

# Circumcision HelpDesk™



## Circumcision:

*A Christian Perspective*



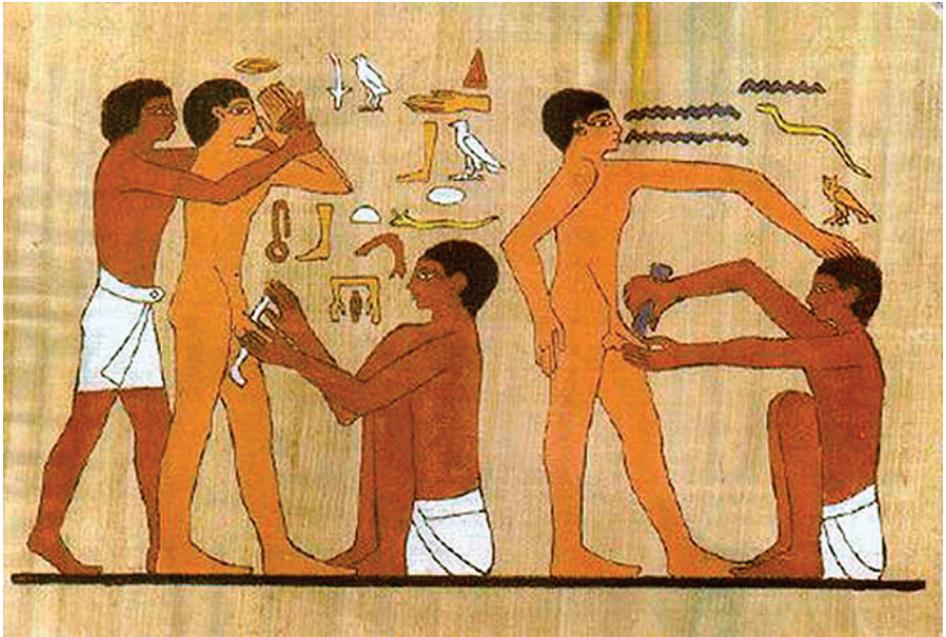
*Circumcision of Christ – Tintoretto*

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Published in England by The Circumcision Helpdesk™

London, United Kingdom

<http://www.circumcisionhelpdesk.org>



Circumcision in Ancient Egypt (ca 2350 BC)  
Coloured copy from a bas relief in the tomb of Ankhmahor at Saqqura

# Circumcision: A Christian Perspective

## Introduction

When discussing the Christian perspective on anything it is important to bear in mind that the Christian church is split into many factions (Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, etc.) and therefore there may be small differences between them. This makes it more difficult to be authoritative in all respects.

For the avoidance of any doubt, the author now openly states that his roots are in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, which is the longest standing, and widest spread, of all Christian churches and has a clear-cut authoritative leadership in the Pope. This will undoubtedly be reflected in this booklet in the absence of any particular information to the contrary.

It is our intention to be as comprehensive and neutral as possible, so if any reader has documented information, from any part of the Christian community, which contradicts, or significantly adds to, anything here we would be pleased to seriously consider it for the next revision if it is sent to [info@circumcisionhelpdesk.org](mailto:info@circumcisionhelpdesk.org)

## Ancient Times

Circumcision is one of the oldest recorded surgical operations. A bas relief (from about 2350 BC) in the Egyptian pyramids (see preceding page) shows the circumcision of young men of noble or priestly class. It is not clear if the operation was confined to these classes or was also performed on others. Archeologists have examined a large number of mummies by means of CT scans, which have clearly shown many to have been circumcised, so it was quite a common practice.

The Bible (*Genesis 17, 9-14*) describes how God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, his son and whole male household as a sign of the Covenant between God and man. God further commanded that the Covenant was to be maintained by future generations, with every 8-day old male being circumcised. Unlike many other Jewish rituals (see *Exodus 12* regarding the Passover; and the whole of *Leviticus* for many other requirements), no method was described, leading to the conclusion that the Jews were already very familiar with the procedure – quite possibly from their Egyptian neighbours.

