

Possible Psychoanalytic Meanings of the Foreskin in the Hebrew Bible

Pieter van der Zwan

University of Pretoria, South Africa

pvdz1961@gmail.com

Abstract

Amongst the approximately 250 body parts which are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the foreskin is mentioned infrequently, even when it is closely linked to circumcision, an essential religious, national, and identity marker. While the foreskin must therefore be highly cathected, this background position may be indicative of either unconscious or constantly assumed meaning(s) which it has in its literary contexts. A psychoanalytic exploration of its possible significance can widen the hermeneutic horizon by investigating what has remained unsaid. This can range from idealisation to shame and can at least serve as a heuristic stimulant.

Keywords: foreskin; prepuce; circumcision; idealisation; shame; nakedness; purity; patriarchy; psychoanalytic; body-part; meaning

Introduction

The relative silence about the foreskin despite the crucial position of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible needs to be interpreted psychoanalytically.

Much has been written about circumcision, and about Jewish circumcision in particular, including its psychoanalytical interpretations (Sierksma 1951, 139–69). Franz Maciejewski (2002, 7) considers this trauma to be the foundation of both Judaism and psychoanalysis, in the latter case leading to Freud's core insight: the oedipal complex.

Little attention has, however, been given to the foreskin and its meaning in the Hebrew Bible. Such a study could enhance understanding of circumcision in turn. The psychoanalytic perspective recognises the over-determination of psychic phenomena (Freud 2008c, 666). That means that the meaning of the foreskin cannot be reduced to a single factor or cause but that a multiplicity of interpretations could overlay its psychic



experience, some of which might even be contradictory. It also means that a phenomenon such as circumcision could have different causal roots and meanings in different cultures, which is why one should guard against imposing the findings of psychological anthropology of “modern” circumcision onto that found in the biblical text. That would be an anachronism.

Body parts have meanings and therefore go beyond their literal existence. These meanings can be inferred from their literary function which is why the historicity of texts in the Hebrew Bible where the prepuce is mentioned is relatively irrelevant for this study. These meanings as extension of the literal become clear, for instance, where a body part is used as symbol or metaphor, as is sometimes the case with circumcision and by implication of the foreskin in the Hebrew Bible.

This study will commence with a brief interpretative summary of the phenomenon of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, followed by instances in which the foreskin is mentioned explicitly and by mentioning other references to genitals. The foreskin’s juxtaposition to shame will then be highlighted as this could suggest associated meanings of the foreskin. In addition, possible idealisation of the foreskin in the Hebrew Bible will then be explored before the panorama of the possible psychoanalytic meanings will finally be presented.

Conscious care has been taken with psychological interpretations of the foreskin or of circumcision which are not strictly limited to the evidence of the Hebrew Bible, as this could risk invalid generalisation.

Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible

The Wider Context

In the Hebrew Bible the foreskin is always mentioned in the context of circumcision. That is why this context should be dealt with first.

In an even wider context than the Hebrew Bible circumcision seems to form part of the human dissatisfaction with the body which goes beyond its regular care such as the cutting of hair (Sierksma 1951, 136). One can assume that by surrendering and losing a natural body part, something cultural or conscious is gained in exchange for it. Circumcision in puberty seems to be a preparation for and initiation into the new reproductive life, while infant circumcision seems to occur in the context of pastoring and breeding (Schmidt 1935, 249) and so celebrates productive but also reproductive

life as thanksgiving sacrifice of first-fruits.¹ The former is at the beginning, while the latter stands at the end of this cycle.

The assumptions in the second instance, are, of course, first that infant circumcision is a sacrifice, and secondly that the foreskin represents the “first” and therefore best part of the total child, a process in which not only the first-born son but all sons, and yet no daughter, are the focus.² This means that certain shifts and displacements have occurred, a function which metaphors play in the unconscious and in language. This means that the foreskin plays a metaphorical role beyond its literal meaning (*vide infra*).

Instances of Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible

Displacement also plays an important role in Exodus 4 (*vide infra*): Aaron replaces Moses as God’s spokesperson. Secondly, God threatens Pharaoh to kill Egypt’s first-born because they are “killing” (in the sense of oppressing) God’s first-born, Israel. Thirdly, the foreskin of Zipporah’s son³ seemingly rescues Moses’ (Durham’s interpretation 1987, 58) or his son’s life, whatever is the correct interpretation, just as the ram replaces Isaac before being sacrificed in Genesis 22:13. She throws it קֶרֶךְ לְרַגְלָיו (at his feet, a word sometimes used as an euphemism for phallus [Schorch 2000, 194–96]), perhaps suggested or adumbrated by Moses’ rod, an obvious phallic symbol, in verses 2, 4 and 17 earlier in the same chapter. It is possible that God wanted to kill Moses because he was uncircumcised ([a requirement] for his calling) and that Zipporah’s throwing her son’s foreskin at Moses’ phallus “misled” God by making God believe that it was actually that of Moses and so having fulfilled the demand for circumcision and rescuing his life. Nowhere does one read of Moses’ circumcision, making the rabbinic tradition solve the problem by claiming that he was already born without a foreskin (Vermes 1958, 314–15).

In this history of shifts some traces of continuity have remained: just as circumcision—even of infants—is found since time immemorial across the world, the Israelites⁴ use צַר (a flint) according to Exodus 4:25 (a text allegedly from the Yahwist tradition), or הַרְבֹּת

1 There is also the possibility that child sacrifice (cf. Joshua 6:26; 1 Kings 16:34; 2 Kings 3:27; Isaiah 57:5; Micha 6:7b) continued even alongside circumcision.

