Moses as an extension of the promise to Abraham (Morrison 1995:1). The rite was commanded to Abraham as a sign of keeping the covenant with Yahweh (Gn 12:10-14), as well as between Abraham’s descendants and Yahweh (Gn 17:9-11). It was men who emphasised the rite of circumcision as the symbol of “a covenant presupposed as existing between men and Yahweh” (Goldingay 2000:4). Yahweh is portrayed as emphasising this circumcision-covenant ideology by commanding that “Any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Gn 17:14). However, the biblical text does not provide some glimpse of a distinct “identity marker”⁵ of a circumcised Jew to identify him amongst other males for the purpose of inclusion in the mainstream religious piety entrenched in Judaism. The Bible makes it clear that circumcision only applied to Jewish males, to their slaves and to converts to Judaism (Gn 17:10-14; Ex 12:48). The Israelites circumcised their children on the eighth day after birth and the young boys continued to learn God’s commandments, statutes, and judgments from parents and the community throughout life (Dt 6:1-9; see also Kanake 2007:83). The day for circumcision in the biblical text varied, although the “eighth day” features prominently. The significance for circumcision to be carried out on the eighth day is not certain. It probably signified purity on the part of the mother after giving birth, as the “eighth day” of circumcision is preceded by seven days of purification. The Jewish tradition regarded a mother as

⁵ The biblical text does not state what visible identity markers clearly distinguished circumcised Jewish males from other uncircumcised males. One would speculate that it involved the cumbersome process of actually inspecting male genital organs.

unclean for seven days after giving birth to a male child (Lv 12:2), followed by circumcision of the boy on the eighth day (Lv 12:3). The mother's purification process continued until thirty-three days had lapsed (12: 4). In contrast, the period for purification doubled when a girl child was born (12: 5). Moreover, there was some inconsistency in maintaining the "eighth day" ideology. On the one hand, Abraham circumcised Ishmael at the age of thirteen on the same day that Abraham was circumcised at the age of ninety-nine (Gn 17:23-24, 26).⁶ On the other hand, Isaac was circumcised on the eighth day after birth (Gn 21:4; Kanake 2007:83).

Other circumcision passages

In the narrative of the rape of Dinah, Jacob's daughter, circumcision is brought into perspective. Shechem, son of Hamor, the Hivite, sexually violated Dinah (Klopper 2010:652), which the biblical text describes as "he took her and violated her" (Gn 34:2). Dinah's brothers were angered by Shechem's conduct, and demanded that all members of Hamor's household be circumcised so "that you become like us by circumcising all your males" (34:15). The proposal was pleasing to Hamor and Shechem and "every male in the city was circumcised" (34:24). Although the proposal for Hamor's household to be circumcised as a requirement for Shechem to remain with Dinah was not genuine on the part of Dinah's brothers – as evidenced by the act of killing all circumcised Hivite males in the city (34:25) – phrases such as "that you become like us" (34:15b) and "as they themselves are" (34:22b), depict the notion that circumcision amongst Israelite males was the norm. In Exodus 12:44-48, the regulations for eating the Passover were strictly for those who were circumcised. A slave was allowed to eat the Passover after being circumcised (Ex 12:44), and the same requirement was for all aliens who were to celebrate the Passover (12:48a). Joshua 5:2-7 mentions Joshua circumcising all males born in the desert. In the exodus, all Jewish males from Egypt were circumcised, but those born in the desert were not (Joshua 5:5), so at Gibeath Haaraloth Yahweh instructed Joshua to "make the flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again" (Joshua 5:2).

⁶ The biblical text does not mention the person that circumcised Abraham (Gn 17:24), although it is explicitly stated that the patriarch Abraham circumcised his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, amongstst other initiates in his household (Gn 17:23, 26; 21:4). My own reconstruction is that some Jewish elders might have circumcised Abraham, although there is no biblical evidence to support this view.

