Chapter 3

ZIPPORAH AND THE BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD
Searching for the Antecedents of Jewish Circumcision

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone interested in the history of male circumcision in the ancient Near East, and particularly in its fateful adoption by the early Israelites, must be mystified by the available evidence in the Hebrew Bible. To be sure, the initial instructions for circumcision come early, in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis: to seal his covenant with Abraham, God requires that Abraham circumcise himself immediately along with every male of his household, slave or free, and ensure that his descendants henceforth circumcise all newborn males at the age of eight days.1 Coming as it does so early in the biblical account of Israelite history, this passage seems to provide the basic template for Jewish circumcision ever since Abraham’s putative lifetime, about 1,800 BCE. Yet there is surprisingly little evidence that Israelites in the distant past — until we reach a genuinely historical era, around 500 BCE — actually did practice male infant circumcision in the Abrahamic manner. Confirming Abraham’s covenant we find merely a single sentence in Leviticus, in the midst of a series of regulations regarding female genital impurity after childbirth, mandating that a male child be circumcised at the age of eight days.2 Beyond that, there is no further mention of infant circumcision in the Hebrew Bible.

There are, indeed, other biblical references to circumcision of boys or men, but they, too, are surprisingly few; and every instance, in its way, is puzzling. Dinah’s brothers, by claiming that they are all circumcised, persuade the Shechemites to become so too; then the Hebrews are able to
slaughter them all in their weakened, post-operative state. 3 Ought we to believe that the Hebrew tricksters in this ancient tale were, in fact, all circumcised, and had been so since infancy? If so, what do we make of Joshua’s command, in an equally ancient story, that all Israelite men undergo a “second circumcision” before their entry into the Promised Land? In this case, we’re told that the second circumcision was necessary because the men “had not been circumcised”—which is odd if they had indeed been party to Abraham’s covenant. 4 More straightforward was King Saul’s challenge to David: bring home one hundred Philistine foreskins, and you can marry my daughter Michal. Since everyone knew that the enemy Philistines did not practice circumcision, this was meant as a daunting trial of strength; foreskins were specified as a customary— and pointedly macho—proof of success. 5 But none of these biblical mentions of circumcision tells us very much beyond the fact that the practice was known in pre-Judaic times. What evidence is there then, in the Hebrew Bible, to suggest the actual history of Israelite circumcision?

One enigmatic story remains to be mentioned: the account of the circumcision of Moses’ son, sometimes referred to as the tale of the bloody bridegroom. This brief text in Exodus has been called “admittedly the most difficult of all the passages on this subject.” 6 Commentators have sought to explain it from various points of view— theological, historical, psychoanalytic, ethnographic. But no one has analyzed the role of circumcision in the account; instead, it is always taken for granted as a bedrock Israelite custom for all male infants. Recent scholarship, however, allows us to consider a new possibility: that, at the time this text was written, universal male infant circumcision had not yet been mandated to the Hebrews and, therefore, that male circumcision had not yet become an ethnic marker for them. In light of this, we can begin to explain this puzzling tale—and, by doing so, illuminate the likely role of circumcision in the pre-Judaic world.

1. DATING THE TEXT

First we need to look at the tantalizingly brief text itself. Moses, whose birth and upbringing in Egypt are recounted in the first three chapters of Exodus, killed a man and fled to Midian, where he married Zipporah, daughter of a Midianite priest. Now they have two sons. One day, Yahweh appears to him in a burning bush and commands him to return to Egypt to confront a new pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people to freedom. After briefly protesting his unsuitability for the task, Moses sets his wife and