2 This could be explained in that Israel, i.e., all male Israelites, is said to be the first-born of God according to Exodus 4:22. Yet, in Ezekiel 44:30 the priests are privileged to receive וְרֵאשִׁית כָּל-בְּכוֹרֵי כָל (and the first of all the first-fruits of everything), repeated in 48:12, and there even called קֹדֶשׁ קֹדְשִׁים (most holy). Psychoanalytically this could be interpreted as envious “sibling” rivalry with the Levites (*vide infra*) or even as an oedipal attack on the father, or both.

3 Usually taken to be their oldest, Gershom, but a midrash by Rashi considers Eliezer. No age is given, but Propp (1993, 499 n.23) takes him to be young enough to ride with his mother on an ass, according to Exodus 4:20.

4 One assumes here that Zipporah as wife of Moses has become an Israelite.

צָרִים (knives of flint) in Joshua 5:3,⁵ suggesting an ancient tradition (Sierksma 1951, 152).

In Leviticus 22:24 and in Deuteronomy 23:2, the word נִכְרִית (and castrated [as passive participle]), confirms the connotation of castration when circumcision is introduced in Exodus 4:25 where the same verb, נִתְּכַרַת (cut off) is applied to the male genital, although the more technical term, לְמִוּלָה (in regard of the circumcision), is used in verse 26. Castration for an apparently female deity introduced as אֵל שַׁדַּי, El Shaddai, sometimes translated as “the god of breasts,” in Genesis 17:1, allegedly as part of the Priestly Source, would tie in well with Exodus 4:25 where a woman, Zipporah, executes this symbolic castration.

This kind of symbolic castration becomes the precondition for inclusion and is used as a demarcation of identity and a barrier to exclude others, as in Genesis 34:14–15, 17, and 22, even though circumcision is not publicly visible. The skin, which serves as a psychologically sensitive body-boundary in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Van der Zwan 2016; 2017) therefore seems to be taken as more significant when it concerns that of the phallus. Circumcision was God’s first command to Abraham and transcends seed, as those born in the house of or bought by an Israelite are also to be circumcised according to Genesis 17:12–13. Yet, it would seem that the Arabs according to Genesis 17:25f., the Phoenicians according to Ezekiel 28:10, and the Egyptians, Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites (the last also in Ezekiel 32:29, but not in Hasmonean times any more) according to Jeremiah 9:25 are also circumcised (cf. Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard 1991, 153–54). The Jew Flavius Josephus (37 to circa 100 C.E.) claimed in *Antiquitates Judaicae* (Josephus 2005, 53) and *Contra Apionem* (Josephus 1926, 231) that the Jews inherited circumcision from the Egyptians. As the Mesopotamians did not have circumcision, it could become a sign of Jewish identity during the exile, in this way enhancing its significance even to a religious level. This process intensified during the Hellenistic period where it was scorned and had to be defended.

Verb forms derived from the root מוּל (circumcise) occur 32 or 35⁶ times in the Hebrew Bible, 11 of which are found in Genesis 17:10–27 and five of which occur in Genesis 34:15–24. That means that half of the total are clustered in only two half-chapters in the Hebrew Bible. Otherwise it occurs only twice outside the Hexateuch (both in Jeremiah), but never in Numbers, just as the root עָרַל (foreskin) never occurs there either (*vide infra*). In 13 instances they are in the *qal* and in the other 19 occurrences they are in the *niph'al* form. In Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6 the *qal* and in Jeremiah 4:4 the *niph'al* form are metaphorical. In all the Qumran texts the verb occurs only four times (Mayer

5 With the more technical verb, נִמְלָה (and he circumcised).

6 Depending on whether one takes the three *hiph'il* formations meaning “cut off” in Psalm 118:10–12 as from the same root, as in Brown, Driver and Briggs (1907, 1335).

1984, 736). A noun from the reconstructed root מִקְלָה (circumcision) occurs only in Exodus 4:26.

In Zechariah 9:11 circumcision is referred to and in Ezekiel 22:10 and 23:18 the impurity and shamefulness of uncircumcision are probably hinted at respectively without using the verb or the noun in any of these three instances.

Despite the crucial position which circumcision plays in the religion and culture of the Hebrew Bible, later differentiating it from Christianity, references to it are therefore not as frequent as one would have expected, and references to the foreskin even less so. Despite its central ritual place, little is mentioned about it in the legislative documents (Erbele-Küster 2008, 85). In fact, its institution occurs in a narrative text, Genesis 17, probably to explain its origin to descendants. Circumcision is explicitly mentioned in only 12 (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, 1 Chronicles) of the 39 books, comprising just over 30 percent of the Hebrew Bible (Blaschke 1998, 108).

The same applies to the classical work on anthropology in the Old Testament by Wolff (1973) and the critique and correction to it in the work of Schroer and Staubli (2005) where no mention of either is made. This lacuna has, however, been attended to by the last two mentioned authors in a later work (Staubli and Schroer 2014).

Blood in connection with circumcision is only mentioned in Exodus 4:25, 26 where Staubli and Schroer (2014, 70) believe that it protects Moses' life, just as with the first-born, but then seemingly both male and female are saved by blood in Exodus 12:13. Propp (1999, 219–20) interprets the plural, מַיִם, as an abstract referring to guilt and suggesting impurity. The essential body part in circumcision is, however, not blood, as this could be obtained from cutting any other body part.

Circumcision as Sacrifice?