The term “uncircumcised” is sometimes used to refer to Gentiles (and the Philistines). In Judges 14:3b, Samson’s parents had queried Samson’s decision that “Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?” Later on in the narrative with reference to the Philistines, Samson beseeched Yahweh that “Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” (Judges 15:18b). David refers to Goliath as “this uncircumcised Philistine” (1 Sm 17:26), and later states “Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living Yahweh” (17:36). At the high peak of the Israelite war against the Philistines, King Saul killed himself when he “took his own sword and fell on it” (1 Chr 10:4b) because he did not want “these uncircumcised fellows” to abuse him (1 Chr 10:4a). Saul’s act shows that the ideology of circumcision was so strong amongst the Israelites that one would choose to die rather than risk association with other peoples who were not circumcised. When Ezekiel predicted death for the ruler of Tyre and the pharaoh of Egypt, he said they would die the death of the uncircumcised and be buried amongst the uncircumcised (Ez 28:10; 31:18). Isaiah predicted a time when only circumcised people would be allowed to enter the new city of Zion (Is 52:1-2). Similarly, Ezekiel criticised those who permitted uncircumcised people into the temple (Ez 44:7). It is also noted that focus on the circumcision of the sexual organ shifted to focus on the “circumcision of the heart” (Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jr 4:4) as a condition for Yahweh’s “softening” of heart towards Israel’s wickedness. Previously, Yahweh had commanded that Abraham and his household be circumcised as a sign of a “covenant” between Yahweh and his people. After the Jews had settled in Canaan, the penile circumcision of the “covenant people” would not change their social, cultural and religious lifestyles, in order to live morally and ethically both in society and before Yahweh. The neglect of the “circumcision of heart” led to the Israelites losing their land through invasion by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C.E. and by Nebuzaradan in 586 B.C.E. (2 Kgs 24:13-16; Scheffler 2001:131; Grabbe 1998:10), which resulted in Babylonian captivity.

Jewish culture emphasised circumcision as a ritual for preparation towards marriage. Patai (1960:181) has opined that amongst several localities in the Middle East, circumcision was a part or a preliminary of the marriage ceremony. It is not clear what purpose circumcision served in marriage. One could postulate in terms of modern postbiblical assumptions (or facts) that a “circumcised penis” increases sexual pleasure and enhances orgasm. However, this assumption is contested by other experts

in sex issues such as Kathryn Valdal Fourie (Fourie n.d.) who critiques this notion. She argues that

The foreskin plays an important role in the sensory input necessary for satisfying orgasm for both partners. Research has shown that men circumcised as adults report a significant loss of sensitivity. This means that the same is probably true for males circumcised in infancy, but they simply are not aware of it.⁷

Whether the same idea motivated the emphasis on male circumcision amongst Jewish males remains a mystery. It is clear that in the postexilic period, and particularly from the second century B.C.E., circumcision became a key concept in defining the Jewish religious community (Lieu 1994:360). Adherents to Judaism believed that neglect of circumcision resulted in serious negative spiritual consequences (Bolnick 2012:265-274; cf. Adams and Adams 2012:291-298). However, this Jewish religious community as depicted in the biblical text excluded Jewish females from being circumcised. The next section examines this notion.

WOMEN AND CIRCUMCISION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

If the practice of the rite of circumcision is taken into its rightful context in which it only applied to Jewish males, their slaves and to converts to Judaism (Gn 17:10-14; Exod 12:48), then Jewish females, who would not be circumcised, had no cultural, religious and perhaps, economic rights in that society. However, exclusion of women in circumcision by the Jewish tradition was not due to respecting the integrity of female bodies, health concerns or disapproval of the sarcasm involved in the practice; it was precisely due to the patriarchal nature of the Jewish religion which gave rise to the rite of male circumcision as noted above. Some contradictions exist between exclusion of women in circumcision by the Jewish culture and inclusion of women by other cultures from which the Jews might have borrowed the practice. For example, it is believed that the Egyptians circumcised both males and females at puberty (Lieu 1994:362). Lieu's observation might serve as a clue that females were also

⁷ This idea will be discussed further in due course when examining various reasons for conducting circumcision in our modern postbiblical world.

circumcised in the ancient Near East, as opposed to the Bible's exclusivist ideology which depicts Yahweh commanding that: "Every male amongst you shall be circumcised" (Gn 17:10). However, in spite of the depiction in the biblical text that the rite of circumcision was conducted only on males, some scholars have advanced the view that female circumcision was also known and practised in ancient Near East. One such scholar is Charles C. Sherman, who contends that

That the most probable original purpose for circumcision was a connection to the sexual life and marriage, and feels that this conclusion is confirmed by the fact and phenomena of "female circumcision" (improperly so-called), that is, the cutting off of the internal labia, which is almost, if not quite, as common as the male mutilation and as a rule accompanies it—a fact which has generally been ignored and its significance strangely overlooked (Sherman 1972:118-119).

