

WHO SANCTIFIED THE BELOVED IN THE WOMB *

by DAVID FLUSSER and SHMUEL SAFRAI *

In Philo Byblius' treatise on the history of the Phoenicians we read,¹ "It was a custom of the early Phoenicians that in time of great disasters, the leading citizens sacrificed the best-loved of their children to appease the demons of vengeance. And this was because Cronus, whom the Phoenicians call El, fathered by a nymph named Anobret, an only son, was who called *Ἰεὸς* (i.e.: the only) and this is how they call an only son, to this day. When grave dangers threatened the land as a result of war, El dressed his son in royal garments, built an altar and sacrificed him as a burnt-offering to his father Uranus, the god of the heavens; circumcised himself, and commanded his confederates, those known as 'Elohim', to do likewise."

The significance of Philo Byblius' report and its great importance for the understanding of the background of the Abraham stories were already

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pointed out by S. E. Loewenstamm.² It is clear that the account of El's actions is a Canaanite etiological story, intended to explain why circumcision was customary and why beloved children were occasionally sacrificed and it seems that only sons were preferred for this purpose. The origin of these two customs is in one incident, and this incident is likely to shed light on the ends which the Phoenicians hoped to achieve by these two customs. El offered his son as a burnt-sacrifice to appease the demons of vengeance at a time of grave dangers to the land, and dressed him for the sacrifice in royal garments: since El was himself a king,³ he succeeded by means of his son's royal garments in diverting the death which threatened him to his slaughtered son, and similarly prevented disaster for himself and his confederates by means of circumcision. It is important that these two motifs—that of circumcising a man and his confederates, and that of sacrificing the only and beloved son as a burnt-offering—are connected by the Phoenicians with El, and in Genesis with Abraham; and there they are divorced completely from their original signification, namely their apotropaic purpose and this meaning is not found in the story of the binding of Isaac, nor in the biblical story of the origin of circumcision as a covenantal sign. But if the ancient meaning of circumcision is not found in the stories of Abraham, it is hinted at in the story of the "bridegroom of blood" (*the circumcision of Moses' son*) (Exodus 4:24-26),⁴ where circumcision still serves the function of allaying a mortal danger. Was this meaning of circumcision forgotten in Israel in the course of time because of its primary significance as a sign of the covenant between Israel's God and His people?

The ancient apotropaic foundation of the Passover sacrifice is obvious,⁵ for it is known that the blood which was put on the door had the power to protect human beings: "For the Lord will pass through to slay the Egyptians; and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to slay you" (Exodus 12:23, cf. 12:13). If so, the reference is to protection against the destroyer who endangered on that night the lives of the Children of Israel.

2. S. E. Loewenstamm; *Philo Byblius*, Perakim II, (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1971), pp. 326-27 (in Hebrew).

3. Eusebius I 10, 18. 29, 44: I p. 47, 14; 49, 1; 52.1.

4. Cf. also S. E. Loewenstamm, *Biblica*, 50 (1969), pp. 429-30.

5. On the original apotropaic character of the Passover sacrifice see S. E. Loewenstamm, *The Tradition of the Exodus from Egypt and its Evolution* (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 80-94 (in Hebrew).

“From this it will be clear why, particularly, the law of Passover emphasizes the prohibition of participation by the uncircumcized (Exodus 12: 48): Circumcision, like the Passover itself, has a pronounced apotropaic significance.”⁶ The material cited by Loewenstamm testifies to the fact that the Sages recognized the apotropaic meaning of circumcision and mentioned this meaning in speaking of the blood of the Passover sacrifice, where the apotropaic meaning is clear from the language of the Torah itself. Both for the *midrashim* and from the *targumim* it is clear that the Sages still sensed the closeness between the functions of the blood in these two ceremonies: that of the Passover sacrifice and that of circumcision.⁷ In connection with circumcision we may further cite the Targum to Canticles 3: 8 where the words “each with his sword at his thigh, against alarms by night” are explained as follows: “And each one of them has the seal of circumcision on his flesh, as it was sealed on the flesh of their father Abraham and are protected by it as a man with a sword strapped to his thigh, and because of this they do not fear the demons and killers who walk at night.”

