

**Lev. 12:1** The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup> Speak to the Israelite people thus: When a woman at childbirth bears a male, she shall be unclean seven days; she shall be unclean as at the time of her menstrual infirmity.— <sup>3</sup> On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.— <sup>4</sup> She shall remain in a state of blood purification for thirty-three days: she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until her period of purification is completed. <sup>5</sup> If she bears a female, she shall be unclean two weeks ...

Baruch Schwartz, “Leviticus,” *Jewish Study Bible*

**3:** Circumcision is not a stage in the purification process. It is noted here by association; mention of the seventh day of a male child’s life quite naturally calls to mind the event of the eighth day. Halakic exegesis also notes that since the command of circumcision was given not to Moses but to Abraham (Gen. 17.9–14), it needed to be repeated here, in the context of the giving of the law to Israel in the wilderness, in order to be valid.

**GERSONIDES:** On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. The Torah wished to have this commanded by Moses, not being satisfied to simply leave it with the command to Abraham in Gen. 17:9–14, lest we think that the Torah was not given entirely through Moses.

Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary)

**3. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised** The essential law of circumcision is stated in Genesis 17:10–14, within the context of the covenant between God and Abraham. ... There is undoubtedly a correlation between the eight-day period between birth and circumcision and the duration of the initial period of the mother’s impurity after giving birth to a male child, as Hoffmann states.

**Gen. 17:10** “Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. <sup>12</sup> And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days.”

Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary), to 17:12

**12. eight days** The eighth day is particularly significant because the newborn has completed a seven-day unit of time corresponding to the process of Creation. In like manner, Exodus 22:29 stipulates that the first-born of an animal is dedicated only on the eighth day after birth, and Leviticus 22:27 lays down that an animal is not fit for sacrifice before that day.

**Lev. 22:27** When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall stay seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as an offering by fire to the LORD. <sup>28</sup> However, no animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young.

**Ex. 22:28** You shall not put off the skimming of the first yield of your vats. You shall give Me the first-born among your sons. <sup>29</sup> You shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me.

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Robert Alter, The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary [to Gen 17:10]

*every male among you must be circumcised.* Circumcision was practiced among several of the West Semitic peoples and at least in the priestly class in Egypt, as a bas-relief at Karnach makes clear in surgical detail. To Abraham the immigrant from Mesopotamia, E. A. Speiser notes, it would have been a new procedure to adopt, as this episode indicates.

E. A. Speiser, Genesis, Anchor Bible [comment to Genesis 17]

Circumcision is an old and widely diffused practice, generally linked with puberty and premarital rites. In the ancient Near East it was observed by many of Israel's neighbors, among them the Egyptians, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and certain other nomadic elements (cf. Jer 9:25). But the Philistines did not follow it (cf. 2 Sam 1:20), and neither did the "Hivites" (i.e., Horites) of Central Palestine (34:15). Nor was the custom in vogue in Mesopotamia. Thus the patriarchs would not have been likely to adopt circumcision prior to their arrival in Canaan, which is just what the present account says in another way. The terse passage in Exod 4:24–26 suggests a primitive religious connection. Eventually, the rite became a distinctive group characteristic, and hence also a cultural and spiritual symbol. To P, however, it was essential proof of adherence to the covenant.

Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus (Anchor Bible)

3. This verse, which switches from the mother to the boy, is clearly an editorial parenthesis that interrupts the prescriptive ritual for the mother. Nor can it be claimed that the circumcision is a purificatory rite for the boy and thus comparable to the purificatory rites enjoined upon his mother, for there is no equivalent rite for a newly born girl. The purpose of this interpolation is to emphasize the uniqueness of this rite; not the rite itself, which was practiced ubiquitously by Israel's Semitic neighbors, but the timing of the rite, which in Israel alone was performed in infancy and, precisely, on the eighth day.

The rite of circumcision is attested throughout the world. According to Jer 9:25, it was practiced by the Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, and Arabs as well as by Israel. In Egypt, however, it seems—at least in the Hellenistic period—to have been limited to the priests. Everywhere it is a puberty rite that fits a man for marriage. In Israel alone is it associated with infancy, though originally it also may have been a premarital rite. Such an earlier practice may be reflected in Ishmael's circumcision at the age of thirteen (Gen 17:25). Philology provides even stronger evidence (Snaith 1967). Hebrew *ḥātān* 'daughter's husband' is etymologically "the one who undergoes circumcision," and *ḥōtēn* 'wife's father' is the circumciser (cf. Arab. *ḥātin*, from *ḥatana* 'circumcise'). In Ug., *ḥtn* connotes son-in-law and marriage (CTA 24 [UT 77], 25, 32) and Akk. *ḥatnūtu* 'marriage' means literally "become a son-in-law," from *ḥatanu* 'a relative by marriage', such as a son-in-law, brother-in-law, bridegroom. Perhaps the bizarre incident of Moses' vicarious circumcision and his designation as *ḥātan dāmīm lammūlōt* 'a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision' (Exod 4:26) reflects the older practice of circumcision as a premarital prerequisite.

With the transfer of circumcision to infancy, it became a sign of the covenant, an initiation rite into the religious bond between Israel and its God (Gen 17:1–27). The fact that the uncircumcised may not participate in the paschal sacrifice (Exod 12:43–49; Josh 5:2–10) and that, in the oldest narrative stratum, circumcision was required of the non-Israelite bridegroom (Gen 34:14–17, 22) indicates that the covenant idea was associated with circumcision from earliest times.

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