Following up on Sherman's opinion is Archer (1990) who puts it that the rite of circumcision in the Bible was conducted on both men and women. Although Archer's and Sherman's observations above are informative, in contrast, the biblical text is silent about circumcision of a girl child during biblical times, but explicitly states that "every male amongst you shall be circumcised" (Gn 12:10). Archer's and Sherman's arguments for women being circumcised in ancient Israel are supported by Lieu (1994:361) who writes that "we should not forget that women were involved in circumcision in the Maccabean literature, as some women had faced death for circumcising their sons" (1 Macc 1:60; 2 Macc 6:10). Lieu's contestation is validated by the circumcision conducted by Moses' wife, Zipporah. The Bible shows that Yahweh was about to kill Moses (Ex 4:24). The reason for Yahweh wanting to kill Moses remains a mystery. It could have been due to disobedience on the part of Moses for neglecting to circumcise his son. This view is supported by the depiction we get from the Bible that Moses' wife Zipporah saved Moses' life by circumcising their son and then "touched" Moses' feet (some versions refer to "feet" as "Moses' genitals") with the foreskin from his son's penis (Ex 4:25-26). This act "healed" Moses.

Interesting to note is Cohen's position which differs from Archer's, Lieu's and Sherman's assertions with regard to circumcision of females during biblical times. In response to the question: "Why were Jewish women not circumcised?" Cohen (2005:xi) defines circumcision as "the surgical removal of the foreskin from the penis,

and a woman does not have a penis". In view of Cohen's definition, one could conclude that the male patriarchal nature of the Jewish tradition (Mathieu 2004:190-200) could be one of the reasons why only males were circumcised. Cohen had previously observed how the Jewish patriarchy marginalised the womenfolk in every sphere of life, which was also exhibited in the exclusion of women to be circumcised, amongst other male-chauvinistic tendencies, rightly described by Mosala (1989) as the "male ruling classes."⁸ Cohen had previously articulated that

Classical rabbinic Judaism has always been, and still in some circles is, a male-dominated culture, whose virtuosi and authorities whose paragon of normality in all legal discussions is the adult Jewish male, whose legal rulings in many areas of life (notably marriage and ritual observance) accord men greater privilege than women, and whose values define public communal space as male space (Cohen 1997:560).

The above opinion by Cohen is also supported by John Goldingay's assessment where he provides the reason why the rite of circumcision in ancient Israel excluded women. Goldingay describes circumcision as "the covenant to which women were a party only in a secondary way through their relationship with their fathers and husbands" (Goldingay 2000:4). To my mind, the form of "cultural defence" that Jewish males had structured around themselves made it impossible to "penetrate" even if women had offered themselves to be circumcised. It follows that both Archer's, Lieu's and Sherman's arguments that the rite of circumcision was performed on both boys and girls, contradict Cohen's and Goldingay's observations. The latter argued that the rite of circumcision was performed on Jewish males only as an initiation into "manhood" as well as to confirm inclusion in a devout Jewish community. Holding the same view is Plaskow (1991:82-84) who affirmed that women represented Israel's "redeemed" flesh. This implied that women's "redemption" or "salvation" in ancient biblical world, was not a result of a "direct" covenant with Yahweh, except through matrimonial relationship. According to this view, men regarded women as being

⁸ Numerous extensive works have been published on this notion, including Horowitz (1979). In her work, Horowitz argues that the biblical text is affirmative that the Hebrew term *adam* is explained as "humankind"/"humanity" (1979:175). She further remarks that both "man" and "woman" were created in God's likeness, citing Gn 1:26-27 as affirming this equality.

outside Yahweh's plan for the "salvation" of humankind. Circumcision was believed to be a rite of masculine status bestowal in which man, the father, initiates a man-to-be, his son, into the covenant with Yahweh (Hoffman 1996:2).