The answer to this question would determine the meaning of the foreskin. Circumcision as tradition is in a sense a repetitive action in a group and it could be argued that it could have at least some sacrificial features. Therefore, the mimetic theory of René Girard (1961) and his idea that violence is a precondition for the sacred could be applied, even when Girard never even mentions it as a possibility. This is despite his global mental tour in his consideration of sacrifice. However, he claims that all rituals, and therefore also transitional ones, derive from sacrifice. In both the contexts of Exodus 4:24ff. and Joshua 5:2–9 circumcision seems to facilitate a transition: in the former from Exodus and in the latter crossing the Jordan River into the promised land. Incidentally, the question arises if the “walls” of Joshua 6:20f. are not symbolic of the (violent) removal of the foreskins *en masse* in the previous chapter. The question arises why the need for circumcision arose precisely then. In any event, the transitional nature of circumcision

would mean that it also has sacrifice as its base, even when no rituals but only the bare practical steps are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

Circumcision, and therefore the foreskin as its facilitator, is also about transition from seven-day impurity to purity, and perhaps from barrenness to fertility (cf. Leviticus 12, 2–3; Silverman 2003, 53). Eight-day cycles occur in Leviticus 9:1; 14:10, 23; 15:14, 29 and 23:36, 39 as renewal and purifying sacrifice as rebirth into a male society.

Moreover, Girard (1978, 147) emphasises that the killing of a sacrificial animal often includes a collective act focusing on its genitals. Yet circumcision is never considered as such in the first ten chapters of Leviticus which deal so thoroughly with sacrifices. Only in Exodus 12:48 is it once mentioned in the six chapters, 11–16, dealing with impurities. Yet Neumann (1949, 68) already noticed the link between the symbols of sacrifice and of castration as both being archetypes of surrender. Rosenzweig (1972, 198) also links sacrifice and circumcision as both are acts of reconciliation and pacification, at least in Exodus 4. Van Baal (1976, 161) regards sacrifice in an even wider way as any gift to a deity. However, it does not seem that the foreskin is in any way a gift to God, as no ritual exists for its presentation to God. In fact, nothing is mentioned regarding what happens to it once cut off. Nowhere is it said that it is preserved or buried as is the case in some cultures (Sierksma 1951, 48).

Perhaps the foreskin is meant to simply disappear and be forgotten, as the relative scarcity of its mention in the Hebrew Bible suggests. The foreskin would then be the object and carrier onto which aggression and violence, for instance, that of the threatened father in the Oedipus conflict, is displaced, projected and so evacuated, similar to the Azazel-scapegoat driven into the wilderness mentioned in Leviticus 16:10. This would be supported by the anger of God in Exodus 4:26 which subsides after the circumcision: וַיִּרְףֵהוּ מִמֶּנּוּ (and he slackened from him, that is, he let him alone). This anger is also used to draw boundaries through exclusion (*vide supra*).

On the other hand, circumcision not only excludes but also imprisons, especially when it is done to infants who have no choice. When institutionalisation means the fixation and “imprisonment” of behaviour and certain people, then all institutions aim to imprison certain categories of people, as Foucault (1975) also recognised. Infants are still so marginal at the edge of society that they may unconsciously seem ideal to carry the aggression between adults or even the adults’ aggression against them as infants.

Ironically and significantly an adult man is, however, excluded from the community rather than forcing circumcision on him. Only in war is it forced onto adult men as in 1 Samuel 18:25, but then it implies death as well. Social (cf. Genesis 17:14) and physical death is the punishment for remaining uncircumcised according to Ezekiel 32:24–30, 32 where עֲרֻלִים (the uncircumcised) הִקְלְלִי-הֶרֶב ([have been] slain by the sword; with variations in verses 24, 26 and 27) or blade which had been avoided, ironically

becoming the one to kill the whole man. Also, in 1 Samuel 31:4 Saul prefers to be killed by the sword rather than be murdered by an uncircumcised Philistine, in this way preempting and preventing being “castrated” by an “uncastrated.”

An essential feature of sacrifice is, in fact, that its violence is not consciously recognised (Girard 1972, 27). Circumcision remains, however, a violent act, specifically when it is done to defenceless infants, even when it is done for religious reasons.

Spence (1910, 670) claims that circumcision originated from the idea of sacrifice of either sexuality or of the whole human being in pre-Western America. Barton (1910, 679f.; 1934, 148f.; cf. Gray 1910, 665, 667) made a similar claim for the Semites. Soloweitschik and Morgenstern (1929, 349f.), just as Pedersen (1946, 731) followed by De Groot (1943, 15), moot the possibility of Passover having been originally a circumcision feast on the basis of Joshua 5:2ff., 10ff; Exodus 12:43–48; 13:2.12–15 and 34:18–20, although in Exodus 12:44 and 48 and Joshua 5:11 circumcision could be a prerequisite for admission to Passover, making one wonder whether these people have been excluded from the Passover during their journey through the desert.

If these two rituals are connected, both are a sublimation and symbolisation of a complete sacrifice (cf. Girard 1978, 148) which is normally regarded as containing two elements of which the second is absent in both: blood and fire as transformational elements, although the burning of the hair of a Nazirite seems to link this symbolic castration with sacrifice. Furthermore, the foreskin was seemingly regarded as unclean (Blaschke 1998, 98ff.; Eberhart 2002, 331, 400).

Yet, in Joshua 5:3 a place is called גִּבְעַת הָעֵרְלוֹת (Gibeath-ha-Araloth, i.e., Hill of the Foreskins), suggesting that this collective occasion was so momentous that it left its mark on history at a specific place. Age, which is as a rule only mentioned at death in the Hebrew Bible, is as a probably significant exception also mentioned when Abraham was circumcised at 99 in Genesis 17:24, when Ishmael was circumcised at 13 in Genesis 17:25, and when Isaac was circumcised at the age of 8 days in Genesis 21:4. This raises the question whether circumcision is some kind of symbolic “death,” as Abram’s name was also changed to Abraham in Genesis 17:5, as if he were a new person, “reborn,” so to speak, but also promised to be the father of those who would be born from and to him. Circumcision therefore has a feminine character, just as the devouring wild beasts or nocturnal demons representing death and the unconscious (Sierksma 1951, 148) in much of mythology are female (Sierksma 1951, 147). Birth and death are here closely related.

