



Review of Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), xvii + 317 pp.

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At the site of the human body, conflicting religious, cultural and theological values can clash. This is all the more true when questions of belonging and communal identity are permanently incised into the body, as in the case of circumcision. Performed on a Jewish boy on the eighth day after birth, circumcision is a sign for the covenant between the people of Israel and God and has become almost synonymous with Jewish identity. To be a Jewish man—or so it seems—means to be circumcised.

But what about Jewish women? Does their non-circumcision imply that they are not part of the covenant? Or, if they are part of the covenantal relationship, is circumcision theologically overrated as a bodily signifier? Does circumcision signify a privileged position of men or, to the contrary, does it indicate that men are lacking a quality that women already possess?

Shaye Cohen presents an in-depth analysis of the rabbinic discussion of such questions from post-biblical Judaism to the era of Jewish Enlightenment. While the bulk of the textual material covers late antiquity and the medieval era, Cohen keeps in mind the diversity of opinions as they span Jewish history from biblical times to modernity. In an introductory chapter, he summarizes the canonical views as expressed in Torah, Mishna and Talmud, and, toward the end of the book, occasionally refers to the contemporary (American) debate. By asking the question of why Jewish women are not circumcised, he foregrounds the issue of “gender” within a ritual activity that seems exclusively male. “This book is not a history of women in Judaism,” he states early on, but “is at best a small contribution to the history of women in men’s Judaism” (p. xiii).

The book is divided into two parts. In Part One, consisting of four chapters, Cohen contrasts the canonical views on circumcision in Jewish classical texts with the writings of early Christian detractors. Those writers dismissed circumcision within a larger framework of the *adversus Judaeos* tradition (Christian anti-Jewish writings).

In Chapter 1, Cohen does not only review the biblical take on circumcision (a *sign* of the covenant or *the* covenant itself; a tribal marker; an act of purification and sacrifice), but also describes pertinent questions raised by early Talmudic debates, including the issues of intentional versus involuntary circumcision, of conversion, and of the surgical procedures. The rabbis of the early medieval period, up until the eleventh century, expanded the range of meanings attached to circumcision: the biblical rationale of “purity” widened to one of “sanctity,” “protection” widened to “salvation,” and “covenant” to “sacrament.” No longer was the foreskin the exclusive center of attention; instead, the “blood” of circumcision gained

prominence. Such blood was interpreted as “powerful and salvific” because it “atones for sin, moves God to mercy, and protects against death” (p. 53).

Chapter 2 briefly asks whether Jewish women have ever been circumcised. The answer is a resounding “no” (with the exception, perhaps, of an Ethiopian custom in the first century BCE). Chapter 3 delineates the basic arguments of the Christian polemics against circumcision starting with Paul, for whom it was “unnecessary, even dangerous,” because it “divides humanity,” whereas “the blood of Christ unites it” (pp. 68, 71). Among the Greek church fathers, Cohen singles out Justin Martyr, for it is he who lays the ground for the tenacious Christian argument that the non-circumcision of women proves that “God does not demand the circumcision of men” (p. 76). Many medieval Christian writers relied on Justin’s argument. Among the Latin church fathers, another crucial anti-circumcision argument developed, namely that with the coming of Jesus Christ, circumcision in the flesh was replaced by spiritual circumcision. The blood of circumcision was exchanged with the waters of baptism, just as Christianity had superseded Judaism. Thus, circumcision became a “sign of Jewish obduracy and sinfulness”; even worse, for some it “became the mark of Cain, marking out Jews as murderers condemned to external exile” (p. 83). Though Augustine and Thomas Aquinas granted circumcision the possibility of bestowing grace on Jews during the times of the Old Testament, the guiding assumption remains in place: baptism has made circumcision obsolete, and the ongoing practice of circumcision among Jews can only be interpreted as divine punishment (as Peter Abelard argues in the eleventh century).

Chapter 4 asks how and why medieval rabbis responded to those Christian charges. While the rabbis of the Talmud (late antiquity) largely ignored both the Christian attack on circumcision as well as the question of why only men, and not women, are circumcised, medieval rabbis found themselves in a different environment. Surrounded by a dominant Christian culture, in which “circumcision became identified with Judaism itself” (p. 105), they felt compelled and coerced to respond. According to Cohen, “medieval rabbinic Judaism would never have been troubled by the non-circumcision of women” (p. 105) had the Christian discourse on Jews and Judaism not forced them to take a stance. It is “no accident,” Cohen states, “that all the medieval rabbinic texts that deal explicitly with [the non-circumcision of Jewish women] were written by [Jewish] authors who were actively involved in anti-Christian polemics and the defense of Judaism” (p. 105).

