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Did Jewish Women Circumcise Male Infants in Antiquity? A Reassessment of the Evidence

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Abstract:

Two diametrically opposed assumptions have influenced interpretations of circumcision rituals in ancient Judaism: either women performed the operation on their infant sons because children at birth and during infancy remained under the purview of the mother; or, conversely, men—specifically a ritual agent known as the *mohel*—performed circumcisions, because only they were typically granted authority to carry out the ritual. This study reassesses the pertinent texts, including Exodus 4 and passages from the books of Maccabees and the Babylonian Talmud (b. Šabb. 134a; b. Yebam. 64b; b. ‘Abod. Zar. 27a), to determine whether women in ancient Judaism may have circumcised their infant sons; and shows that an older, family-based ritual practice in which either mothers or fathers performed the operation was being replaced by late antiquity by a specialist-based ritual performed by *mohels* from outside the household.

Keywords:

Circumcision, Ritual, Ancient Judaism, Mohel, Women’s ritual agency

1. Introduction

As a “sign of the covenant” between God and his people, ideological aspects of circumcision have been elaborated in detail.¹ Preferential treatment given to the

I thank Ryan D. Collman and Matthew Novensen for inviting me to present a version of this paper at the online Edinburgh Circumcision, Gender, and Ethnicity Conference (16, 23, 30 August 2021) and Matthew Thiessen for his response. I am grateful to Claudia D. Bergmann, John J. Collins, Rebecca Ullrich, Susan Ackerman, and an anonymous reviewer for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. Any remaining shortcomings are entirely my own responsibility.

¹ See, e.g., Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Ancient Judaism*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (Tübingen: Francke, 1998); Simon Claude Mimouni, *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine: Histoire d’un conflit interne au judaïsme* (Leuven:

symbolic aspects of the ritual leaves curious lacunae with respect to its material realia: How exactly was the procedure performed, with what instrument(s), with what effects on the body and its functioning, and who performed it? Moreover, as Jewish circumcision has traditionally been practiced only on males during infancy, the ritual raises important questions about sex and gender, the life cycle, and ritual agency. Female agents—mothers, midwives, and wet-nurses—are typically associated with the care of newborns, infants, and children, yet male actors—mohels—have, at least since the medieval period, been viewed as the agents responsible for performing the cutting ritual on eight-day-old boys. How and when did this apparent paradox arise? This study considers the possibility that women exercised agency as circumcisers of their infant sons in ancient Judaism and sheds light on the development of the mohel as a ritual agent by late antiquity.

In an article on the importance of women's ritual activity within ancient Israelite households, Carol Meyers identifies practices that "were part of the religious culture associated with women's reproductive concerns," including those designed to ensure fertility and the protection of newborns, cutting the umbilical cord and washing the newborn. Meyers adds that naming children and circumcising male infants fell into the same category.² Similarly, commenting on the story of Zipporah's circumcision of her son Gershom in Exod 4:24–26, Meir Bar-Ilan claimed that "as a rule, women cared for the newborn infant, severed the umbilical cord, nursed and clothed him, so it is not at all surprising that they also removed the foreskin."³ The evidence for the view that Judean or Jewish women sometimes served as the primary agents in circumcising their sons in antiquity is, however, contested. Susan Haber, for example, argued that although women were understood as bearing the responsibility for having their male children circumcised in the Second Temple period, nevertheless they did not perform the ritual themselves, but enlisted male ritual agents to carry out the task.⁴

Peeters, 2007); David Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Hugh Young, "Circumcision as a Memplex," in *Bodily Integrity and the Politics of Circumcision: Culture, Controversy and Change*, ed. George C. Denniston et al. (New York: Springer, 2006), 1–16; and Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² Carol Meyers, "From Household to House of Yahweh: Women's Religious Culture in Ancient Israel," in *Congress Volume: Basel 2001*, ed. André Lemaire, VTSup 92 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 277–303 (citation 289).

³ Meir Bar-Ilan, *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 17–18.

⁴ Susan Haber, "They Shall Purify Themselves": *Essays on Purity in Early Judaism*, ed. Adele Reinhartz, EJL 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 75–92.

This paper assesses the sources pertinent to the question of whether Judean or Jewish women performed circumcisions on male infants from around the eighth or sixth century BCE through around the end of late antiquity (ca. the eighth century CE); recognizing from the outset that, as Karin Neutel points out, the “sources that can shed light on what happened during a circumcision are remarkably scarce” during that period.⁵ Moreover, the sources do not present unmediated images of ancient social and ritual practices, but rather constitute literary narratives, with all of the problems that the devices of characterization, plot, stereotypical themes, and so on imply for historiography. The pertinent sources, including Exod 4:24–26 and portions of the books of Maccabees, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Scroll of Antiochus will be assessed in what follows.

2. Zipporah’s Circumcision of Gershom (Exod 4:24–26)

As we have already noted, Bar-Ilan cites Exod 4:24–26 in his claim that women performed circumcisions in antiquity. The narrative, from the nonpriestly portion of the Pentateuch written in the late exilic or postexilic period, that is, around the sixth to fifth centuries BCE, or, for proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis, in the eighth century BCE or earlier, offers the oldest extant account in Judaic literature of a woman performing a circumcision ritual; in this case, on Zipporah’s son Gershom.⁶

Numerous difficulties, however, attend the interpretation of the brief text, and the referent of the pronouns is ambiguous. According to the Hebrew text, Yahweh meets and desires to kill “him”—probably Moses, who was addressed by Yahweh in the previous passage (Exod 4:21–23); and less likely the

⁵ Here I take Peter Brown’s delimitation of “late antiquity” as extending from the third to the eighth century CE as indicative of antiquity’s terminal period (Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* [London: Thames & Hudson, 1971]). On the limited information available: Karin B. Neutel, “Circumcision Gone Wrong: Paul’s Message as a Case of Ritual Disruption,” *Neot* 50, no. 2 (2016): 373–396, esp. 376. The information for later periods is more plentiful; see, e.g., Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*; Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?*; Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 55–89. I thank Claudia Bergmann for bringing Baumgarten’s work to my attention.

⁶ On the dating of the sources: Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 37–43; John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 47–65, 107; Ernest Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid, *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); Konrad Schmidt, “The Neo-Documentarian Manifesto: A Critical Reading,” *JBL* 140, no. 3 (2021): 461–479.

son, Gershom, who has not yet been introduced at that point in the narrative.⁷ In order to prevent the attack, Moses's Midianite wife, Zipporah, takes a flint knife and "cuts off" (וּתְּכַרֵּת) the foreskin of Gershom, subsequently touching "his" "feet" with it—"feet" here being a euphemism referring to the phallus.⁸ Presumably the phallus so touched is Moses's and not Yahweh's (a possibility entertained by Dozeman), since Zipporah next exclaims, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me!"—a phrase indicating Zipporah's marital relation to Moses.⁹ The narrative specifies the ritual agent responsible for severing the foreskin—Zipporah—and the object utilized in the performance of the ritual, a stone knife, most likely made of flint.¹⁰ Zipporah's ritual expertise serves an apotropaic function; and in this case, it is Yahweh whose hostile attack is deflected (Exod 4:26 NRSV: "So he [Yahweh] let him [Moses] alone."). As Dozeman notes, blood, which is mentioned twice in the passage, is also used to prevent Yahweh "the destroyer" from attacking the Israelite firstborn in Exod 12:21–23.¹¹

While the mythic episode can hardly be imagined to depict the way in which the circumcision ritual was typically carried out, it is noteworthy that the narrator attributes to Zipporah the agency required to perform the circumcision both readily and successfully. Perhaps this is because, as Bar-Ilan indicates, "as a rule, women cared for the newborn infant ... so it is not at all surprising that they also removed the foreskin." On the other hand, perhaps Zipporah's ritual agency is only a literary device: both Meyers and Dozeman indicate that the narrative presents Midianites as agents whose ritual expertise allows them successfully to interact with the god Yahweh, who is introduced to Moses on the "mountain of God" in Midian (Exod 3:1–6).¹² Moreover, as Dozeman notes, Zipporah's saving of Moses by circumcising Gershom develops the theme of Moses's salvation by women, a theme encountered already in Exod 1:15–2:10, where as an infant his life is saved by the interventions of Hebrew midwives and nurses.¹³ Deploying Victor Turner's notions of liminality and anti-structure, Susan Ackerman has argued that Zipporah usurps her father's role as circumciser, assuming male and priestly prerogatives during a liminal period of wandering in which traditional gender roles were suspended or inverted.¹⁴

⁷ Similarly, Susan Ackerman, "Why Is Miriam Also among the Prophets? (And Zipporah among the Priests?)," *JBL* 121, no. 1 (2002): 47–80, esp. 73.

⁸ Similarly in Exod 4:25; Isa 6:2 (see *HALOT*, s.v. "תְּכַרֵּת," 4); Dozeman, *Exodus*, 366.

⁹ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 349 (see also 366), writes, "The antecedent to 'his' is unclear in the MT, whether Moses, his son, or Yahweh."

¹⁰ On flint blades, see Steven A. Rosen, "The Canaanite Blade and the Early Bronze Age," *IEJ* 33, nos. 1–2 (1983): 15–29; Rosen, *Lithics after the Stone Age: A Handbook of Stone Tools from the Levant* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1997).

¹¹ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 368.

¹² See Exod 3:1; 4:18; 18:1–10, 13–27; Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63–64; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 356–360, 367–368.

¹³ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 366.