There is indeed a scaling-down and compromise from child sacrifice to castration to circumcision, and, if one accepts the contestable claim by Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard (1991, 154) that neither Jeremiah nor Deuteronomy encourage bodily circumcision, then finally to a circumcised heart.

Sublimation dissolves the intensity and severity of the literal and refines it into the symbolic. There is also a self-subversive element involved: sacrificing sacrifice. That is perhaps why both circumcision and Passover have been disqualified as possible sacrifices.

Instances of Explicit Mentioning of the Foreskin

Literal Use

The object of circumcision is either the flesh of the foreskin (*vide infra*), the foreskin or a male person, the latter case serving as metonymy suggesting that the foreskin stands for the whole male person and so forms its essence, which is then removed and given up. This is also the case when circumcision is used as both a metaphor and a metonym in Jeremiah 4:4.

Words from the root עָרַל (foreskin) occur 55 times in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Mayer 1989, 385), mostly in the Pentateuch (but never in Numbers; *vide supra*) and in the three major prophets, Ezekiel mentioning it the most with eight times followed by seven times in Genesis. The noun עָרְלָה (foreskin), or its derivatives, is only used 16 times, three of those instances in a figurative sense. The adjective עָרֵל (having foreskin) occurs, however, 37 times, suggesting that the state of having a foreskin is emphasised more than the foreskin itself. This implies that the foreskin is so important that it affects the state of the whole person. Twice a verb is used, once in Leviticus 19:23 in the *qal* and once in Habakkuk 2:16 in the *niph'al* form, both in the figurative sense. It is possible that the adjective, מְעַרְלִים, in Ezekiel 32:27 should be read as מְעוֹלָם, although its context looks somewhat similar to the next verses (28–30 and 32) which almost echo Ezekiel 31:18 (Brown, Driver and Briggs 1907, 1902).

It is noteworthy that the “uncircumcised” is not described *via negationis* but as those with a foreskin (Erbele-Küster 2008, 95 note 77). That means that the foreskin remained in the unconscious even after its bodily absence, as the unconscious can only conceptualise positives, even when they are denied (Freud 1991a, 285f.; 1991b, 15; 2005, 113 note 2).

Incidentally, it may be significant that Freud who, as a Jewish medical doctor, mentions so many other related body parts such as the penis, scrotum, and glans, never explicitly refers to the foreskin, not even when he deals so much with circumcision and castration. It seems that it is, just like the Tetragrammaton, ineffably clouded in the silence of awe and fear.

The noun בָּשָׂר (flesh; as euphemism for penis) sometimes precedes the noun עָרְלָה (foreskin), or its derivatives, as pregenitive as is the case in Genesis 17:11, 14, 23, 24, 25 and Leviticus 12:3 (*vide supra*). This could be a tautology when it is used appositionally or as a specification of בָּשָׂר when this is not used in a euphemistic way.

In Genesis 17:14 it becomes *pars pro toto* generalised to the whole uncircumcised man who is then removed as if he were the foreskin itself. As this uncircumcised man is not pure, so the foreskin can therefore not be pure either.

In 1 Samuel 14:6, 17:26, 36, 31:4, 2 Samuel 1:20 and 1 Chronicles 10:4 הָעֶרְלָה (the uncircumcised), or its derivatives, is even used as a swearword. In 1 Samuel 18:25, 27 and 2 Samuel 3:14 derivatives of עֶרְלָה (foreskin) could represent the whole penis.

In Jeremiah 9:24 there seems to be a contradiction with מִגֵּל בְּעֶרְלָה (the circumcised in uncircumcision/the foreskin) but the meaning is “all the [physically] circumcised who are uncircumcised [in heart].”

Foreskins serve as “negotiation currency” in Genesis 34:14, 15, 17, 22 and 24 where it could also have been a hidden form of castration as preamble to death as collective punishment for rape. This recalls David who with the 200 foreskins harvested from the enemy as proof and guarantee of his own power and virility bought Michal with this as a kind of dowry from her father, Saul, in a similar way in 1 Samuel 18:25, 27, where it also implies death. This price goes beyond the compensation required in Exodus 22:15. Yet, one could ask whether the circumcision is the test and the foreskin even as “dowry” offered to enter into marriage with God as well.

Figurative Use

Despite the relatively scarce references to the foreskin in the Hebrew Bible its use in a figurative way implies that it has a broader spread in the unconscious than at the literal conscious level.

The metaphorical use can also be interpreted as a counter to the literal meaning which is then critiqued for the way it has been distorted, even when it is not rejected. Cult-critique of sacrifice runs parallel to the same critique of circumcision when it is not congruent with an inner attitude even when it does not wish to abolish it, as later happens in New Testament times where it becomes irrelevant.

The opposite of circumcision is then, however, mostly the case, meaning “uncircumcised.” That means that the foreskin is only referred to when it is (still) attached to the male body, except in the case of David who brought it as proof of his worthiness in 1 Samuel 18 (*vide supra et infra*). In Exodus 6:12, 30 Moses’ lips are said to be עֶרְלָה (uncircumcised), probably referring back to Exodus 4:10. This oral connection is reminiscent of Leviticus 19:23 where יֹאכַל (eating) the עֶרְלָתוֹ (uncircumcised) fruit is עֶרְלָה (forbidden, or taboo, according to Propp 1987, 366, and so קִדְּשׁ [holy] as in verse 24) in the first three years when it is “first-born.” Ironically leaving this fruit in its original state is tantamount to sacrificing it to God as its origin. A verb, to be reconstructed as עָרַל and meaning “count as foreskin” and an adjective עָרַל (having

foreskin) are used here respectively. The *niph'al* form of this verb, וְהֵעֵרַל (translated as, “and be uncovered”), is used in Habakkuk 2:16, although it could be read as the *niph'al* form of רָעַל (stagger), as in LXX.