The next section examines contemporary perspectives on MGM.

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON MGM

It was explored in this study that in ancient Israel, religion played a key function in influencing circumcision. In the absence of religion, some modern postbiblical societies (hence "contemporary perspective of circumcision"), are choosing to be circumcised for various reasons. Amongst the Xhosa communities in South Africa, it is largely on the basis of culture that young males choose to be circumcised. In discussing a global perspective of circumcision, the present section will be segmented into four parts as follows: (1) the role of culture amongst the Xhosa communities in motivating MGM, (2) the emergence of FGM in Africa, (3) the theory that circumcision eliminates transmission of HIV which causes AIDS, and (4) the theory that a circumcised penis enhances orgasm.

The role of culture⁹ in motivating MGM

It appears that religion has played a key role in motivating MGM amongst societies of various contexts, both ancient and modern. Studies that have been published to date do not seem to refer to any other source that influenced the rise of the ritual outside the plethora of religious practices. For example, as a religious rite, circumcision has been practised within Islamic and Jewish communities since time immemorial (Gwata 2009:3). Muslims practised circumcision usually during pre-school years or immediately before marriage (Funani 1990). The Jews – as already discussed in this essay – practised the rite because Yahweh commanded it to Abraham, usually eight days after birth (Gn 17:10-14). Although Christianity as a religion is perceived to be claiming numerous followers in Southern Africa, Christians do not seem to be open in either affirming or condemning MGM. To say that MGM amongst Xhosa

⁹ In addition to culture, other components (e.g., social status, access to sex, preparation for marriage, amongst others) are believed to be contributing factors for modern postbiblical societies to choose to be circumcised.

communities was influenced by the Old Testament ideology of the practice or by Christianity is an overstatement.

Some opinions suggest that circumcision was not practised in Southern Africa before 1492 C.E. One such opinion was advanced by Doyle (2005:279-285) who noted that the practice of circumcision is thought to have been brought to the Bantu-speaking tribes of Africa by either the Jews after one of their many expulsions from European countries, or by Muslim Moors escaping after the 1492 C.E. conquest of Spain. These “Bantu-speaking African tribes” as Doyle puts it, would include, amongst others, the Xhosa community in South Africa. The above assertion by Doyle draws this paper to respond to the question: Was MGM amongst Xhosa communities influenced by the biblical text? One cannot say with certainty that the biblical text influenced the ritual amongst Xhosa communities. Amongst scholars who have done extensive research on circumcision amongst the Xhosas are Louis Vincent and others (Vincent et al. 2008). In contrast to Doyle’s affirmation above, Vincent and others – who put forward some reasons for turning to MGM amongst the Xhosa ethnic group – did not mention that the biblical view of circumcision precipitated modern MGM amongst Xhosa communities. Amongst the reasons given by Vincent (Vincent et al. 2008) and others for Xhosa men opting to be circumcised are: upkeep of culture and a gateway to manhood; social status; access to sex; and preparation for marriage. Thus the role of the biblical text in influencing MGM is inconceivable. To date, existing written works on MGM do not draw our attention in a direct way that the ancient biblical text might have motivated the ritual amongst Xhosa communities. However, this does not rule out the possibility of “borrowing” some tenets from the biblical text, as most Africans tend to be familiar with the Bible and its teachings. However, the dominant factor that influenced MGM amongst Xhosa communities is the aspect of culture. Amongst most African cultures, MGM continues to play a role in the upkeep of a particular people’s culture, highly regarded as a ritual of “entering manhood”. Andrea Wilcken, Thomas Keil and Bruce Dick write that “in many African societies, male circumcision is carried out for cultural reasons, particularly as an initiation ritual and a rite of passage into manhood” (Wilken et al. 2010:907). African cultures circumcise boys in their teens as a rite of passage (Fourie n.d.). For example, Swaziland and Botswana have also begun to prematurely encourage infant circumcisions in an attempt to prevent HIV infection, even though research contradicts this rationale (Fourie n.d.). John Mbiti admits that “circumcision and ritual initiation is

the only possible way of entering manhood and gaining the status, respect, rights and responsibilities that are thought to attend manhood” (1986:93).