¹⁴ Ackerman, "Why Is Miriam Also among the Prophets?," 71–75. In a different vein,

Due to the problems the literary construction of the narrative poses for historiography, the relation of Exodus 4 to actual ritual practice is complex: parts of the narrative utilize verisimilitude and thus likely reflect actual ritual practices (i.e., the use of a flint knife [cp. Josh 5:2–3; Josh 21:42d; 24:31, 31a LXX], and the severing of the foreskin during circumcision). Other parts, however, reflect literary invention: Gershom's circumcision occurs on the road, during his family's journey from Midian to Egypt, rather than at home (on circumcision in domestic contexts, see section 6 below). Moreover, the circumcision appears as an unplanned and ad hoc response to Yahweh's hostile attack against Moses; and, as a result, does not appear to be tied to any particular part of the life cycle of the circumcised, whether infancy (e.g., Gen 17:9–14, 23–27) or puberty and marriage (e.g., Gen 17:25; 34:13–17; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.12 [§2]; cp. Zipporah's statement, "you are a bloody bridegroom" in Exod 2:26), as would be expected.¹⁵ Since Gershom is circumcised by his mother, he may very well be understood as an infant, not yet weaned and remaining in the domain of maternal influence, in the episode (see further section 10 below).

William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Hermeneia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 32–34, analyzes the narrative as a "heroic adventure story," relying on the typology of fairy tales developed by Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd ed., trans. Laurence Scott, American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series 9 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

¹⁵ For puberty as the most common time for circumcision cross-culturally and for circumcision as a rite of premarital initiation, see Emil G. Hirsch, Kaufmann Kohler, Joseph Jacobs, Aaron Friedenwald, and Isaac Broyd, "Circumcision," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906), 4:92–102; D. Doyle, "Ritual Male Circumcision: A Brief History," *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* 35 (2005): 279–285 (the idea that the procedure protects against HIV/AIDS and penile carcinoma is, however, a flimsy rationale to justify the prophylactic removal of healthy tissue on medical grounds); Meyers, *Exodus*, 64–65. On the contrary, Ulrich Zimmermann, "Beschneidung (AT)," WiBiLex: Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/wibilex/das-bibellexikon/lexikon/sachwort/anzeigen/details/beschneidung-at/ch/56e1af39f3c2c295f462b405515b991a/>, last accessed Aug. 24, 2021, does not think that the connection of circumcision with puberty and marriage is evident in the Hebrew Bible. Zimmermann thinks that in the preexilic period, circumcision functioned as a "sign of tribal affiliation" (*Stammeszeichen*). On Gershom's age: In the redacted, "biblical" form of the text, an indeterminate amount of narrative time elapses between Gershom's birth (Exod 2:22) and his circumcision; according to Exod 2:23, it is "a long time" (so NRSV; lit., "many days," an idiom that could imply years). However, as Propp (*Exodus 1–18*, 170, 174, 191) notes, Exod 4:24–26 is related to the literary activity of the "Yahwist" or is perhaps an "excerpt from another, unknown source," whereas the temporal notice in Exod 2:23 cannot easily be assigned to any particular "source" within the framework of the Documentary Hypothesis; thus Exod 2:23 tells us nothing of the child's age as it is imagined in Exod 4:24–26. I thank Susan Ackerman for pointing this out.

In sum, although the Exodus narrative attributes significant agency to Zipporah as she circumcises her son, the details of the ritual are shaped by literary and narrative considerations. For this reason, the extent to which Zipporah's role as maternal circumciser constituted a typical practice when the text was written remains unclear. That said, evidence that some mothers circumcised their sons occurs in later periods, as we will see.

3. Women as Circumcisers in the Books of Maccabees

Moving from the exilic or postexilic (or earlier) narrative in Exodus 4, we turn to the Hellenistic- and Roman-period books of 1, 2, and 4 Maccabees, where we encounter additional references to women performing circumcisions. The interpretation of these passages, however, has been the subject of debate, the issue hinging on whether or not the relevant verb, περιτέμνω (“to circumcise”), is to be understood in a causative sense.

Written in Hebrew (now lost) perhaps in the last decade of John Hyrcanus's rule (135/134–104 BCE) and subsequently translated into Greek, 1 Maccabees narrates events surrounding the Hasmonean Revolt.¹⁶ After the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes had reportedly outlawed the observance of the laws of the Torah in 167 BCE, 1 Macc 1:60–61 narrates the following:

⁶⁰καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας τὰς περιτετμηκυίας τὰ τέκνα αὐτῶν ἐθανάτωσαν κατὰ τὸ πρόσταγμα ⁶¹καὶ ἐκρέμασαν τὰ βρέφη ἐκ τῶν τραχήλων αὐτῶν, καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς περιτετμηκότας αὐτοὺς.

And the women who had circumcised their children they put to death according to the ordinance, and they hung the babies from their necks and put to death their families and those [masc.] who circumcised them. (NETS)¹⁷

The verb περιτέμνω, “to circumcise,” occurs twice in the passage. In the first instance, the verb appears as an attributive participle modifying “women” (τὰς

¹⁶ On the dating, see Uriel Rappaport, “Maccabees, First Book of,” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 903–905; Michael Tilly (*1 Makkabäer*, HTKAT [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2015], 48) argues that the Hebrew version of 1 Maccabees was written in Jerusalem around the time of the death of John Hyrcanus (i.e., ca. 104 BCE). Jonathan A. Goldstein (*1 Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 41 [Garden City: Doubleday, 1976], 62–64) dates the text to the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (i.e., 103–76 BCE). On the lost Hebrew version and its Greek translation: Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*, 14–15 (“extremely literal ‘translate’”), 176; George T. Zervos, “1 Makkabees,” in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 478–479 (“extremely literal Jewish-Greek translational style”).

¹⁷ Translation of Zervos, “1 Makkabees,” in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (abbrev. NETS), 478–502.

γυναῖκας τὰς περιτετμηκυίας); and in the second instance, it appears in a masculine plural form that functions as a substantive; that is, “those (men) who had circumcised” (τοὺς περιτετμηκότας) infants. The Hebrew *Vorlage* may have featured a finite verb and a participle (underlined) rather than two participles as in the Greek versions; Seckel Isaac Fränkel’s (1830) rendering of the Greek into Hebrew reads: והנשים אשר מלו את בניהן הומתו ... ואת המלים אותם הרגו ויבזו את בתיהם.¹⁸ Since the underlying Hebrew can only tentatively be reconstructed on the basis of the Greek versions, however, the interpretation of the passage proceeds primarily on the basis of the latter.

In his commentary on 1 Maccabees, Jonathan Goldstein writes, “In the time of Antiochus IV seeing to the circumcision of babies appears to have been the responsibility of the mother, even though she did not perform the operation herself.”¹⁹ The evidence that Goldstein cites, however, including 1 Macc 1:60–61, 2 Macc 6:10, and even Exod 4:24–26, does not adequately support his position. It is odd that Goldstein cites Exodus 4, which, as we have seen, most likely envisions Zipporah as carrying out the circumcision herself; thus the citation contradicts Goldstein’s claim. He also cites the article on circumcision in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1903) for support. The encyclopedia article, however, indicates that “while in Biblical times the mother (perhaps generally) performed the operation, it was in later times performed by a surgeon ... also called by the specific name ‘mohel’” (the article, in turn, cites Josephus, *Ant.* 20.2, 4; b. B. Bat. 21a; b. Šabb 130b, 133b, 135, 156a). The Josephus account, however, refers to the circumcision of Izates, king of Adiabene in the early- to mid-first century CE, by what was likely a non-Jewish royal physician; thus, this says nothing about typical Judaic practice in or around the first century CE.²⁰

¹⁸ Seckel Isaac Fränkel, *Later Writings Known by the Name “Apocrypha...”* [Hebrew] [Fleischer: Leipzig, 1830] renders the text (numbered 1 Macc 1:58–59): והנשים אשר מלו את בניהן הומתו על פי המלך ... ואת המלים אותם הרגו בחרב ויבזו את בתיהם (“And the women who had circumcised their sons were put to death in accordance with the decree of the king ... and those circumcising [masc.] them they killed with the sword, and they plundered their houses”). Fränkel’s Hebrew text largely corresponds with the readings of a “corrector” of Sinaiticus (S^c) and the Lucianic version (L). In contrast, I utilize the Greek as printed in Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, *Septuaginta: Editio altera* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Gesellschaft, 2006), whose critical text prefers the “more difficult” readings of Sinaiticus (S) and Alexandrinus (A) in this passage. Fränkel’s translation is viewable online at the Hathi Trust Digital Library:

babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.ah5jef&view=1up&seq=37;

and (unpointed) on Sefaria:

https://www.sefaria.org/The_Book_of_Maccabees_I.1.59?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

¹⁹ Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 139.

²⁰ On the passage, see Mark D. Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’s Advisors to King Izates,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context of the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) 105–152; Thomas R. Blanton IV, “Circumcision in the Early Jesus Movement: Perspectives of Simon Claude

The references to Talmudic passages pertain to the ritual practices of the fifth through the eighth centuries CE, when the Babylonian Talmud was compiled. As we will argue below in section 8, some of the compilers of the Talmud advocated that only males could perform circumcisions, and therefore could not countenance the possibility that Zipporah herself circumcised Gershom. A Babylonian position advocated in the Gemara, however, cannot be assumed to have been normative in Judea some seven centuries earlier.

Goldstein also cites the Codex of Justinian (issued in 534 CE) for support, but the relevant passages list penalties for any Jew who circumcises a Christian, has him circumcised (Cod. Just. 1.9.16), or circumcises a Christian slave (Cod. Just. 1.10.1).²¹ The codex provides no evidence pertaining to the circumcision of Jewish infants. In short, none of this evidence supports the claim that a mother could “not perform the operation herself” during the second century BCE. (On the passages in 1 and 2 Maccabees, see further below.)