This oral connection is, however, missing in Leviticus 26:41 where לִבְבָבְכֶם (their heart) is described as הֵעֵרַל (uncircumcised). The same applies to וּמְלַתְּמֵם אֶת עֵרְלֹת לִבְבָבְכֶם (circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart) in Deuteronomy 10:16, וּמְלֵ יְהוָה אֶלֶהֶיךָ (and the LORD your God will circumcise your heart) in Deuteronomy 30:6, אֶת-לִבְבָבְךָ (and the LORD your God will circumcise your heart) in Deuteronomy 30:6, הַמְלִי לַיהוָה וְהִסְרוּ עֵרְלוֹת לִבְבָבְכֶם (circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart) in Jeremiah 4:47, עֵרְלֵי-לֵב (are uncircumcised in the heart) in Jeremiah 9:25 as in Ezekiel 44:7, עֵרְלֵ לֵב (uncircumcised in heart) in Ezekiel 44:9 and אֶזְנֵהָ אֵזֶן (their ear is dull) in Jeremiah 6:10, where it is used in the feminine form.

In all these figurative cases, whether it is applied to the mouth, the heart, or the ear, the foreskin suggests incapability, implying that circumcision enables. It is about initiation and opening the way, just as the first-born opens the way out of the womb in Exodus 13:2, 12, and 15 as the leader for his siblings. It also calls for the centre and the periphery, the (fore)skin as presentation to the world, to be congruent.

This wide range from the literal to the spiritual including the metaphorical meaning of both circumcision and therefore the foreskin as well, suggests that much psychic investment (cathexis) must be involved with the latter resulting in a rich texture of meaning. Circumcision and the foreskin therefore both have bodily, psychological, social and religious dimensions.

Other References to Male Genitals

It may be important to investigate other references to the penis in the Hebrew Bible in order to contextualise עֵרְלָה (foreskin) and render it a clearer significance. A few examples will suffice.

General for genitalia are מִפְּשָׁעָה (the pubic region, stepping-region of the body, hip or buttock [Brown, Driver and Briggs 1907, 2013] in 1 Chronicles 19:4 from the verb, [פָּשַׁע] [step, march]), עֵרְוָה = מְעוּר (nakedness, pudenda), יָרֵךְ (thigh, loin, side, base), רֵגֶל (foot, private part). The mention of male genitalia far exceeds that of female genitalia and includes several euphemisms for male- and fruitfulness.

In Leviticus 6:3 (but not in 12:3), 15:2, 3, 16:4 and in Exodus 28:42 (more specifically עֵרְוָה בְּשַׁר עֵרְוָה [the flesh of nakedness]) the root בָּשַׁר (flesh) is used as a euphemism for the penis. (Once, in Leviticus 15:19, it is used for the vulva.) That means that six of these

7 In the latter two cases the verb מוּל (circumcise) is also used metaphorically.

seven instances occur in Leviticus which seems to have body issues, which could psychoanalytically suggest neurotic and more specifically obsessive-compulsive struggles.

Other body parts which substitute for the penis are לִשׁוֹן (tongue) in Isaiah 57:4; בְּרַכְיִים (knees) which, significantly, has the same consonants as the verb בָּרַךְ (kneel, blessing); הִלְצִיָּם (loins), as in Genesis 35:11, from which the children of Jacob were to be born after, in a dream-struggle in Genesis 32:26, the angel struck בֶּה-הַיָּרֵךְ (the hollow of [his] thigh) perhaps leaving a wound of circumcision, reminding one of Abraham to whom a similar promise of off-spring was made connected to the covenant symbolised by circumcision; אֶשֶׁר עַל-בֶּה הַיָּרֵךְ גֵּיד הַנֶּשֶׂה (sinew of the thigh vein) (which is upon the hollow of the thigh) in Genesis 32:33; [מְעָה] (internal organs, inward parts [intestines, bowels], belly) perhaps in Genesis 15:4, 2 Samuel 7:12, 2 Samuel 16:11, Isaiah 48:19 and 2 Chronicles 32:21; and יָד (hand) perhaps in Isaiah 57:8.

In addition, in 1Samuel 21:6 בְּכֵלִי (in the “vessel;” σκεῦος in Greek) refers either to the body (Dietrich and Arnet 2013, 247) or to the penis (Schroer and Kipfer 2015, 38). David emphasises twice here that this “vessel” is holy (כְּלִי-הַנְּעָרִים קֹדֵשׁ) and that the young men have not been with women the three days before. Gesenius (2013, 549) assumes a euphemistic use of this word for the phallus here.⁸

In Deuteronomy 23:2 אֲשַׁפֵּךְ (‘‘pouder,’’ privy parts) stems from the verb, שָׁפַךְ (pour) and in 25:11 בְּמִבְרָשָׁיו (by his secrets, perhaps ‘‘privates’’ due to the tendency to privatise what is shameful) is derived from בֹּשׁ (be ashamed).