This Covenant was renewed at Gilgal (the hill of the foreskins) when Joshua was commanded to circumcise all those Israelites who had not been circumcised during their wanderings in the desert after coming out of slavery in Egypt (*Joshua 5, 2-9*). God later rewarded them with victory at the battle of Jericho (*Joshua 6, 20-21*).

So faithful were the Jews to the circumcision mandate that over the years they came to be known as 'the people of circumcision', or simply 'The Circumcision' (despite the fact that some of their non-Jewish neighbours also circumcised).

## Christian Times

By the time of Christ the term 'circumcision' was almost synonymous with 'Jew' (see *Philippians 3, 3* where Paul uses the term to refer to the Jews in general). As we shall see later, this can lead to some misunderstanding these days in interpreting references to circumcision in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Jewish Law had become a mass of detailed and very burdensome requirements, many of which were quite openly flouted by the average Jew, although outwardly rigorously defended by the Pharisees (who didn't always observe them to the letter, and often found ways to circumvent them. They were strongly criticised by Christ himself for their hypocrisy – e.g. *Matthew 15, 1-9*). There are several accounts in the Gospels of the Pharisees trying to trip up Jesus over the interpretation of some piece of the Law.

The disciples and all the earliest Christians were converts from Judaism and hence had all been circumcised as infants. The *Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15, 1-2)* records that there were two schools of thought about the need for converts to Christianity to also observe the Jewish Law, which is represented in the *Acts* simply by reference to its most obvious outward symbol – circumcision.

St. Paul was primarily preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles (i.e. non-Jews), who became Christians but without first becoming Jews. Some of the Jewish converts argued, however, that the Gentiles must be circumcised and adopt the whole of Jewish Law (*Acts 15, 5*). Paul (a Jew himself) realised that this would place an intolerable burden on them and declared that non-Jewish converts did not have to become Jews first. This argument culminated in the 1<sup>st</sup> Council of Jerusalem (*Acts 15, 4-20*) at which Peter and the other Apostles decided that it was not necessary for converts to observe the whole Jewish Law.

Circumcision itself was not to be regarded as essential, neither were all the minor regulations that the Law had accumulated. The new Christians were, however, to observe some things from the Law, namely they must abstain from sexual immorality, from food and blood sacrificed to idols, and from both the meat and blood of animals which had been strangled – rather than being killed in accordance with Kosher requirements.

In some people's mind there is a doubt as to whether the Apostles had the right and power to change the requirements of the Law, as far as Christians are concerned, since Christ himself had said "Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete. I tell you this: so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter, not a stroke, will disappear from the Law..." (*Matthew 5, 17-18*). And again, He says "If any man therefore sets aside even the least of the Law's demands, and teaches others to do the same, he will have the lowest place in the Kingdom of Heaven" (*Matthew 5, 19*). However, Christ also said to Peter (as head of the Apostles) "Whatever you shall bind on Earth shall be bound in Heaven and whatever you shall loose on Earth shall be loosed in Heaven" (*Matthew 16, 19*). This may have given them the power to over-ride the implication of Christ's words that Christians were also to follow the whole Jewish Law. This view is backed up by the account (*Acts 10, 9-16* and *Acts 11, 3-10*) of God telling Peter that the (uncircumcised) Gentiles were not to be regarded as 'unclean' – which is how Jewish Law viewed them.

We have already seen that the term 'Circumcision' had become synonymous with 'being a Jew', and 'uncircumcised' was regarded as being synonymous with 'being a Gentile'. So when Paul writes (*Romans 2, 25*): "Circumcision has value if you observe the Law, but if you break the Law you have become as though you had not been circumcised", he is not referring so much to physical circumcision as to being a Jew.

This is confirmed when he says, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (*Romans 2, 28-29*).

Paul did, however, have two of his companions, Timothy (*Acts 16, 3*) and Titus (*Galatians 2 3*), circumcised because they were Gentiles and he didn't want to offend the Jewish converts to Christianity. Paul says in *Galatians 2, 4* that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, but it is clear that Paul adopted double standards and, in his heart, considered it was preferable (though not essential) for Christians to be circumcised.