Susan Haber espouses a position similar to that of Goldstein: women were viewed as being “responsible” for having their sons circumcised, but they did not carry out the rite themselves. Commenting on 1 Macc 1:60–61, Haber writes:²²

In this account, the women are mentioned first, indicating that they were the ones held responsible for the circumcision of their children. It is evident, however, that they did not perform the circumcisions themselves, as the text specifies that both the families and those who performed the ritual circumcisions were put to death along with the mothers. Here the use of the masculine participle περιτεμνόντας indicates that the procedure was likely performed by a man.

Haber’s interpretation of 1 Macc 1:60–61 receives support from the NRSV, which translates the passage as follows: “According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them.”²³

Mimouni, ‘Paul within Judaism,’ and ‘Lived Ancient Religion,” *JJMJS* 8 (2021): 105–131, esp. 147, 152–153.

²¹ For the text and an English translation, see Bruce W. Frier, ed., *The Codex of Justinian: A New Annotated Translation, with Parallel Latin and Greek Text; Based on a Translation by Justice Fred H. Blume*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See further section 9 below.

²² Haber, “*They Shall Purify Themselves*,” 80.

²³ Tilly, *1 Makkabäer*, 82, similarly translates: “Und gemäß dem Befehl töteten sie die Frauen, die ihre Kinder hatten beschneiden lassen.... Und sie töteten auch ihre Familien und die, die sie beschnitten hatten” (“And in accordance with the order, they executed the women who had their children circumcised.... And they also executed their families and those who had circumcised them”).

Andreas Blaschke provides the most detailed argument in favor of seeing only male circumcisers in 1 Maccabees 1; and indeed, in all of the books of Maccabees.²⁴ Like Haber, he notes that “the explicit mention of the (male) circumciser suggests a causative understanding of τὰς γυναικας τὰς περιτεμνηκίας; the women *have* [ließen] circumcision [performed].”²⁵ Blaschke further argues that the mention of “those (masc.) who had circumcised” children in 1 Macc 1:61 constitutes “the first trace [*die erste Spur*] of the מוהל [mohel] or similar terms of the rabbinic texts.”²⁶ A mohel or mohel-like ritual expert may be envisioned, Blaschke suggests, because the males who had circumcised children are distinguished from the “members of the household” in 1 Macc 1:61 (καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς περιτεμνηκῶτας αὐτούς); the circumcisers therefore must have come from outside the household.

As Blaschke makes clear, the denial that women themselves performed circumcisions on their infant sons is predicated on the understanding that the verb περιτέμνω has a causative sense, “to cause to be circumcised,” “to have someone circumcised”; in addition to the more common, transitive usage: “to circumcise (someone).” We must therefore briefly consider the evidence for the purported causal usage of the verb περιτέμνω.

4. A Causative Usage of περιτέμνω?

In his classic reference work, *Greek Grammar*, Herbert Smyth defines the causative active as a verbal usage in which “an action [is] performed at the bidding of the subject”; as, for example, ἀποκτείνω, “to put to death”; and οικοδομέω, “to build” (in the sense “to have [something] built [by others]”).²⁷ Smyth also lists a category of denominative verbs (i.e., those derived from the stems of nouns) ending in -όω that are typically used causatively, “denoting *to cause* or *to make*”: δηλόω, “to make clear”; δουλόω, “to enslave”; and μαστιγόω, “to whip.”²⁸ More recently, Daniel Wallace has offered a more detailed treatment: causative (or ergative) active verbs are those whose “subject is not directly involved in the action, but may be said to be the ultimate source or cause of it.... Often the causative idea is part of the lexeme (especially with -όω and -ίζω verbs), though other verbs can also be ergative without any help from the verbal stem”: ἀνατέλλω, “to cause to rise”; βρέχω; “to cause it to rain.”²⁹ David Alan Black expands the list of verbal endings that may connote causation to include

²⁴ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 171–176.

²⁵ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 174 (emphasis is Blaschke’s).

²⁶ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 174 (emphasis is Blaschke’s). Similarly Zimmermann, “Beschneidung”: “In 1Makk 1,61 [Lutherbibel: 1Makk 1,64] sind für das Judentum erstmals spezielle Beschneider erwähnt.”

²⁷ Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 390, §1711.

²⁸ Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 245, §866.3 (emphasis is Smyth’s).

²⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 413–414.

-αίνω and -ύνω as well as -όω and -ίζω, adducing φανερώ, “to make manifest”; αἰσχύνω, “to make ashamed”; and φωτίζω, “to illumine” among his examples.³⁰

Wallace’s comments imply that we must distinguish *lexically causative* verbs—those whose causativity may be seen as inherent in the verbal stem or ending—endings typically including -όω, -αίνω, -ύνω, or -ίζω, from *contextually causative* ones; that is, verbs whose causativity may be inferred from the context.³¹ Neither Smyth nor Wallace lists any criteria for assigning contextual causality to verbs, although the examples they give offer indications: contextually causal verbs are those that do not end in -όω, -αίνω, -ύνω, or -ίζω and that refer to actions not typically performed by the verbal subject but delegated to agents. Similarly, situations in which a service involving professional or contracted labor fall into this category; for example: οἰκοδομέω, “to have a house built.”

Ending in neither -όω, -αίνω, -ύνω, or -ίζω, the verb περιτέμνω cannot be considered to be lexically causative. The lexica bear this out: LSJ defines περιτέμνω as “cut or clip round about,” “to cut off,” noting that it is used of circumcision.³² For its part, BDAG offers the gloss “to circumcise,” noting instances where the verb is used with an object in the accusative case (e.g., Luke 1:59; 2:21; John 7:22; Acts 7:8; 15:5; Barn. 9:8), indicating a transitive usage.³³ The *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* similarly indicates that in the active voice, the verb takes an object in the accusative (e.g., Gen 17:27: περιέτεμεν αὐτούς; Gen 17:23 Αβρααμ ... περιέτεμεν τὰς ἀκροβυστίας αὐτῶν).³⁴ The lexica thus offer no indication that the verb is lexically causative; this is consistent with the fact that περιτέμνω is not formed on the basis of any of the endings that characterize lexically causative verbs.

Although περιτέμνω is not lexically causative, it remains possible that it could in some cases act as a contextually causative verb. In his *A Grammar of the New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, A. T. Robertson lists περιτέμνω as (contextually) causative in one instance: when Paul is the subject in Acts 16:3: ὁ Παῦλος ... λαβὼν περιέτεμεν αὐτόν; “Paul took him and circumcised him (NRSV: ‘had him circumcised’)”; “him” referring to Timothy.³⁵ It is not necessary to attribute a causative sense to περιτέμνω in this verse, however. Hans Conzelmann, for example, translates, “[Paul] circumcised him,” opining,

³⁰ David Alan Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek: A Survey of Basic Concepts and Applications*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 69.

³¹ Although Wallace lists -ίζω verbs in this category, Smyth (*Greek Grammar*, 245, §866.6) indicates that verbs ending in -ίζω typically denote action.

³² LSJ, s.v. “περιτέμνω.”

³³ BDAG, s.v. “περιτέμνω.”

³⁴ Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2015), s.v. “περιτέμνω.”

³⁵ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 801.

“Circumcision can be performed by any Israelite.”³⁶ Similarly, Richard Pervo writes: “To enhance Timothy’s fitness for mission, Paul circumcised him.”³⁷ Thus, the evidence for the causative usage of περιτέμνω is either slim or nonexistent in the sources examined here. Admittedly, a wider study of the usage in Josephus, Philo, and other Greek literature could yield different results, but that is beyond the scope of the present discussion. My claim here is not that περιτέμνω *never* has a contextually causative sense, only that we need to examine each usage carefully to determine whether, in any given instance, a causative usage can plausibly be asserted. This very brief lexical discussion does, however, suggest that the “default” usage of the term is transitive, but not causative (see also the additional examples cited below).

5. On the Usage of περιτέμνω in 1, 2, and 4 Maccabees

Although Blaschke did not distinguish between lexically and contextually causative verbs, his thesis requires that the verb be understood as contextually causative in 1 Macc 1:60, 2 Macc 6:10, and 4 Macc 4:25. We next examine the latter two passages, and subsequently revisit 1 Macc 1:60–61 in more detail.

The verb περιτέμνω also occurs with women as the subjects in 2 Macc 6:10 and 4 Macc 4:25. The first passage reads δύο γὰρ γυναῖκες ἀνήχθησαν περιτετμηκυῖαι τὰ τέκνα (NETS/NRSV: “two women were brought in [or: ‘brought up’] for having circumcised their children”). In this case, women are said to have circumcised their children and, unlike 1 Macc 1:60, no men are mentioned. Although Blaschke attributes a causal sense to the verb in this case, translating “weil sie ihre Söhne hatten beschneiden lassen” (“because they had their sons circumcised”), the grounds for doing so are in this case weaker than in 1 Macc 1:60, as no male circumcisers are mentioned. In his commentary on 2 Maccabees, Goldstein translates “Two women were brought to trial for having circumcised their children,” which seems to imply that women performed circumcisions themselves. In his comments on the passage, Goldstein does not directly address the issue, instead referring the reader to his earlier comments on 1 Macc 1:60–61, which, as we have seen, are based on insubstantial evidence.³⁸ In contrast, Robert Doran sees women as themselves performing

³⁶ Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 125.

³⁷ Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 388. As Ryan S. Schellenberg and Heidi Wendt state in their introduction to *The T&T Clark Handbook to the Historical Paul*, ed. Schellenberg and Wendt (London: T&T Clark, 2022.), 3, n. 11, I “do not wish to cite his [Pervo’s] work without acknowledging his 2001 conviction for the possession and distribution of child pornography and the violence entailed in these actions.”