What should be covered, but in such a way that the original ‘‘shape’’ is still recognisable, is often done so by means of metaphor. Euphemism is one kind of metaphor and, for genitals, many of them are *hapax legomena*, which could suggest that something is singled out. From the classification of euphemisms by Schorch (2000, 215–35) it is clear that experiences in which much sensitivity have been vested and which thus threaten with shame or another danger elicit this figure of speech.

This taboo concerns expressing anxiety provoking experiences relating to death, illness, bodily defects, sexuality, shameful body parts, castration, blindness, animals (lions and perhaps snakes), menstruation, seminal discharge, sperm, faeces, urine, abortion or miscarriage, and divinity, including the temple. The latter is the only category which is not directly related to the body, unless the temple is seen as some representation of a divine body, as buildings refer to the body according to both Freud (1998, 154; 2008a,

8 Cf. Guichard (2014, 1–2); Soysal (2014, 2–4); Czichon (2014, 4–6).

89; 2008b, 351) and Jung (1984, 116). These experiences could become so overwhelming that they border on the ineffable.

Given that no direct word for the penis exists and that *פְּרִיָה* (foreskin) exists as the only word for a genital-related part in the Hebrew Bible means that it has a specific status over against all the above-mentioned, avoidant euphemism which could stem from awe, fear or disgust.

Possible Negative Evaluation of the Foreskin

Juxtaposition to Shame

“Shame” is the literal meaning of the Latin *pudenda*, a word adopted into the Germanic languages for genitals. It would seem that a sense of shame about nakedness is a breakthrough in the development of culture as it implies an increase in consciousness and sensitivity about the ego (cf. also Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, 21, 30–56). Shame, however, is already in Genesis 2:25 associated with nakedness, which in turn becomes yet another euphemism for (exposed and therefore visible) genitals. Ironically, one would expect a circumcised penis to be more naked than an uncircumcised one.

Only in Habakkuk 2:16 is *קָלוֹן* (ignominy, dishonour; perhaps also shame) associated with the foreskin as (a form of) nakedness: *וְהִפְעֵרְלָהּ* (be uncovered, show your foreskin), where the meaning of the relevant verb is used in a figurative sense. Moreover, in Ezekiel 32:24, 25 and 30 shame is in close proximity to and therefore associated with being uncircumcised, that is, the foreskin.

In Leviticus 12:3 the foreskin seems to be an unclean body part, where it obstructs the way to cleanliness, even for the mother in the previous verse. The same applies in Isaiah 52:1. In Leviticus 19:23–25 LXX the foreskin instead, or as actual meaning, of *פְּרִי* (its [i.e., the land’s] fruit) in the Masoretic text is regarded as impure or unclean and therefore unsuitable for sacrifice but the question arises if impurity equals shame. Blaschke (1998, 7) claims that purity concerns were a secondary development, although Delitzsch (1853, 376) believed that the ritual meant that the penis was unclean before God and therefore required a bloody atonement, perhaps like defloration. Uncleanliness seems to refer to the danger involved with threshold or boundary transition, such as at birth, sex, and death and concerns the fluids that accompany these changes.

If there is shame about the foreskin which therefore has to be cut off, it seems to imply that this body part is somehow imperfect and represents a blemish, not one which has enjoyed the blessing words of Genesis 1:31 and would therefore be a consequence of the “fall” in Eden. Yet God counters in Exodus 4:11 Moses’ worry or even complaint in the previous verse that his tongue is *כִּבְדָּה* (heavy, and therefore slow), probably linked to Exodus 6:12, 30 where he claims to have *שִׁפְתָי עֲרֵל* (uncircumcised lips). The

implication of God's words is that all kinds of "foreskins," other immaturities and even defects just like all strengths come from God.

The foreskin therefore is like a heavy lid which needs to be removed to become light, functional and (re)productive. This makes one think of the hymen which, even when provided by God (or "nature"), needs to be removed to move forward into intimacy which, in the case of Israelite circumcision, was both sexual and religious.

Veiling a Man's Pride

The removal of the foreskin can be connected to some form of unconscious exhibitionism about the penis in the sense of the glans (cf. also Róheim 1955, 207), which it hides. The foreskin could then be the feminine hiding the masculine body-part. The fact that the penis itself is sometimes hidden in euphemisms could question this assumption unless they are used precisely to express reverence. The question could therefore arise whether a euphemism hides or highlights something.

That the erect phallus represents strength and pride but also the arrogance (cf. Psalm 75:5,6) of a man may perhaps be inferred from Lamentations 2:3 (resonating with Psalm 75:11 and Jeremiah 48:25), where קַרְנֵי (horn) is a metaphor of pride but must psychoanalytically also be a phallic suggestion (*vide infra*). This phallic horn of pride is here threatened to be cut off as a kind of castration.

"She [Zipporah, PvdZ] peels away the outer casing of the male organ of life-giving" (Haberman 2003, 26). This means that the foreskin is a "veil," just as metaphors, including euphemisms, and metonyms are "veils" revealing but also hiding meaning. Its meaning is in displacing and in this way serving as a metaphor, sometimes for that which cannot be faced, looked in the eye, so to speak, or to extend its meaning when the prophets and Deuteronomy spiritualise it by interiorising moral insight. As Jeremiah 9:25, for instance, suggests, they increasingly "decathect" from the physical foreskin, which is then, ironically, for the first time to let go, psychically.

Association serves in this way as disguise to render the literal indirect. Jung (1972, 149) claims that human nature shies away from, that is, is ashamed of consciousness. The foreskin is therefore a mask hiding consciousness which can only be undone through trauma (*vide supra et infra*). On a psychoanalytic level it could be said that it represents the unconscious blocking the way to consciousness (*vide infra*), probably because it is as a complex cathected so much in the unconscious.