It is here that Part Two, seamlessly, continues and deepens the investigation of Cohen’s investigation. How did the rabbis, from the medieval period to the early Jewish Reform movements in Europe, respond to the Christian charge that the non-circumcision of Jewish women made the ritual cutting of the foreskin obsolete? Cohen presents four distinct Jewish responses: circumcision indicates that the normative way of being Jewish rests with Jewish men, thus relegating women to a lower status (Chapter 5); circumcision signals a moral (and ontological) defect in men, namely an excess of lust, for which the cutting of the foreskin is a cure (Chapter 6); faith, not circumcision, is the determining sign for Judaism—a position advanced by Maimonides—and hence women and men can be equally Jewish (Chapter 7); finally, Jewish women possess a bodily quality analogous to the male rite of circumcision: the blood of menstruation and of circumcision are both interpreted as covenantal blood (Chapter 8). These four explanations were not drawn directly from

canonical, legal Jewish texts but are the result of the religious imagination in response to external challenges. “The Jewish respondents,” Cohen states, “were left to their own devices and were free to invent any answer they could” (p. 108).

For each of these four Jewish responses, Cohen provides a plethora of textual evidence, which he carefully lays out for the reader so that even the non-specialist can follow the complexity (and internal referencing) of the Jewish medieval and pre-modern debates. It is especially intriguing to read Chapter 5 and 6 side-by-side, since the positions introduced here cannot be reconciled. Whereas the former demonstrates a Jewish view that declares only men to be “real” Jews, thus celebrating Jewish manhood, the latter argues the opposite, namely that circumcision remedies “some defect that inheres in Jewish men” (p. 143). Philo of Alexandria, the famous first-century Jewish philosopher, identified the male “defect” as an excess of lust and pride; circumcision, he reasoned, would decrease and suppress these impulses. In the twelfth century, Maimonides picked up on the same theme, and later commentators developed such thinking further into theories about sexual pleasure: Circumcised men, they argued, were less capable of sexually pleasuring women. Seemingly in a self-defeating gesture, they fantasized about the sexual prowess of “foreskinned” (i.e. Christian) men—and their anxiety as colonized men was replicated in analogous fashion by the colonizing fantasy of Christian men about “the beautiful Jewess” (p. 159). However, the thrust of such reasoning lay not in the intentional self-effeminizing of Jewish men but in claiming that true virility was not a function of “sexual prowess but of intellectual and spiritual capacity” (p. 156). Such nuance did not, of course, prevent Christian polemicists to exploit the theme of the effeminization of Jewish men. Circumcision (and the bleeding accompanying it) was put into proximity of castration and female menses, with the result that Jewish men, as some Christians have claimed, were suffering from menstruation (see also Irvn Resnick, “Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 93/3 [2000]:241-63).

Chapter 7 presents Jewish viewpoints that deemphasize the significance of circumcision by placing it as one commandment among all the other 613 commandments. Because no single individual is expected to fulfill all commandments, and because some commandments are meant for specific groups only (e.g. women, children, converts), circumcision is merely one of the commandments for men, from which no further privileges are derived. Chapter 8, finally, offers a truly stunning idea already voiced in the twelfth century by R. Joseph Bekhor Shor. Menstrual blood, he wrote, is covenantal blood, and hence contains its own salvific quality. Women, therefore, are no less or no more part of the covenant than men. Cohen is quick to point out, however, that Bekhor Shor’s position should not be understood as a pre-modern feminist stance (he works, Cohen says, “within the decidedly anti-feminist period,” p. 205). But it still can function as a backdrop for grounding and inspiring modern, gender-conscious discourses on circumcision.

In Jewish history, the debate on the circumcision of Jewish men, and the non-circumcision of Jewish women, has been anything but monolithic and dull—Cohen’s work makes this absolutely clear. Importantly, and contrary to persistent misconceptions, no Jewish legal text claims that a Jewish man refusing to be circumcised ceases to be Jewish. “Such a Jew, of course, is a sinner, perhaps an apostate, but no authoritative legal text had excluded such a Jew from Judaism or

Jewishness” (p. 210). Hence, the debate about circumcision is far from being over. Any such debate—as Cohen’s work demonstrates convincingly—inevitably occurs within contested theological claims and within the politics of religious exchanges between hegemonial and marginal communities.

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