³⁸ Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees: A New Translation, with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 41A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 279.

circumcisions in 2 Macc 6:10: “The women here are said to have *circumcised their sons*, in contrast to the narrative in 1 Macc 1:60–61, where the women are said to have *had their children circumcised*.”³⁹ Since men are nowhere mentioned in the passage, there seems to be scant reason to attribute a causative sense to the verb περιτέμνω. Moreover, since, as we have seen, the verb is not lexically causative, in the absence of any contextual clue to warrant it, it is gratuitous to attribute a contextually causative sense—unless, of course, one begins with the assumption that women could not perform circumcisions in the Hellenistic period; but that would be putting the exegetical cart before the horse. Thus the active, transitive translation of NRSV, NETS, and Doran is to be preferred to that of Blaschke, who reads περιτέμνω as causative, even in the absence of any contextual clues that might support that reading.

The same issue occurs in 4 Macc 4:25, which reads in part, ὥστε καὶ γυναῖκας, ὅτι περιέτεμον τὰ παῖδια, μετὰ τῶν βρεφῶν κατακρημνισθῆναι προειδυίας ὅτι τοῦτο πείσονται (NRSV: “even to the extent that women, because *they had circumcised* their sons, were thrown headlong from heights along with their infants, though they had known beforehand that they would suffer this”).⁴⁰ Blaschke renders the relevant portion as “daß Frauen, weil sie ihre Knaben hatten beschneiden lassen” (“that women, because *they had their boys circumcised*”), again taking the relevant verb as causative.⁴¹ We note that as with 2 Macc 6:10, no men are mentioned in this verse. Thus the objection lodged with respect to Blaschke’s reading of 2 Macc 6:10 applies to 4 Macc 4:25 as well: in the absence of any contextual clues to warrant it, περιτέμνω ought not be translated causatively.

By way of comparison, we note that the verb περιτέμνω is regularly translated as transitive but not causative when men appear as the subjects. To the usage in 1 Macc 1:61 (τοὺς περιτεμηκότας; “the men who had circumcised”); we may add Gen 17:23–24 LXX (Ἀβραὰμ ... περιέτεμεν τὰς ἀκροβυστίας αὐτῶν... Ἀβραὰμ ... περιέτεμεν τὴν σάρκα τῆς ἀκροβυστίας αὐτοῦ; Abraham ... circumcised their foreskins.... Abraham ... circumcised the flesh of his foreskin”); 21:4 (περιέτεμεν δὲ Ἀβραὰμ τὸν Ἰσαὰκ τῇ ὀγδόῃ ἡμέρᾳ; “and Abraham circumcised Isaac on the eighth day”); Josh 5:2–3 LXX (εἶπεν κύριος τῷ Ἰησοῖ Ποίησον σεαυτῷ μαχαίρας πετρίνας ... καὶ καθίσας περίτεμε τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ.... καὶ ... Ἰησοὺς ... περιέτεμεν τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ; “The Lord said to Joshua, ‘Make for yourself stone knives ... and, while sitting down, circumcise the sons of Israel....’ And ... Joshua ... circumcised the sons of Israel.”), Josh 5:7 LXX (ἀντὶ δὲ τούτων ἀντικατέστησεν τοὺς υἱοὺς αὐτῶν, οὓς Ἰησοὺς περιέτεμεν; “and in their place, he substituted their sons, whom Joshua circumcised”).⁴² These few examples

³⁹ Robert Doran, *2 Maccabees: A Critical Commentary*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2012), 148 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Emphasis added.

⁴¹ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 175, emphasis added in the translation.

⁴² On Abraham’s self-circumcision in the LXX, see Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 109, where

suffice to show that in the typical usage of the verb περιτέμνω in reference to circumcision, the subject performs the action (circumcision) on an object, indicated in the accusative case. The object may either be the foreskin, which is cut off, or the person whose foreskin is so removed. The same pattern is clearly evident in 4 Macc 4:25: γυναῖκας, ὅτι περιέτεμον τὰ παιδιά.

One might argue that περιτέμνω was used causatively in 1 Macc 1:60, 2 Macc 6:10, and 4 Macc 4:25 on the grounds that it falls into the category of services involving professional or contracted labor; similar, for example, to the case of οἰκοδομέω, “to have a house built.” Thus, in Blaschke’s view, 1 Macc 1:61 offers “the first trace [*die erste Spur*]” of the mohel that we encounter in later Jewish texts such as the Babylonian Talmud (discussed below, section 9). Thus, the mohel plausibly falls into the category of a “professional” or a comparable ritual expert. But is it safe to postulate the existence of a designated mohel or similar ritual agent in the second century BCE, some seven to ten centuries before we encounter terms denoting such agents in the Babylonian Talmud? Linked to Blaschke’s postulate of the existence of a mohel-like ritual agent already in the Hellenistic period is an apparent assumption that males and not females were recognized as agents authorized to carry out the ritual activity. In effect, this is what Blaschke proposes when, commenting on 1 Macc 1:60–61, he writes, “As long as there were men ... *they* must have carried out the circumcision” (“Solange es Männer gab ... dürften *diese* die Beschneidung durchgeführt haben”).⁴³

The result of Blaschke’s reasoning is that each time the verb περιτέμνω occurs with a male as subject, that male is assumed to have performed the circumcision; and each time the same verb occurs with a female as subject, the verb is understood to be causative: males *circumcise* infants, but females *have infants circumcised*. This procedure implies an exegetical double standard that imposes a predetermined view on the texts, ignoring the fact that syntactically, the subject-verb-object pattern remains the same whether the subject happens to be male or female. Against this approach, we note that unless the text itself provides a clear warrant for doing so, there is no reason to deny women the same ritual agency attributed to men in performing circumcisions. Following this criterion, both 2 Macc 6:10 and 4 Macc 4:25 would seem to indicate that the authors of those texts envisioned situations in which women themselves circumcised their infant sons, as male circumcisers do not appear in those texts, and women are the stated or implied subjects and their infants the objects of the verb περιτέμνω.

The facts that περιτέμνω is not lexically causative, the lexica do not support a causative usage, and the syntax remains the same whether males or females are the subjects of the verb (*x* circumcises *y*) should give us pause, not only when approaching the relatively straightforward cases of 2 Macc 6:10 and

he rightly reads περιτέμνω as transitive, but not causative.

⁴³ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 174 (emphasis is Blaschke’s).

4 Macc 4:25, but 1 Macc 1:60–61 as well. Although, as both Haber and Blaschke note, the presence of male circumcisers in 1 Macc 1:61 offers the best evidence of any of the passages surveyed that περιτέμνω might be used there in a contextually causative sense, such an inference is not necessary. In the *New English Translation of the Septuagint*, for example, George Zervos renders the verb transitively, but not causatively: “And the women who had circumcised their children they put to death according to the ordinance, and they hung the babies from their necks and put to death their families and those who circumcised them.” But given the prevailing view that a causative sense is to be understood (even the NRSV translates the verb causatively, although it does not do so with 2 Macc 6:10 and 4 Macc 4:25), the syntax and interpretation of the passage remains to be worked out if a noncausative, transitive interpretation of the verb περιτέμνω in 1 Macc 1:60 is to be maintained. In what follows, I suggest that 1 Macc 1:60–61 ought to be understood similarly to 2 Macc 6:10 and 4 Macc 4:25. This suggestion is based on two observations: the parallel structures of 1 Macc 1:60 and 1:61, and the possibility that the second καί in 1:61 is explicative.

First, we note first the parallel construction of the passage:

v. 60: καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας τὰς περιτεμηκυίας τὰ τέκνα αὐτῶν ἐθανάτωσαν ...

v. 61: καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς περιτεμηκότας αὐτοὺς [ἐθανάτωσαν].

“and they executed the women who had circumcised their children ...”

“and [they executed] their households and those (masc.) who had circumcised them.”

The bracketed verb ἐθανάτωσαν in verse 61 is supplied from the previous line in order to make the parallelism clearer.⁴⁴ Syntactically, there is no distinction between the relation of subjects to the objects of verbal action in the parallel formulations; in both cases, the objects of the verbal action are indicated in the accusative case, and there is no apparent distinction between the active character of the action whether the subject is female or male. The parallelism would seem to indicate that in both cases, the subject, *x*, circumcises the object, *y*, irrespective of the subject’s gender. Thus, the text names two groups of circumcisers, and not one, as Blaschke, Goldstein, and Haber argue: women in 1 Macc 1:60 and men in the following line. The clear parallelism argues against translating περιτέμνω as causative in 1 Macc 1:60 and noncausative in 1 Macc 1:61.