Possible Idealisation of the Foreskin

One wonders whether shame or respect is the reason that the foreskin is mentioned so rarely in the Hebrew Bible. What is cut off and thrown away to appease the deity could then become the mediator for reconciliation and so holy. Likewise, the circumcision

episode with the accused Shechemites requires foreskins to reconcile them with the Israelites, which it, in fact, does not.

When cutting hair is a symbolic castration (*vide infra*), robbing a man such as Samson of his strength, this implies that a man's essential power is symbolically vested in his foreskin. The foreskin was implicitly regarded as so powerful that possessing those of others suggests that one had the power to castrate, emasculate, disempower and even kill, as in 1 Samuel 18:25 (*vide supra*) for instance. This would make the foreskin seem like a kind of fetish with magical power, even when there is no evidence of this in the Hebrew Bible.

The foreskin is shamed amongst those who had not undergone circumcision, even when their neighbours practised virtually the same ritual but only at puberty (Doyle 2005, *passim*; Gollaher 2001, 7). When Israel, perhaps as a competitive move, changed this old practice to do it at the age of eight days, in this way symbolising and sublimating the sacrifice of the oldest child, or rather son, the foreskin gained a relatively unique position (despite [non-Jewish] infant circumcision happening in Africa and South-America as well [Gray 1910, 669]). It now may have symbolised the whole baby boy. When circumcision is some kind of sacrifice, it is the only one where a part of the human body is offered to God.

It is therefore possible that the shame of (still) having a foreskin is because it has not been "offered" to God in some way. If there is nevertheless any sacrificial dimension to circumcision, it would have been the best a baby boy could give to God, and then as a thanks-giving offering, very different from the guilt attached to the concept of sacrifice for Girard (e.g., 1982, 24, *passim*).

This could be the case when circumcision is interpreted as part of the oedipal struggle where the father is the anxious one and pre-empted the rivalry from the son, as the hostile intruder represented twice in a metonymic way by, first, the son's threatening phallus, and then its foreskin. The father's (probably unconscious) shame about these feelings of being threatened is projected onto the son's foreskin, which, when it has been "killed," is rendered a lost love-object and becomes sacred (the Latin *sacrificium* means "making-sacred"). The resultant mourning and even melancholy would then lead to guilt feelings idealising the "guilty victim."

When this projection of the father's excess of violence is actually a displacement of prohibited aggression against "siblings" (i.e., all other group members) the victim ironically holds them together in the end, as is the case with circumcision as group identity marker.

Guilt feelings could, however, play a role in monotheism such as that of ancient Israel, even when this religious development seems to have sedimented only as a result of the

exile. The guilt feeling about the exile is probably why the Priestly source emphasised monotheism the most. In that case the removal of the foreskin was a reaction formation to counter and defend against the high value attached to the very foreskin as competing with the only God committed to or even recognised. That means that the foreskin may have a semi-divine status, which is not undermined by the fact that it was regarded as unclean as in Leviticus 12:3.

In the narrative of Exodus 4 it serves as a protective shield against God, even a ransom, a kind of “deflector.” When the attention of an aggressive God can thus be distracted by the foreskin, the latter must be attractive enough to do so. When this belief is a projection of humans “playing this trick” (cf. Sierksma 1951, 153), then they themselves do not recognise that they themselves have actually invested the foreskin with such importance.

Integration of Possible Psychoanalytic Meanings of the Foreskin

What originally seemed to be a blaming and a shaming of the foreskin then turns out to be the primacy of the penis metonymically suggested by the foreskin, so highly regarded as the best of humanity that it is offered in sacrifice to God, just as the first-born is considered the best. In fact, in Numbers 3:13 and 8:16 every בְּכוֹר (first-born) is hallowed by God, and if the foreskin qualifies as firstling, it is then made holy by God. That Isaac was not the first-born but still the “best” when he was almost sacrificed according to Genesis 22:10–12 can either be explained that he was the first and only son of Abraham’s real wife, and therefore to be preferred, or that this is already a subtle critique of this norm.

The displacing shifts in Exodus 4 (*vide supra*) continue as the Levites (*vide supra*) are taken by or given to God in Numbers 3:12 and 8:16 respectively פִּתְחָה (instead of) the first-born. This is an ironic subversion of the status quo order as they are grouped with widows, orphans, and foreigners (גֵּרִים) without a fixed income or land-property in Deuteronomy 12:12, 18f.; 14:27, 29; 16:11, 14 and 26:11ff. and reminds one of the constant inversion of the cultural superiority of the first-born, so that Jacob, for instance, surpasses his older brother in privilege. Similarly, the foreskin may shift from, or at least vacillate between, demonisation and idealisation. Alternatively, it could be an integration of this polarity and so a psychological progression but proving this would be to move to a diachronic interpretation of the foreskin in the Hebrew Bible.

Blaschke (e.g., 1998, 11f., 98) repeatedly makes a distinction between the meaning of circumcision and the foreskin. This might imply that the foreskin has a different meaning when it is still attached and when it is already detached from the body. Another difference might have existed between the foreskin from a male adult over against that of an infant. The answers to these questions remain elusive but can be inferred as adult circumcision is often linked to marriage (Pedersen 1946, 492) as a sacrifice to the

goddess of fertility (Oesterley and Robinson 1949, 137), whereas an infant's loss of the foreskin seems to be a sign of social and religious belonging.

There seems to be some ambivalence towards the foreskin just as Karl Abraham (Jones 1927, 295, 426) found towards faeces towards which an unconscious narcissistic longing for what once belonged to the body remains: just as it could have been regarded as the very best gift a man could offer, and therefore elicit some envy towards those who still have it, it consequently leads to hatred as a defence in Genesis 17:14 where even an innocent infant is radically excluded; Judges 14:3; 1 Samuel 17:26, 36; and 1 Samuel 31:4 and 2 Samuel 1:20 where the Philistines are equated with the uncircumcised.