However, male circumcision is a practice considered highly sacred by Xhosa communities. Ntokozo Tshapa (Thsapa n.d.:n.p.) explains that “male circumcision” (*ukusoka*) is a phase that a boy has to go through before he is declared a “man”. Tshapa adds that certain public figures in South Africa have gone through this practice, citing former president Nelson Mandela and the deputy minister of police Fikile Mbalula, as examples (Thsapa n.d.:n.p.).

The Xhosa culture believes that “circumcision is the gateway to manhood in the same way that baptism is the gateway to Christianity” (Mtuze 2004:41). This cultural belief of “manhood” deriving from a ritual of circumcision is clearly expressed in the words of Wilson (1952:200) as follows:

Before dawn the initiates are led by the men, blankets covering their bodies and heads, to a place near the lodge where the operation is performed. The initiates sit on their blankets on the ground in a row, the surgeon emerges, unsheathing his knife, takes the foreskin between thumb and forefinger, pulls it forward and cuts it in two sawing motions. He drops the foreskin onto the blanket in front on the initiate and moves to the next one. Each boy has to shout ‘Ndiyindoda’ (‘I am a man’) at the time of being cut.

In addition to culture, the mushrooming of MGM is further compounded by the aspect of financial gain on the part of the circumciser due to lack of unemployment and income. In an attempt to salvage a financial scarcity, the circumciser concocted a scheme of charging fees for carrying out the “surgical operation”. According to Vincent et al. (2008:30) in some places up to R1200 is charged per initiate and it is not unusual for a single school to circumcise over 100 people. In some cases, people pay as much as R400 per boy for attending the initiation school” (see Ncayiyana 2003:n.p.). Vincent et al. further noted that circumcision is a large source of income in poverty-stricken areas where unemployment is high.

The emergence of FGM in Africa

Althaus (1997) has noted that the debate over female circumcision is relatively recent. However, the following glimpses will throw some light on the emergence of FGM in

Africa. Writings by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C.E. described female and male circumcisions (Watson 2005:422). Watson further noted that Herodotus' writings indicated that circumcisions were performed among the Egyptians, Ethiopians, Phoenicians, and the Hittites. The Ethiopians referred to the process as "pharonic circumcision," implying that the Egyptians were the first with this practice, yet in some Egyptian writings there was indication that the practice was from Ethiopia (Watson 2005:422). Althaus (1997:n.p.) has argued that FGM – the partial or total cutting away of the external female genitalia – has been practised for centuries in parts of Africa, generally as one element of a rite of passage preparing young girls for womanhood and marriage.

Unlike the portrayal of the biblical text of women being circumcised in the ancient Near East as well as in other parts of ancient Africa discussed above, FGM is not practised amongst Xhosa communities. According to a report released by the UK Border Agency (2008:55) the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) noted that FGM affects girls and women of certain immigrant populations. The above observation seems to concur with Doyle's (2005:279-285) view conferred previously in this transcript that circumcision might have been exported to South Africa by either immigrant Jews or the Moors from Europe and Spain. It is probable that these immigrant populations would practise FGM by themselves as immigrant communities, although to some extent the ritual might influence the locals to begin circumcising females. However, South African legislation has outlawed FGM. The Centre for Reproductive Rights reported that in January 2008 legislation against FGM was enacted in 2005 (UK Border Agency 2008:55). The South African position against FGM might have been motivated by its consciousness of the similar stance which had been taken by the World Health Organisation (WHO) at a seminar held in 1979 in Khartoum, Sudan, which was meant to address traditional practices affecting the health of women and children. WHO issued recommendations that governments work to eliminate the practice (WHO 1979). For Xhosa communities not encouraging FGM might be an act of compliance with the pieces of legislation forbidding the practice. The gruesome nature associated with FGM makes the practice appear sarcastic especially when explanation for carrying out the procedure is inconceivable. Althaus (1997:n.p.) has opined that the conditions under which FGM is generally performed in Africa, even the less extensive types of genital cutting can lead to potentially fatal complications, such as hemorrhage, infection and shock. The inability to pass urine because of pain,

swelling and inflammation following the operation may lead to urinary tract infection. Althaus further chronicles that a woman may suffer from abscesses and pain from damaged nerve endings long after the initial wound has healed.