Second: on the explicative καί. We look again at the text: καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας τὰς περιτεμηκυίας τὰ τέκνα αὐτῶν ἐθανάτωσαν ... καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς περιτεμηκότας αὐτοὺς. The three καί... clauses sit awkwardly together. Consideration of the syntax is further complicated by the fact that the Greek text

⁴⁴ Both a “corrector” of Codex Siniaticus and the Lucianic version add the verb ἐθανάτωσαν at the end of 1 Macc 1:61. However, as Goldstein (*I Maccabees*, 227) notes, this expedient is unnecessary, as it is likely that the accusatives τοὺς οἴκους ... τοὺς περιτεμηκότας are governed by the verb ἐθανάτωσαν that appears in 1:60.

represents a translation of a Hebrew exemplar. Goldstein speculates that the conjunction in the phrase *καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν* may translate an underlying Hebrew *wegam* (“and also”).⁴⁵ Goldstein, like Blaschke, reads the final *καὶ* in the phrase *καὶ τοὺς περιτεμνηκῶτας αὐτοὺς* as indicating the simple connective “and.” On this reading, three groups are included among those executed for violation of Antiochus’s ban on practices stemming from the Torah: women, their households (or possibly, “their husbands”), and male circumcisers from outside the household. It is the mention of the third group that Blaschke takes as an indication that mohels or mohel-like ritual agents are in view.⁴⁶ As for the second group, Goldstein has some difficulty with the idea that Antiochus would have had an entire household executed due to a circumcision performed in its midst, noting, “To wipe out the entire family in which a circumcision occurred would not be too bloodthirsty a procedure for Antiochus, but it could lead to awkward results: what if a member of such a family was an apostate?” To resolve the problem, he translates the term *oikous* (“households”) as “husbands” on the basis of the claim that “house” can indicate “spouse” in rabbinic Hebrew.⁴⁷ (N.B.: Marcus Jastrow’s lexicon of the Targumim indicates that the Hebrew term *בית* can be used to indicate “wife,” but does not list an analogous usage to refer to the husband.⁴⁸)

The difficulty that Goldstein notes is removed, however, if we understand the final *καὶ* as a *καὶ explicativum*, or exegetical *καὶ*, which introduces a phrase specifying or defining what preceded it.⁴⁹ The passage would then admit of the following translation: “And they executed the women who had circumcised their children ... and their households; that is, those who had circumcised them.” The fact that the Greek was translated from Hebrew presents no difficulty for this reading, as *waw* also functions exegetically.⁵⁰ On this reading, the death penalty is limited to two groups: women who had

⁴⁵ Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 227.

⁴⁶ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 174.

⁴⁷ Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 227.

⁴⁸ See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1992), s.v. “בֵּית,” 5.

⁴⁹ On the exegetical *καὶ*, see BDAG, s.v. “καί,” 1c; BDF, §442.9; Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*, trans. Joseph Smith (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1994), §455f; G. K. Beale et. al., *An Interpretive Lexicon of New Testament Greek: Analysis of Prepositions, Adverbs, Particles, Relative Pronouns, and Conjunctions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), s.v. “καί,” 2.

⁵⁰ On the exegetical *waw*, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §39.2.4; E. Kautsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §154, n. 1b; Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), §434, citing Gen 4:4: וְהָבֵל הִבְיֵא נִסְחָתָא מִבְּרֹת צֶאֱנוּ וּמִחֻלְבָּהֶן (“while Abel on his part brought some of the first-born of his flock, specifically their fat portions”).

circumcised their children, and the women's households, with "households" being limited specifically to males within the household who had themselves circumcised a male infant (τοὺς περιτεμηκότας).

Caution, however, is in order: both a "corrector" of Codex Sinaiticus and the Lucianic version read καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν προενόμευσαν καὶ τοὺς περιτεμηκότας αὐτοὺς ἐθανάτωσαν ("and they plundered their houses, and they killed those who had circumcised them"), adding the underlined words. In those readings, the "houses" were plundered, not put to death; and the identity of "those (masc.) who circumcised them" is undetermined. Probably the glosses were added to smooth out a difficult text.⁵¹ On the whole, the passage provides only the slimmest of threads on which to hang the theory that mohels existed already in the Hellenistic period; we can only say, tentatively, that the text seems to envision both female and male circumcisers, and the male circumcisers may well be from within the household; that is, husbands and fathers.

6. Household-Based Circumcision around the Second Temple Period

To ground this reading of 1 Macc 1:60–61 in its ancient context, we note that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that circumcision was a household-based ritual in the Second Temple period and in the first centuries CE, just as Meyers indicated was the case in ancient Israel. In addition to the "households" of 1 Macc 1:60–61, we mention Luke 1:57–66, where neighbors and relatives come to visit Elizabeth to witness the circumcision of John the Baptizer, apparently in the home; and m. Šabb. 19.2, where the mention of courtyards in connection to circumcision implies a domestic setting.⁵² While these passages tell us where circumcision took place, they do not yet indicate who held the blade. In their respective Abraham narratives, however, both Gen 17 and Jub. 15 imagine that it is a male head of household—in this case, Abraham—who circumcises his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, as well as male servants and retainers. Although Jubilees freely revises the biblical text in other respects, it does not substitute a mohel in place of Abraham: apparently, during the Hellenistic period, circumcision was still viewed as an inner-household affair, as it was in Gen 17 and Exod 4.⁵³ If this inference is correct, then the phrase "those (men) who had

⁵¹ Cp. Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 227; and n. 44 above. The critical text of Rahlfs and Hahnhart relegates the variant readings to the apparatus. Fränkel's Hebrew translation corresponds to the Sinaiticus and the Lucianic versions, as noted above (n. 18).

⁵² See also Blanton, "Circumcision in the Early Jesus Movement," 126.

⁵³ One example of Jubilees's revisionary work: the covenant ritual in which animals are neatly bisected and laid in two rows, between which the parties to the covenant walked (Gen 15:7–21), is transformed into a sacrificial scene in which the victims' blood is poured out on an altar in Jub. 14:7–20; see James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 2 vols., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 1:493, 496–497. On the ceremony in Genesis 15, see Moshe Weinfeld, "Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90, no. 2 (1970): 184–203.

circumcised” infants in 1 Macc 1:61 would point specifically toward fathers, and not to ritual experts recruited from outside the household, a mohel or mohel-like agent, as Blaschke imagines. The parallelism between the female and male circumcisers in 1 Macc 1:60–61 indicates that the scenario envisioned in 1 Maccabees corresponds with practices described in the Pentateuch, where in some cases, the male head of household performed circumcisions (i.e., Abraham in Genesis 17); and in others, the female head of household—the mother—did the same (i.e., Exod 4:24–26).

To summarize: The reading of 1 Macc 1:60–61 proposed here resolves the problem that Goldstein finds with the notion that entire households were executed under Antiochus’s ban on circumcision and respects the evident parallelism established between the clauses τὰς γυναῖκας τὰς περιτετηκῦας τὰ τέκνα and τοὺς περιτετηκότας αὐτοὺς. It dispenses with the need to posit two different usages of the verb περιτέμνω in 1 Macc 1:60–61, one causative and one noncausative. And it respects the fact that the verb περιτέμνω is not lexically causative. Lastly, it obviates the need to impose an exegetical double standard onto the text by asserting that the verb is contextually causative when applied to women in the text, but not when applied to men. Thus it seems that the texts in 2 and 4 Maccabees envision situations in which women themselves circumcised their sons, Zipporah-like. In 1 Maccabees, both women and men were understood to circumcise children in their own households: men from within households, probably the infants’ fathers, were envisioned as circumcising their sons in cases when the mothers did not do so.

One additional issue remains to be addressed concerning the books of Maccabees: Ohr Margalit and Chariklia Tziraki-Segal argue that in antiquity, women “performed and assumed responsibility for fulfilling the commandment of circumcision” only during periods characterized by “‘stressful’ and unusual circumstances”; that is, women assumed the male prerogative during times of crisis, when men were unable to fulfill their “normative” roles.⁵⁴ It is significant, though, that the books of Maccabees offer no indication that it was irregular or unusual for women to circumcise their sons, and no explanation or apology for the women’s performance of the ritual is given. What was irregular and unusual was rather the interdict against circumcision and the harsh penalties against those who performed it.

As Margalit and Tziraki-Segal themselves note, the situation was quite different in the eighth–ninth century CE Scroll of Antiochus, a text that Bar-Ilan describes as “a re-working of the Books of Maccabees, incorporating additional material unknown to us from other sources.”⁵⁵ In contrast to the

⁵⁴ Ohr Margalit and Chariklia Tziraki-Segal, “Circumcision: Man’s Obligation and Woman’s Praxis,” *Nashim* 12 (2006): 20.

⁵⁵ Margalit and Tziraki-Segal, “Circumcision,” 21–22; Bar-Ilan, *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity*, 16. On dating the Scroll of Antiochus, see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 364–

books of Maccabees, in the Scroll of Antiochus 34–36, a woman who had circumcised her son flings both herself and her offspring from a city wall in an act of infanticide-suicide (rather than being hurled from the wall as a penalty: 2 Macc 6:10; 4 Macc 4:25). An explanation is provided as to why a woman and not a man had carried out the ritual: the woman's husband had died. The late antique or early medieval Scroll of Antiochus seeks to justify a significant departure from what by that time had become a male-dominated ritual. A similar need to explain or reinterpret older texts depicting women's circumcision of their sons occurs in a Talmudic passage concerning Zipporah's circumcision of Gershom, which we examine in section 8.

7. Talmudic Traditions Attributed to Rabbis of the Roman Period⁵⁶

Several traditions in the Babylonian Talmud and Tosefta, however, take for granted that women performed circumcisions on their infant sons.⁵⁷ A tradition associated with Rabbi Nathan (a tanna of the second century CE), for example, reads as follows:

דַּתְנִיָא, אָמַר רַבִּי נָתָן: פַּעַם אַחַת הִלְכֵתִי לְכַרְכֵּי הַיָּם, וּבָאת אִשָּׁה אַחַת לִפְנֵי שְׁמִלָּה בְּנָה רִאשׁוֹן וָמָת, שְׁנִי וָמָת, שְׁלִישִׁי, הִבִּיאָתוֹ לִפְנֵי, רָאִיתִי שֶׁהוּא אָדָם. אָמַרְתִּי לָהּ: הַמְתִּינִי לוֹ עַד שְׂיִבְלַע בּוֹ דָּמוֹ, הַמְתִּינָהּ לוֹ עַד שְׂנַבְלַע בּוֹ דָּמוֹ, וּמָלָה אוֹתוֹ וְחִיָּהּ, וְהָיוּ קוֹרִין אוֹתוֹ "נָתָן הַבְּבִלִי" עַל שְׁמִי.