## Mediaeval Times

These times included the period of the incursion of Islam into the Holy Land and the consequent Crusades. Where the Moslems overran a country they attempted to forcibly convert people to Islam and often forcibly circumcised both those who had died or had been captured in battle.

Pope Eugene IV and two church Councils put out definitive statements condemning forced conversion and explicitly opposing any form of amputation or mutilation of a human body unless done for purely therapeutic reasons. These prohibitions of the time were aimed fairly and squarely at atrocities of war.

Infant male circumcision (IMC) has become controversial these days amongst some folk and many have criticized the practice of routine IMC, still widely performed in the United States and other places. Others have gone further, claiming that circumcision has been condemned explicitly by the Church and criticizing IMC as 'mutilation' and, hence, prohibited implicitly by Catholic moral principles. However, closer examination of the Catholic tradition shows that the Church regards IMC as having been a means of grace under the Old Covenant and, more importantly, in the flesh of Jesus. This positive theological account of IMC cannot be evaded by invoking a supposed historical distinction between milah (a token cut) and periah (the complete removal of the foreskin). The Church has never condemned IMC as mutilation, and while IMC carries some risk, there is no evidence that it inflicts disabling mutilation. A reasonable body of modern medical opinion regards IMC as conferring net health benefits.

## Modern Times

Catholic theology since the Second Vatican Council has increasingly emphasized that God's covenant with the Jewish people remains valid. It has never been revoked. This covenant includes the circumcision of infant males. Jesus himself had, of course, been circumcised when He was 8 days old (*Luke 2, 21*) and there are many famous paintings of His circumcision (as on our cover). Many modern Christians have taken the view that what was good enough for Jesus is good enough for their own sons. They therefore desire that their sons be circumcised, not to make them into Jews, but to more closely follow Christ himself.

Infant circumcision is routinely practised by the Coptic and Abyssinian Christians. In the Philippines circumcision is also considered as a Christian custom, although it is generally performed without ceremony at ages from 7 to 11 and, in many cases (especially in rural areas), is not a true circumcision but rather a 'supercision' or 'dorsal slit';

that is, simply making a slit along the upper surface of the foreskin without removing any of it.

Amongst the Irish, at least until well into the 1950s, those families who could afford it had their sons circumcised. This was particularly true of the more affluent ones who had migrated to England – a biography of Paul McCartney recounts that he and his brother “were Catholicly baptised and Jewishly circumcised”.

Whilst circumcision is clearly not *required* in order to be a Christian, the Church has never actually forbidden it to its followers. Indeed many Christians circumcise in imitation of Christ’s own circumcision, although most seek it for medical, hygienic, sexual or social reasons.

It is interesting that both the Jews and the Muslims, whose roots are in the dry, dusty deserts of the Middle East, routinely circumcise and also abstain from eating pork. From a medical perspective both practices are highly desirable in the conditions in which they originally lived. Pork is the first meat to go bad in hot conditions and so avoiding it completely would have seriously reduced the problem of food poisoning.

Sand and fine dust can easily get between the foreskin and glans where it is trapped by the natural secretions of the inner foreskin. Once trapped there it readily causes irritation which leads to balanitis (inflammation of the glans and foreskin). The problem is compounded when there is a lack of water for washing the genital area. Circumcision allows the glans to dry and removes the possibility of trapping the sand, thus providing a more comfortable situation. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that, during recent military conflicts in the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East, many soldiers sought and received circumcision to cure or prevent balanitis as a result of the sand and dust, when water for washing was in short supply.

Long-term health and hygiene was undoubtedly the primary reason behind the Jewish and Moslem requirement for circumcision.