In my view, if the rite of male circumcision in the modern postbiblical world could be traced to biblical times, it would portray the biblical text and its interpretation as very dangerous because “once they are born, they go their own way and there is no limit to the influence they have on people’s lives” (Klopper 2010:652).

The theory that circumcision reduces HIV transmission

HIV (human immuno-deficiency virus) is the virus which causes AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) (Weiss and Polonsky 2007). Marck (1997:337-339) opines that the African AIDS epidemic is a predominantly heterosexual epidemic with a subordinate epidemic involving mother to child transmission. He further says transmission through intravenous drug use, male homosexual activities and other means significant on other continents are rarely observed in the African epidemic. Mundane penile-vaginal sex acts are the main mode of transmission across the continent. To date, medical research has not succeeded in finding a breakthrough to cure the AIDS pandemic. Health practitioners have opted for alternative substitutions – not as remedies to combat the pandemic but as temporary measures while research to solicit for a lasting solution continues. Amongst such temporary measures, MGM has been recommended.

However, the question: “Does MGM reduce HIV transmission?” attracts differing opinions by both scholars who are in favour of MGM and those against it. For example, the theory that MGM reduces HIV transmission is gradually gaining momentum in South Africa (Ncayiyana 2011). Some men in general who are not culturally-entrenched choose to be circumcised following the scientific research that claims that circumcision reduces HIV infections by 76% in South Africa (Ncayiyana 2011:n.p). The World Health Organisation reported that modern scientific research has responded positively to circumcision and has recommended the rite as part of a comprehensive programme for preventing HIV transmission in areas with high endemic rates of HIV (WHO 2007). Jacobs, Grady and Bolnick (2012:3-8) have also affirmed the finding that circumcision significantly reduces female-to-male HIV transmission has promoted medical organisations serving the affected communities to promote circumcision as additional method of controlling the spread of HIV. Siegfried

et al. (2009) concur that studies done on sexually active men in Africa found that circumcision reduces the infection rate of HIV amongst heterosexual men by 38-66% over a period of 24 months. In contrast, Kathryn Valdal Fourie has a different idea. She critiqued the above theory by arguing that circumcision is no longer considered to be a preventative health measure, and no medical association anywhere in the world recommends non-therapeutic, routine infant circumcision. The theory of circumcision reducing HIV transmission is followed by yet another controversial “myth” that says a circumcised penis enhances orgasm during sex presented under the next section.

The theory that a circumcised penis enhances orgasm

The “popularised” belief that a penile circumcision enhances sexual excitement or orgasm has not attracted much attention amongst scholars. News that has been making rounds was that circumcision enhances orgasm. The impact that male circumcision has on the overall sexual experience for either partner is unknown (O’Hara and O’Hara 1999:79). The reason given for the above belief is that the “head” of the penis is usually covered by the foreskin. My anonymous informant has revealed that when the foreskin is removed, the sensitive soft layer of the penis is exposed, which leaves the glans under the foreskin bare. This “head” of the penis is hardened with time due to friction and constant contact with harder surfaces, such as undergarments and so on. In this way, when the erect penis rubs against the glans of the vagina forth and back, ejaculation is “delayed” because the “hardened” head of the penis is no longer “too sensitive” to “succumb” to sexual excitement in a hurry. This longevity in a sexual activity – so it is believed – provides orgasm for both partners. “Early ejaculation” is believed to be a result of being too sensitive to sexual excitement, and the “soft layer” of an uncircumcised penis responds to this excitement too early. It follows, therefore, that penile circumcision delays ejaculation for both partners to enjoy sex. To date, there are no published findings that support the above notion. However, the opposite has been proposed by scholarly research with regards to the responses of women to penile circumcision. It has been noted that the presence of the movable foreskin makes a difference in foreplay, being more arousing to the female (O’Hara and O’Hara 1999:83). O’Hara and O’Hara further contend that women reported that they were about twice as likely to experience orgasm if the male partner had a foreskin. O’Hara and O’Hara’s view is supported by Kathryn Valdal Fourie’s opinion (Fourie n.d.:n.p.)

which states that “the foreskin plays an important role in the sensory input necessary for satisfying orgasm for both partners,” arguing that if the foreskin is removed this sensory input is reduced. Also, a survey was conducted of 35 female sexual partners aged 18 to 69 years who had experienced sexual intercourse with both circumcised and genitally intact men (Bensley and Boyle 2003). The majority preferred an intact penis with a foreskin as opposed to one that is circumcised. In my view, the absence of literature to support the claim that circumcision enhances orgasm does not mean the claim is invalid. Further investigation is required in this regard.