It may be significant and ironic that a woman from the uncircumcised Philistines eventually "castrates" Samson by cutting his hair, psychoanalytically thus interpreted (*vide supra*), and so robbing him of his famous strength. This causes him to lose his eyes as well, according to Judges 16:21 and 28. Being overpowered by those with a foreskin, the uncircumcised Philistines, causes Samson, whose name significantly means "man of the sun" (that is, a symbol of consciousness according to psychoanalytic thinking), to lose his sight but brought him insight, making him progress into consciousness. According to Neumann (1949, 172) patriarchal⁹ castration has two forms: an inferior form, where the vital functions represented by the penis are destroyed, and a superior form, where the mental functions represented by the eyes are destroyed. The first was executed by Delilah when she cut his hair, and the second by her compatriots. Likewise, in 1 Samuel 11:2 שִׁנָּה Nahash (the same word used for the phallic serpent in Genesis 3:1) the Ammonite demands "sacrificing" an eye as price, seal or proof of sincerity to enter into a contract.

In the unconscious the foreskin therefore obtains a "pagan"¹⁰ and demonised dimension, as it represents the unconscious. The foreskin is a barrier to consciousness (*vide supra*) and blinds one from seeing the real nakedness underlying it, just as the eyes of the first couple were opened to see their nakedness and hear the voice of God, according to Genesis 3:7.

This consciousness remains hidden to those who still do not have it. Whereas the skin has been inscribed with public presentations of identity markers and reminders such as tattoos, a kind of bodily graffiti, in various cultures and subcultures, circumcision remains hidden to outsiders. Its covenantal nature of intimate commitment permanently inscribes the new relationship into the flesh, a kind of mini-amputation, leaving its mark. "[M]ale circumcision sanctifies the universal male organ with the seal of covenant"

9 Here a woman is the initial castrator before Philistine men continue what she started.

10 In not belonging to the established religion.

(Haberman 2003, 28). This is ironic as this covenant is one of procreation whereas circumcision also symbolises castration, that is, the barrier to procreation. That “cutting” is also how a covenant comes into place in Genesis 15:18 (כָּרַת), where animals are cut in two, and 21:27 (וַיִּכְרְתוּ), is significant for circumcision which symbolises a covenant inscribed or “cut” into the body as well (Silverman 2003, 50).

In Western culture what is hidden is sometimes assumed to be truer than what is visible (Freedberg 1989, 315), although that is precisely what deception is about. This positive assumption may be the case with the glans hidden by the foreskin, which is connected with shame, as if hiding the more vulnerable but “real” penis.

The foreskin stands for prohibition, reminding one of the superego of the superior paternal group, and so is a boundary barring one from belonging to the “real” group of people who have allegedly been elected for a special relationship with the divine demanding the first of everything to be sacrificed, perhaps as a way of initiation and test. There is clearly a negative attitude against the foreskin which therefore causes shame whereas circumcision amounts to pride and even haughtiness, defying any castration threat (Geller 1992, 438). As the sign of a foreigner or a broken covenant, its removal signifies belonging and identity. If some wilfully refuse to cut off their foreskin, they will be cut off socially and so would lose more, as was the intention in Exodus 4: their life. In 1 QH 6:20 it is equal to both the impure and, ironically, the violent.

The penis-father “metonymically” removes a part of the son’s penis, pre-empting the oedipal challenge by making the son almost similar to the mother, but, ironically, identical to the father, separating it from the mother so early already. It has been paradoxically instituted in order to become תָּמִים (whole) in Genesis 17:1.

Like the umbilicus the foreskin shares in the impurity of the postpartum mother or menstruating woman. It is therefore feminine just as the rib removed from the androgynous human being in Genesis 2:21 (Silverman 2003, 51) was or became feminine. Yet, this “loss of femininity” introduces the desire for reunion with the mother (Maciejewski 2002; 2006, 203 n. 192).

Conclusion

Psychoanalytically interpreted, the foreskin seems to be like a complex of ambivalence and a symbol of inner conflict, and therefore a strongly cathected body part.

It would seem that the foreskin has a different meaning and value depending on whether it is still attached to the male body over against it having been removed from it. Circumcision as patriarchal marker implies that the foreskin has feminine connotations as metonym for the whole body, and is possibly related to the unconscious, the carrier of others’ aggression and therefore even death.

The foreskin fulfils both a metaphoric and a metonymic function when it either displaces or condenses respectively. In the literal sense, however, it is aggressively excluded and so seems to be evaluated negatively.

Even when some of these possibilities which have been explored are speculative, they still serve a heuristic purpose in that they map the landscape in which further investigation can be pursued.

What remains to be researched is what the meaning is of putting blood on the horns (*vide supra*) of the altar in Exodus 29:12, 30:10, Leviticus 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34, 8:15, 9:9, 16:18ff. (all priestly) and Ezekiel 43:20. That these horns could have a phallic sense is perhaps suggested in 1 Kings 1:51 where an oath is demanded by touching them just as in Genesis 24:2 and 47:29 where a similar gesture applies to the penis. This practice reminds one of the etymology of “testimony” from “testes” suggesting the divine gift of fertility being at stake and confirming the Freudian castration anxiety.

A second area of exploration would be how Lacan’s insights about metaphor, displacement and the phallus are relevant for the meaning of the foreskin in the Hebrew Bible.

A third research indicator would be to what extent Girard’s mimetic theory and the continuous displacements observed in respect of the meaning of the foreskin are perhaps tangential.

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