## **Circumcision and Masturbation**

In Victorian times, masturbation was seen as one of the greatest sins and all sorts of means were sought to prevent it. This proscription was based on the Biblical account of Onan who “whenever he slept with his brother’s wife, spilled his seed on the ground” (*Genesis 38, 9*). He did this instead of giving his deceased brother’s wife a child as was required under Jewish Law. It is very doubtful that Onan’s action was one of masturbation – it was much more likely, from the Biblical account, to have been ‘coitus interruptus’ – i.e. withdrawal before climax to avoid impregnation. God’s displeasure with Onan was most probably not actually due to the act of masturbation or coitus interruptus itself but his failure to observe the Law and give his late brother’s wife a child.

One means of preventing masturbation, suggested in Victorian times, was circumcision. Clearly circumcision does not actually prevent masturbation, nor other sexual pleasure, but it does remove one cause of involuntarily rubbing one’s genitals, namely balanitis – the inflammation of the glans and/or foreskin. Many a young boy has discovered masturbation long before sexual maturity because of rubbing at an irritated foreskin.

Although medical science has now shown masturbation to be useful for sexual development, the Christian view is still to condemn it. Circumcision in infancy or early childhood can therefore be regarded as good since it will usually delay the discovery of masturbation because balanitis is very unlikely. Of course circumcision will not totally prevent masturbation later on!

Circumcision is thus useful in avoiding the taboo appearance of public masturbation through dealing with irritations of the glans and foreskin, but it will still allow private masturbation when one desires it.

## **Legal and Medical Aspects**

Whilst it is not the purpose of this booklet to discuss the legal, medical or social aspects of circumcision in any detail (for which other publications of The Circumcision Helpdesk™ are available), it is worth noting that, in every democratic country, it is perfectly legal for men to seek it for themselves for any reason if they so desire, and for parents to have their sons circumcised, whether for religious or social reasons; future hygiene; or to cure immediate medical problems.

Circumcision is the only sure, immediate and guaranteed permanent cure for phimosis and paraphimosis. Attempting to stretch the foreskin opening wider may be tried first, but in the majority of cases circumcision becomes necessary in the end. This is either because the stretching didn't result in allowing the tight foreskin to pass freely over the engorged glans when erect or, having done so, it closes behind it in a dangerous paraphimosis.

Circumcision has also now been conclusively proven to significantly reduce the risk of a male ever catching each of several STIs (including heterosexually acquired HIV/AIDS) during sex with an infected woman. It also reduces the risks for the female partner as the circumcised man is less likely to be infected himself.

## **Other Considerations**

Most of the apparent condemnations by the Church are fairly ancient and were made before modern medical research proved the prophylactic (preventive) benefits of circumcision, some of which are better than any vaccine has ever produced in respect of the disease it protects against. Had these prophylactic benefits been known at the time, the pronouncements would undoubtedly have mentioned prophylactic aspects and not just therapeutic ones. Furthermore, at that time there were no reliable anaesthetics, so circumcision would have been a very painful affair – which it isn't today.

Vaccination has never been officially commented upon by the Church, despite it actually having a much more far-reaching effect on the patient's bodily systems than circumcision ever does. Although the risks associated with vaccination are very small, they are several times greater than those of modern circumcision under local anaesthetic.

A few years back, a German provincial (lower) court ruled that infant circumcision was unlawful. There was an immediate backlash from the Jewish and Moslem community. The Catholic bishops joined in and supported the right of parents to circumcise their sons for religious reasons. They would not have done this if the Church

condemned circumcision outright. The German Government eventually introduced a law making male infant and child circumcision specifically legal as a genuine medical procedure, which parents could choose for their sons, even if prompted by religious or other non-medical reasons.

## Conclusion

The Catholic Church (and Christianity in general) does not prohibit circumcision at any age when performed for medical, sexual or social reasons.

Only two particular reasons are condemned:

1. Circumcising in the expectation of it aiding one's salvation.
2. Using circumcision as a form of punishment or its imposition on captives, conquered peoples, etc.

## Further Information

Further information on circumcision and the reasons for it can be obtained from other Helpdesk publications which can be found on The Circumcision Helpdesk™ web sites at <http://www.circumcisionhelpdesk.com> and <http://www.circinfo.com>

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