Although the discussion focuses on MGM within the Xhosa ethnic group as a case study, cases of deaths emanating from initiation schools in the Eastern Cape at large, amongst other regions, are also highlighted. The section that follows provides statistics of some fatalities that occurred at some initiation schools in South Africa in recent years.

MGM FATALITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Reports of initiates dying as a result of circumcision at initiation schools abound (see Mann 2013; Lubisi 2001; van Niekerk 2002; Feni 2005). Causes of these deaths vary from infections to dehydration. Initiates are expected to observe strict dietary taboos during their initiation. These commonly include the instruction not to drink water or eat salty foods including meat in the first seven days after circumcision (Vincent et al. 2008:13). It is reported that beatings also constitute some punishment exerted on deviant initiates. In the following section, this article critiques MGM as a violation of human rights.

MGM AND VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

It seems deaths that occur as a result of MGM are neither designated as “human rights violation” (Milos and Macris 1992:87-96; Nhlapo 1995), nor “homicide” for perpetrators to appear in court for justice to prevail. Is the South African government really committed to dealing with the complications¹⁰ arising from initiation schools? In spite of the fatalities that have been experienced recently in initiation schools

¹⁰ Discussion of complications arising from initiation schools is adequately explored by Menahem (1981:45-48).

country-wide in South Africa and the alleged government commitment to tighten the rules about thirteen years ago (cf. Sidley 2001), delivery of justice is problematic as it appears the law does not take its course to either put an end to these fatalities or close the initiation schools or ban MGM.

Most of the people that are dying during initiation are young initiates. Within the Xhosa custom the ritual is performed most commonly on males ranging between the ages of 15 and 25 (Vincent et al. 2008:11). Most of these initiation schools continue to exist and operate against the law (that is, culture versus the law). It is reported that the Eastern Cape's circumcision legislation sets the legal age for circumcision at 18 but boys of 16 and older may be circumcised with the permission of their parents or guardians. Vincent et al. further affirm that this is in line with the new Children's Act (Act No. 38 of 2005) which was signed into law in June 2006. Although the Children's Act (Chapter 2, Section 12 [8]) prohibits circumcision of male children under the age of 16 except when performed for religious purposes or for medical reasons, boys who are 15 years of age and under (see Vincent et al. 2008:11) are still being circumcised and fatalities are still occurring. The Act, said Vincent *et al*, also stipulates that male children older than 16 may be circumcised only with their consent and after proper counselling.

On the one hand, the United Nations' Act which seeks to protect children is taken for granted by the government, local communities and traditional initiation schools. Article 5 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) places primary responsibility for children on parents, guardians and on the extended family. On the other hand, Article 9, Section [3] and [18] of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child prohibits abuse of children and promotes protection of children (Nyandiya-Bundy and Bundy 2002:597). The above pieces of legislation are meant to guide children and protect them against abuse, such as what is being experienced in initiation schools in South Africa. In my view, legislation can just be an insignificant piece of paper if it does not transcend or translate into praxis.

The Church should not be regarded as having taken an obstinate position and remaining on the sidelines towards MGM and its consequences. For example, Fr. Peter A. Clark of the Catholic Church has maintained that the controversy surrounding male circumcision extends to Catholic health care (Clark 2006:30-39). Clark further affirms that non-therapeutic mutilations violate the physical integrity of the human person and are, therefore, morally wrong. The Catholic Church also teaches that God

created us in God's image and likeness (Gn 1:27-28). It follows then that God created males with normal, healthy foreskins for the purpose of protecting the glans, providing natural lubrication to prevent dryness, and contributing significantly to the sexual response of the intact male. To surgically remove the foreskin for hygienic reasons – and/or to obtain other questionable benefits – is not only ethically unjustifiable but morally irresponsible, especially when such procedures can lead to serious injury and even death. The above notion is a representative example of the view that the sacred institution has continued to challenge MGM and fatalities occurring at initiation schools.