As it was taught *in a baraita*, Rabbi Nathan said: On one occasion, I went to the coastal cities,⁵⁸ and one woman came before me who circumcised her first son and he died, *and she circumcised her second son and he died, and since she feared circumcising the third due to concern that he might die as well*, she brought him before me. I saw that he was red. I said to her: Wait until his blood is absorbed into him. She waited until his blood was absorbed into him and then circumcised him, and he lived. And they would call him Nathan the Babylonian after

365. A Hebrew version of the text with an English translation is printed in Philip Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book: Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), 713–726.

⁵⁶ Roman Period: ca. 37 BCE–324 CE; following Christian Frevel, *History of Ancient Israel*, ABS 32 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 563.

⁵⁷ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer, who first pointed me to b. Šabb. 134a; the other references discussed in this section followed from there.

⁵⁸ The “cities by the sea” refers to indeterminate coastal towns, perhaps including Tyre or Caesarea Maritima; see Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1992), s.v. “בְּרִי” glossing הַיָּם כְּרִי as “sea towns, mercantile ports (Tyre &c.).” Jordan D. Rosenblum (“Cities of the Sea: In Search of הַיָּם כְּרִי,” *Hebrew Studies* 51 [2010]: 211–221) argues that the location serves literary and pedagogical functions and need not be connected to any particular geographic location.

my name. (b. Šabb. 134a [§15]; trans. Adin Steinsalz and Israel V. Berman [modified])⁵⁹

The story is followed immediately by another adhering to the same basic pattern: a woman from Cappadocia had circumcised her first and second sons, both of whom had died. Before circumcising her third son, however, she consulted Nathan, who again recommended that circumcision be delayed, but for the opposite reason. In the first story, the woman's third son was "red" due to an overabundance of blood, which required time to be "absorbed" into the body; and in the second, the third son was "pale" or "yellowish green"; that is, "jaundiced" (ירוק). As the Steinsaltz edition glosses the passage, "he had a blood deficiency," similarly requiring a period of delay before circumcision could safely be administered. The third son of the first story had too much blood; that of the second story, too little. Both narratives are patterned around the number three (two lethal, one nonlethal circumcision), maternal consultation with Nathan, opposite sanguine diagnoses (too much or too little blood), the motif of ritual delay, and, most importantly, the sage's life-saving medico-halakic advice. Aside from such literary considerations, notably in both episodes it is unnamed women who are understood to circumcise their sons. The narratives raise no objection to the women's performance of the ritual; it is simply assumed that was a normal, or at least acceptable, practice for women to do so.

Similar stories are told in b. Yebam. 64b, where women are also presumed to act as circumcisers; as, for example, in a baraita attributed to Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi, a tanna of the second and early third century CE: "*If a woman circumcised her first son and he died as a result of the circumcision, and she circumcised her second son and he also died, she should not circumcise her third son*" (מִלָּה הִרְאִישׁוֹן וָמֵת, שְׁנֵי וָמֵת, שְׁלִישִׁי—לֹא תִּמּוֹל). A more stringent opinion, attributed to Shimon ben Gamliel (tanna of the first century CE), indicates that three deaths, not two as per R. Yehudah, were necessary to exempt subsequent sons from the requirement of circumcision. Again, it is assumed that a woman performs the ritual: רִבִּיעִי—לֹא תִּמּוֹל, שְׁלִישִׁי תִּמּוֹל ("She should circumcise *her* third son, ... *but* she should not circumcise *her* fourth"). Another story is attributed to the third-century amora Yoḥanan bar Nappāḥa, as transmitted by Ḥiyya bar Abba: three sisters living in Sepphoris each circumcised a son, and each son died in turn. A fourth sister brought the question before Shimon ben Gamliel, a tanna

⁵⁹ See also the parallels in b. Hul. 47b and t. Šabb. 15:8; on the latter, see Amram Tropper, "Children and Childhood in Light of the Demographics of the Jewish Family in Late Antiquity," *JSJ* 37, no. 3 (2006): 299–343, esp. 316–317. The text and translation are those of Adin Steinsalz and Israel V. Berman, eds., *The Talmud / Talmūd Bavli: The Steinsaltz Edition* (New York: Random House, 1989–1999), available online at *Sefaria: A Living Library of Torah*, <https://www.sefaria.org/texts>, last accessed Aug. 10, 2021. By using italic font, I indicate the explanatory glosses added to the text by Steinsalz. All translations of the Bavli herein are from the Steinsaltz edition.

of the first century CE, who ruled that she should not circumcise her son due to the mortal danger in which it would evidently place him. One need not assume that each of these episodes transmits historically accurate information to appreciate the fact that the compilers who brought these traditions together in the Talmud had no trouble envisioning women performing circumcisions in Galilee, Cappadocia, and—depending on the referent of the “coastal cities” of b. Šabb. 134a—perhaps Judea or Coele-Syria during the first three centuries CE.

8. A Dissenting Opinion: The Zipporah Episode in Talmudic Interpretation

In contrast to the narratives in Exodus 4, the books of Maccabees, and Talmudic traditions associated with Nathan, Yehudah ha-Nasi, and Shimon ben Gamliel, but similar to the Scroll of Antiochus, the attribution of significant ritual agency to women as circumcisers proved unacceptable to some (not all) compilers of the Babylonian Talmud in the fifth to eighth centuries CE.⁶⁰ In the tractate Abodah Zarah, two opinions are expressed regarding the halakic rectitude of women acting as circumcisers: one for and the other against. An objection is promptly raised to refute the latter position: Zipporah’s circumcision of Gershom provides a seemingly clear halakic precedent. That precedent, however, is subsequently discounted on the basis of a rereading of Exodus 4:

ומי איכא למאן דאמר אשה לא והכתיב (שמות ד, כה) ותקח צפורה צר קרי
ביה ותקח והכתיב ותכרות קרי ביה ותכרת דאמרה לאיניש אחרינא ועבד
ואיבעית אימא אתיא איהי ואתחלה ואתא משה ואגמרה.

The Gemara raises a difficulty against this explanation: And is there anyone who says that a woman may not perform circumcision? But isn’t it written: “Then Zipporah took [wattiqqah/וַתִּקַּח] a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son” (Exod 4:25). *This verse explicitly states that a circumcision was performed by a woman. The Gemara answers that one should read into the verse:* “And she caused to be taken [wattaqqah/וַתִּקַּח]”; *that is, she did not take a flint herself. But isn’t it written:* “And she cut off [wattikröt/וַתִּכְרֹת]”? *Read into the verse:* “And she caused to be cut off [wattakrēt/וַתִּכְרֹת],” as she told another person to take a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and he did so. *The Gemara provides an alternative explanation:* And if you wish, say instead: She came and began the act, and Moses came and completed the circumcision. (b. ‘Abod. Zar. 27a [§14]; trans. Steinsalz and Berman [modified])

⁶⁰ On dating the Babylonian Talmud and its sources, see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 211–225.

The debate hinges on the stems or *binyanim* of the verbs *lqh*, “to take,” and *krt*, “to cut (off).” In the MT of Exod 4:25, Zipporah both “takes” (*wattiqqah*/וַתִּקַּח) and “cuts off” (*wattikrōt*/וַתִּכְרֹת), using the *qal* or G-stem, an active form. Both verbs, “to take” and “to cut,” are used transitively; that is, they take direct objects, indicating the object of the verbal action. In Exod 4:24, the object of *wattiqqah* is *sōr*, “a flint knife”; and the object of *wattikrōt* is *ārlat*, the foreskin, the latter being additionally indicated by the object marker *’et*.⁶¹ Thus, the MT understands that Zipporah both “took” the flint knife and “cut off” the foreskin of Gershom. One of the Talmudic interlocutors understands the verbs differently, employing a distinction between *ketiv* and *qere*, that which is “written” in the consonantal text and that which is to be “read” and pronounced; a distinction indicated in the Steinsalz translation by “isn’t it written?” and “one should read into the verse.”⁶²

What is to be read, in this opinion preserved in the Gemara, is not *wattiqqah* but *wattaqqah*, and not *wattikrōt* but *wattakrēt*. In each case, the Gemara does not vocalize the verbs as *qal* forms with the MT, but instead vocalizes (“reads”) them as *hiphil* or H-stem forms. As Bruce Waltke and M. O’Connor note, “Roots that are transitive in Qal ... in the Hiphil tend to be causative”; that is, the verbal subject causes an object to engage in an action. The transitive *hiphil* often takes two objects, “the object of the causing (usually a person) and the object of the basic or root verb.”⁶³ Thus, as the explanatory gloss in Steinsalz’s translation makes perfectly clear, Zipporah did not herself take the flint but caused someone to take it, and she did not cut the foreskin but “told another person to take a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and he did so.” By this reading, Zipporah’s ritual agency is reduced in the sense that she enlists another agent, understood to be male, to perform the circumcision; she herself is viewed as unauthorized to take a “hands on” role in its performance.

A problem attends the Talmudic understanding, however, as in its transitive use, the *hiphil* typically takes two objects, the first, as Waltke and O’Connor note, is “usually a person”; that is, the person who is enlisted to perform the verbal action. The presence of a personal agent as object must be supplied by the imagination of the Talmudic interlocutor, as the explanatory gloss makes clear: Zipporah “told another person to take a flint and cut ... and he did so.” But the reference to a person as object is entirely lacking in the Exodus passage, so the vocalization of the MT is more likely the correct one: Zipporah serves as the subject of the verbs, which are used transitively with the *qal* stem, each taking one object: Zipporah (herself) takes the knife and cuts the foreskin. Perhaps to account for the grammatical problem the Gemara’s interpretation raises, an alternative solution is proposed: Zipporah “came and

⁶¹ On the object marker, see Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction*, 55, §3.3.4e.

⁶² On the *ketiv/qere* distinction, see GKC, §17.1; Israel Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, trans. E. J. Revell (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980), §93–107.

⁶³ Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction*, 441, §27.3a–b.

began the act, and Moses came and completed the circumcision.” The Gemara’s grammatical and exegetical maneuvers indicate that by late antiquity, some (not all) Jewish interpreters had become uncomfortable with the idea that women could perform circumcisions on their sons.

There is, however, evidence to suggest that, despite the denial that Zipporah herself circumcised Gershom in b. ‘Abod. Zar. 27a (§14), women may have continued to perform circumcisions even in late antiquity. There is a running debate in b. ‘Abod. Zar. 27a over whether legal reasoning regarding circumcision should proceed on the basis of Gen 17:9, וְאַתָּה אֶת־בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר, “And you shall keep my covenant,” or Gen 17:13, הֵמוּל יְמוּל, “he must surely be circumcised.” Those basing their legal reasoning in the former verse conclude that women are not permitted to perform circumcisions: since “a woman is not subject to the mitzva of circumcision ... therefore she is not included in those who must ‘keep God’s covenant.’” Those who based their reasoning on the latter verse, on the other hand, argue that “there is reason to permit a woman to perform circumcision, as a woman is considered as one who is naturally circumcised” (b. ‘Abod. Zar. 27a; trans. Steinsalz [slightly modified]). The discussion is not grounded in case law (i.e., the interlocutors do not seem to be reflecting on an actual case brought before them) but reads more as a theoretical reflection on the limits and possibilities inherent in the biblical passages cited. That said, the discussion indicates that some Babylonian legal authorities of late antiquity could, at least in theory, envision the possibility that women might perform circumcisions. In the twelfth century CE, Maimonides envisioned a hierarchy of classes of people authorized to perform circumcisions. Although women were subordinated to men in this hierarchy, they were nonetheless viewed as authorized—in the absence of a qualified male—to perform the procedure: “Where there is no adult circumcised male (Israelite), it is performed by an uncircumcised Israelite, a bondman, a woman or a minor” (*Mishneh Torah, Circ. 2.1* [trans. Moses Hyamson]).⁶⁴ Thus it seems that the late antique attempt to exclude women from performing the ritual was largely but not entirely successful.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Edited according to the Bodleian (Oxford) Codex; With Introd. Bibl. and Talmudic References, Notes and English Trans.*, ed. Moses Hyamson, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Boys Town Jerusalem, 1937–1965); online at Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Abodah_Zarah.27a.13?lang=bi&with=Mishneh%20Torah,%20Circumcision&lang2=en, last accessed Aug. 12, 2021. For a discussion of circumcision in Medieval Ashkenaz, see Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 55–89.

⁶⁵ This observation fits into the broad pattern involving the exclusion of women from circumcision ceremonies in late antiquity and the Middle Ages outlined in detail by Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*.

9. The Emergence of Male Ritual Experts Specializing in Circumcisions in Late Antiquity

The opinions registered in b. 'Abod. Zar. 27a and the Scroll of Antiochus point to a development in late antiquity in which older texts designating women as circumcisers were explained or reinterpreted to revoke women's agency in performing the ritual. This corresponds to a parallel development with respect to the terms designating male ritual agents either performing or specializing in circumcisions. It is not until the fifth to eighth centuries CE that the Babylonian Talmud names classes of ritual experts who specialized in circumcision: b. Šabb. 130b (§6) mentions one Rabbi Yehudah "the Cutter" (הַגֹּזֵר) in the context of a discussion about circumcision on the Sabbath. By way of contrast, we note that the first-century BCE Prayer of Nabonidus text from Qumran (4Q242 1.3–4) features a *gazar* (גזר), an "exorcist" or "diviner," characterized as a "Judean from among the exiles," who heals the "severe inflammation" (שחנה באיש) of the Babylonian king Nabonidus by forgiving his sin.⁶⁶ The Aramaic stem גזר, "to cut, decree" perhaps refers in this context to the cutting of roots and herbs for medicinal use (cp. 1 En. 7:1; Jub. 10:12–13). It is well known that in Mediterranean antiquity, a line between magic, medicine, and exorcism was not always clearly drawn.⁶⁷ The relation between these two types of "cutter" and the possibility of a transition from one to the other are topics that merit further study.

The Aramaic form of the term *mohel* (Aram. מְהוּלָּא: "circumciser") appears, for example, in b. Šabb. 135a (§7); 156a (§11). The "physician" (רופא; b. 'Abod. Zar. 26b [§10]; 27a [§1]) and the "skilled practitioner" (אומן; b. Šabb. 133b [§11]) are similarly viewed as agents authorized to perform circumcisions.⁶⁸ These grammatically masculine terms provide evidence that by the late antique period, various categories of male ritual experts had begun to encroach on what was apparently in earlier periods a procedure that been carried out in the context of the family, with either the mother or the father performing the operation. Thus, the scenes envisioned by biblical and postbiblical writers in which male or female heads of household themselves circumcised their infant sons had by late antiquity largely given way to a trend in which male ritual specialists from outside the household were called upon to complete the rite. Whether this trend might have been spurred by the development of the practice of periah in the second century CE, with the

⁶⁶ For the Aramaic terms, see Edward Cook, *Dictionary of Qumran Aramaic* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), s.v. "גזר," "באיש." See the text in Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Study Edition*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1:487–488.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Michael Zellmann-Rohrer, "Hippocratic Diagnosis, Solomonic Therapy, Roman Amulets: Epilepsy, Exorcism, and the Diffusion of a Jewish Tradition in the Roman World," *JSJ* 52 (2021): 1–25.

⁶⁸ For the terms, see also Hirsch, "Circumcision," 4:95.

additional degree of surgical skill required to perform that operation, is a possibility that it is beyond the scope of the present study to address.⁶⁹

In a prescript dated April 9, 423 in Constantinople, the Christian emperors Honorius and Theodosius II issued the following order (Cod. Just. 1.9.16): “Jews will be condemned both to the confiscation of their property and to permanent exile, if it is shown that they have circumcised a man of our faith or had others circumcise him [*si nostrae fidei hominem circumcidisse eos vel circumcidendum mandasse constiterit*].”⁷⁰ It appears unlikely that the edict applies to (formerly) Christian converts to Judaism since it mentions men “of our [Christian] faith”; more likely it pertains specifically to Christians enslaved under Jewish ownership, as is the case in a related edict (Cod. Just. 1.10.1).⁷¹ Although the prescript does not deal with the circumcision of Jewish infants, it is nonetheless significant that it assumes that male Jewish heads of household could either themselves circumcise their male slaves (corresponding to the pattern seen in Gen 17, where Abraham circumcises his male slaves) or “have others circumcise them.” It is unclear whether the “others” who might be enlisted to circumcise household slaves would have been ritual experts, such as the mohel, or other persons called upon to perform the operation. The prescript indicates that even in late antiquity, circumcision could be seen as an inner-household ritual performed by the male head of the household, whose property could be confiscated for violating the edict. Female circumcisers are not envisioned; this could be either because females were associated only with the circumcision of their own sons, and not slaves (I am unaware of any source indicating that women circumcised household slaves); or because by the fifth century CE, circumcision had already become a ritual performed largely by males; or both.

⁶⁹ Periah involves amputating both the external foreskin and the inner preputial mucosa, fully denuding the glans. On the development of periah in the second century CE, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 225; Nissan Rubin, “Brit Milah: A Study of Change in Custom,” in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press 2003), 87–97; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, rev. ed., 3 vols., ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, Matthew Black, and Pamela Vermes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973), 149, n. 28. Ra’anan Abusch, “Negotiating Difference: Genital Mutilation in Roman Slave Law and the History of the Bar Kokhba Revolt,” in *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 71–91, refutes the notion that periah was introduced due to a supposed Hadrianic ban on circumcision.

⁷⁰ Translation of Fred H. Blume and Bruce W. Frier (Frier, *Codex of Justinian*, 1:235).

⁷¹ For comment on the prohibition of Jews from circumcising their Christian slaves, see Simon Corcoran, “The Codex of Justinian: The Life of a Text through 1,500 Years,” in Frier, *Codex of Justinian*, 1: xcvi–clxiv (esp. cxii).

10. Variegated Ritual Practice: The Pertinence of Age and Familial Relation

The previous section attempted to demonstrate that chronology was an important factor in the development of the circumcision ritual, as male ritual agents from outside the household came to displace household-based ritual agency, both maternal and paternal, in earlier periods. The reference to the circumcision of adult male slaves in the Code of Justinian raises another important issue that must now be discussed: the age of the circumcised at the time the ritual is performed. As Elisheva Baumgarten demonstrates in *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*, the period including pregnancy, birth, and infancy was largely the province of women: mothers, midwives, and their female attendants.⁷² By and large, men remained on the periphery of such activities, remaining outside the door during birthing, for example. Circumcision provided opportunity to a brief exception to the rule: “If the newborn was a boy, he was separated from this group of women for the first time on the day of his circumcision. On this occasion, his father first formally recognized him as his son. After the circumcision ceremony, the infant was returned to the sphere and care of the women.”⁷³ Infants remained largely in the domain of women, especially that of the mother and/or wet nurse, until the child was weaned after a legally defined period of twenty-four months,⁷⁴ but that in actual practice could range “from two to four or five years.”⁷⁵

The situation was not dissimilar in antiquity, when, as Meyers notes, “rituals surrounding pregnancy, labor, and birth, along with those securing fertility before pregnancy and those dealing with postpartum lactation, infant care, and circumcision, constitute the religious culture of women more than of men.”⁷⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, children remain in the domain of the mother and of women until they are weaned around the age of three (cp. 1 Sam 1:21–28). In 2 Kgs 4:11–20, the child of the unnamed Shunnamite woman is transferred from the maternal to the paternal sphere at an age vaguely specified, “when the child had grown” (וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד), only to be transferred back to the mother when he became fatally ill.⁷⁷ In the narrative in Genesis 21, Isaac appears in the domain of his mother Sarah until the time of his weaning (Gen 21:1–8); but by the time Abraham considered sacrificing Isaac, the lad had clearly passed into the domain of the father (Gen 22:1–19).⁷⁸ Given the temporal division of

⁷² Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 21–54.