The following section on concluding remarks offers possible solutions towards improving MGM in South Africa.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It was explained that circumcision in the ancient Near East was conducted on the basis of religion, depending on the demands of a particular god or gods. Before circumcision came to be known and formalised amongst the Jews, it was already the norm existing amongst other cultures such as in North Syria, Phoenicia, and Egypt, amongst others. It is speculated that the Jewish patriarchs might have imported the rite of circumcision from their neighbours, notably the Egyptians. It is therefore supposed that Abraham might have borrowed the practice when he visited Egypt, although – as was noted in this article – the patriarchal narrative depicts Yahweh as the architect who introduced the rite to Abraham. Reasons for practising circumcision during biblical times varied. One of the theories advanced by scholars is that it probably could have been an act of hygiene because of sandy and dusty environments which characterised large portions of the ancient Near Eastern landscape. On the other hand, the biblical text portrays it as a religious ritual in which Yahweh was believed to have commanded to the patriarchs in order to establish the covenant with Abraham and his descendants who became known as the “chosen people” of God. Since the time of Abraham to date, circumcision has been regarded and practised as an identity marker amongst devout Jewish communities. The rise of MGM in Southern Africa (e.g., South Africa) cannot be validated with certainty. However, scholars speculate that it might have been “exported” by Jews or Muslims who migrated to Southern Africa around 1492 C.E. While amongst ancient biblical societies circumcision was practised

as a religious and “covenantal” exercise, in contrast, amongst the Xhosa communities it was adopted as a cultural ritual, in which young men are initiated to become “real men.” Over the years, not much attention was paid on the traditional method of conducting MGM in South Africa, particularly amongst Xhosa communities until the 1990s when the rate of fatalities emanating from initiation schools were increasingly smoldering, resulting in public outrage. Although legislation to regulate MGM has been passed by parliament particularly in the Eastern Cape where initiation schools were reportedly “mushrooming” at an alarming rate, recent figures of deaths of initiates reflected that the traditional practice of “surgical operation” and the recruitment exercise itself, have not gone through a transformational exercise as a programme of action to improve it. This discourse concludes by suggesting the following possible solutions towards mitigating fatalities of MGM in the Eastern Cape, especially amongst Xhosa communities:

- (1) MGM – although involving the local traditional leadership – should be regulated by a government department, in which a task force is established. This task force is informed about an initiation procedure, the date, names of initiates, their ages as well as total number of initiates.
- (2) Letters of application to carry out MGM are required:
 - (a) Just like a letter of application to register a marriage (governed by a Marriages Act) by a qualified marriage practitioner, a letter of application should state the legal status of the circumciser (or traditional surgeon), including his qualifications, and
 - (b) A letter of consent by either the initiate or the parent/guardian should be attached.
- (3) A task force leader is assigned to make routine checks on the goings-on at the initiation school.
- (4) A legislation to govern initiation procedures should state it clearly that it will be a punishable offence not to report abuse or prolonged infectious condition or illness on the part of circumcised initiates during the “healing period.” Any illness should be referred for clinical attention.
- (5) A manageable number of initiates should be recruited at a time; say between 20 and 40 (like a formal school class), manned by at least two traditional surgeons. Any excess of the above figure is a violation of the law, and is liable for prosecution.

- (6) Although culture plays a key function in maintaining MGM in which modern technology is deliberately negated, age limit should also be considered whether sterilising instruments should not be used.
- (7) Like a taxi/bus driver who – due to reckless driving ending in accident which kills passengers – is charged for homicide, a traditional circumciser should account for every person that dies as a result of the exercise at the initiation school. A prison term should be stipulated, as well as a ban from practising “surgical operation” in the country. This will motivate initiation schools to take extra precautionary measures during the initiation process in order to avoid fatalities.
- (8) The Department of Arts and Culture (together with the Department of Health), should conduct workshops where both parents and traditional leaders/surgeons will be trained on safer methods of conducting “surgical operation” during initiation.

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