⁷³ Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 53–54 (citation: 53).

⁷⁴ Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 123–124.

⁷⁵ Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 126.

⁷⁶ Meyers, “From Household to House of Yahweh,” 283.

⁷⁷ I thank Susan Ackermann for pointing out the relevance to the present argument of the several passages cited here.

⁷⁸ On the festival mentioned in Gen 21:7–8 to mark the occasion of Isaac’s weaning, see Claudia D. Bergmann, “Infant Israel Growing Up: The Theme of Breastfeeding in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bib* 102, no. 2 (2021): 161–181, esp. 164–166.

responsibility in which children existed largely in the domain of their mothers and of women until the time of their weaning, and subsequently entered the domain of fathers and of men, it is easy to understand how Meyers could make the assumption, as in the quotation above, that the circumcision of male infants fell into the domain of women's ritual activity.

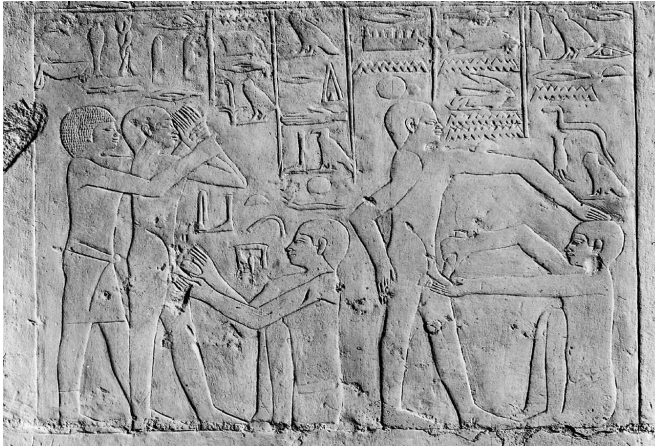


Fig. 1. "Egypt, wall carving showing a circumcision scene, Sakkara" (cropped). Wellcome Collection. Image available under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.

Conversely, as Ackerman has remarked: it is difficult "to imagine that pubescent or marriage-age sons, who have been absorbed into the world of their fathers and the world of men, would be put back into the hands of their mothers for something that is so male-focused; i.e., circumcision. So I suspect that puberty-age or marital-age circumcision had to be performed by fathers."⁷⁹ In support of the idea that pubertal or postpubertal males were circumcised only by other males, whether fathers or other adult group members, we may point to the examples of Joshua circumcising (postpubescent male) soldiers at Gilgal (Josh 5:2–8), and of Abraham circumcising both the thirteen-year-old Ishmael and his male slaves (Gen 17:23–27). By way of comparison, we may also point to the depiction of a "priest of the dead" undergoing a genital cutting operation by another adult male ritual agent in the Tomb of Ankhmahor from Saqqara, Egypt, circa 2300 BCE; the apparent depiction of the same priest having his pubic hair shaved (see fig. 1, right register) indicates that he was of pubertal or postpubertal age.⁸⁰ The narratives of Abraham's circumcision of his thirteen-

⁷⁹ Susan Ackerman, email message to author, Feb. 11, 2022.

⁸⁰ For the interpretation of the scene, see Joachim Friedrich Quack, "Zur Beschneidung im Alten Ägypten," in *Menschenbilder und Körperkonzepte im Alten Israel, in Ägypten und im Alten Orient*, eds. Angelika Berlejung, Jan Dietrich, and Joachim Friedrich Quack (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 561–651, esp. 568–573. For Egyptian techniques of male genital cutting, see Richard-Alain Jean, "Anatomie humaine. Le bassin \-VIII.

year-old son Ishmael along with all of the male household slaves in Gen 17:23–27, and presumably the circumcision of Shechemites in Gen 34:13–31, follows a similar pattern: the circumcision of adult males is performed by adult males, either a father or another male figure.

What then do we make of Abraham's circumcision of the eight-day-old Isaac in Gen 21:3–4? Possibly a situation similar to that which pertained in medieval Europe is presupposed: the child, although not yet weaned, briefly passes out of the mother's domain and into that of the father, who serves the role of circumciser. On the other hand, some aspects of the narrative depart significantly from known ritual procedures, which raises questions about the extent to which the text sheds light on "actual" ritual performance in antiquity. Here I refer to Abraham's apparent *self-circumcision* in Gen 17:24, discussed in Gen. Rab. 49.1 and Midr. Tanh., *Vayera* 2; and pictured in the medieval Bible (see fig. 2) illuminated by the Master of the Bible of Jean de Sy, or the Master of the Boqueteaux (active 1350–1380 CE).⁸¹



Fig. 2. "Circumcision of Abraham (Bible of Jean de Sy).jpg." Wikimedia Commons. Image in the public domain under the CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication license.

Abraham is named as the ritual agent responsible for severing all the foreskins in the household in Gen 17:23, and no other ritual agent is mentioned

L'appareil génito-urinaire de l'homme–Atlas (2), Atlas chirurgical–La circoncision," <http://medecineegypte.canalblog.com/pages/anatomie---bassin---viii---bassin-homme---atlas-2---circoncision/34010268.html>, on *Histoire de la médecine en Egypte ancienne*, 25 June 2016, last accessed 18 June 2023.

⁸¹ See also Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 109. I thank Matthew Thiessen for the references to Genesis Rabbah and Midrash Tanhuma.

in Gen 17:23–27.⁸² Self-circumcision is a practice that, while attested at least twice in medieval contexts, nevertheless deviated significantly from otherwise known procedures, in which normally a ritual agent other than the circumcised carried out the ritual.⁸³

It appears that in depicting Abraham as the circumciser par excellence, standard forms of male ritual agency (i.e., circumcising a pubescent son and household slaves) were broadened to encompass what otherwise might be viewed as the mother's prerogative (i.e., to circumcise an infant who had not yet left the maternal domain), and indeed broadened so far as to include even the unlikely scenario of self-circumcision. Conversely, bearing in mind the temporal aspects of maternal and paternal domains of contact with and control over children, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Zipporah's circumcision of Gershom in Exod 4, for all its literary coloring, might plausibly reflect a known ritual procedure in which mothers circumcised their infantile sons, not yet weaned; a procedure otherwise attested in the books of Maccabees and Talmudic traditions associated with Nathan, Yehudah ha-Nasi, and Shimon ben Gamliel.

11. Concluding Remarks

One final note is in order: all of the sources discussed or mentioned here, including Exod 4, Gen 17, 1 Macc 1, 2 Macc 6, and 4 Macc. 4, b. Šabb. 134a, b. Yebam. 64b, and b. 'Abod. Zar. 27a, constitute stylized literary constructions; and for that reason, they cannot be said to offer an unmediated view of actual ritual practices during the Second Temple and Roman periods. That being the case, it is nevertheless significant that the authors and editors of the various accounts could, without apology or explanation, envision situations in which women themselves circumcised their sons. This stands in stark contrast to a competing view that had developed by late antiquity, when male ritual experts from outside the household had begun to displace the household-based agency attributed to mothers and fathers evident in texts and traditions of the exilic and postexilic, Hellenistic, and Roman periods; and consequently, one Talmudic authority could no longer countenance the possibility that Zipporah had circumcised her own son. The late-antique curtailing of women's ritual agency is also evident in the Scroll of Antiochus, whose author felt the need to specify that a woman had taken the initiative to circumcise her son only because her husband had died. Although, due to the nature of the evidence at our disposal, the shift that we witness from the Second Temple period to late antiquity

⁸² For discussion, see Thomas R. Blanton IV, "A Relational Account of Structure and Agency via 'Lived Ancient Religion' and the 'Processing Approach,' with a Case Study of Circumcision in Ancient Judaism," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 8, no. 3 (2022): 270–300, esp. 287–289.

⁸³ Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83.

indicates above all a change in modes of literary representation, in my opinion it does not stretch the imagination too far to suggest that parallel developments in ritual practice lay underneath the observable shift in representation.

Like the literature that imperfectly depicts it, the ritual itself may have undergone various permutations: in domestic contexts, being performed on infants by either mothers or fathers, and later by mohels arriving from outside the household; and in collective contexts by male heads of household (e.g., the circumcision of adult male slaves), or by other males understood as authorized ritual agents, perhaps based on specific or even unique contextual factors (e.g., Joshua's circumcision of soldiers at Gilgal; the unspecified circumcisers of adult Shechemites). At the very least, the data presented here serve to warn us against assuming either (1) that a mohel or mohel-like figure was already present during and shortly after the Second Temple period, (2) that only males were viewed as authorized to perform circumcisions throughout all antiquity, or (3) that norms and specifications concerning the agent or agents who performed circumcisions within the context of a given household had developed prior to late antiquity.