In the Second Temple period there were major changes in the thought and perception of Israel: there developed a speculative and theological approach to the Torah; and concurrently the irrational-mystical outlook was strengthened, although at the same time the ancient character of this mythic element was considerably changed; the mythic powers, both positive and negative, were seen as tangible expression of the principles of good and evil. Here also the speculative-theological inclination was at work. The destructive demonic forces are now part of the Kingdom of Evil, to which Gehenna belongs. Thus, for example, according to the Book of Jubilees (49: 2-7) God sent all the soldiers of Prince Mastema to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians.⁸ This Prince Mastema is identified with Belial, of whom it is said in the Scroll of the War of the Children of Light (13: 10-12): “And you made Belial for destruction, Prince Mastema, and his reign is in darkness, and his aim is to condemn and convict, and all the spirits of his lot are angels of destruction, they

6. Cf. Loewenstamm, *The Tradition of the Exodus from Egypt...*, pp. 87-88.

7. Possibly the word “sign” in the context of circumcision [(Genesis 17:11): “and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you”] Exodus 12:13 and cf. 12:23, once had apotropaic meaning, as in the case of the blood of the Passover sacrifice: “The blood shall be a sign for you upon the houses” etc. M. S. Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem 1944), p. 129 (in Hebrew), relates the protective sign of the blood of the Passover sacrifice with the mark of Cain (Genesis 4:15) and with Joshua 2:12.

8. Cf. Loewenstamm, *Tradition...*, p. 91.

walk in darkness and towards it (i.e. darkness, evil) is their common desire.”

It seems reasonable that a passage of the *Damascus Document* (6QD 16: 4-6) which also speaks of Prince Mastema, is connected with the apotropaic nature of circumcision; “And on the day when a man accepts on himself to return to the Torah of Moses, the angel Mastema leaves him if he fulfills his word; for this reason Abraham was circumcised on the day of his knowledge.”⁹ Although the sentence concerning Abraham is apparently corrupt, it is clear that the author connects the entrance into the covenant of the sect with the covenant of Abraham. The opinion that the wicked are under the dominion of Belial, who departs from those who have chosen to lead just lives, is found in the “Testament of the Patriarchs,” a work closely connected with the Dead Sea sect, in which Naphtali tells his sons:¹⁰ My sons, if you do good, men and angels will bless you... and Satan will flee before you, and the wild animals will fear you, and the angels will cleave to you... but he who does not do good will be cursed by men and angels... and Satan will dwell in him as in his own vessels, and every wild animal will dominate him...” Similarly, according to the *Damascus Document*, if a man enters the covenant of the sect “the angel Mastema will leave him.” We have already stated that the Sages still understood the significance of circumcision as a form of rescue from punishment. If so, it will not be difficult for us to understand why the author of the *Damascus Document* compares entry into the sect with entry into the covenant of our father Abraham: it seems reasonable that in his opinion, the angel Mastema leaves the infant who is circumcised.

It seems that the statements of the *Damascus Document* are important also in another area, the Jewish origin of Christian baptism. From the accounts of Josephus and of the Scrolls,¹¹ we learn that those who joined the Essene covenant were then permitted to perform immersion. If so, immersion was connected with entrance into the sect, and we have just seen that some of the sect believed that Prince Mastema leaves the man who joins the sect, and compared entrance into the covenant

9. H. Rabin corrects and reads “was saved” instead of “was circumcised,” but this correction seems implausible.

10. *Testament of Naphtali* 8:4-6 and similarly, *Testament of Issachar* 4:7, *Testament of Dan* 5:1, *Epistle of Jacob* 4:7. Cf. also *The Shepherd of Hermas* 48:2-5, 47:6-7, 48:2, 49. The closeness between the *Testament of Naphtali* and Mark 1:13 has already been pointed to by C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels* I, 1927, p. 9. I hope to return to the Christian side of the matter and treat it at greater length.

of the sect to the covenant of circumcision. Also in Christian baptism the baptized person is freed from the dominion of Satan and his angels of destruction. Although this Christian belief, which finds expression in special ceremonies, has other foundations—whose roots are also predominantly Essene—it seems likely in view of the statements of the *Damascus Document*, that the Christian belief that the baptized person is freed from the realm of Satan, was influenced by the outlook of the Dead Sea sect. And as far as this sect is concerned, the source of this belief is in the apotropaic nature of circumcision. We hope elsewhere to be able to deal with this subject at length.

We come now to the most important testimony concerning the apotropaic nature of circumcision. We refer to the blessing recited to this day at the time when the circumcised infant is introduced into the covenant of our father Abraham. This is its text:¹² “He who recites the blessing must say: Blessed... Sanctified us... sanctified the Beloved in his mother’s womb, and instituted an ordinance among his kin, and sealed his descendants for a covenant of sanctity. Therefore in recompense for this, living God, our portion¹³ is salvation of (lit. to save) our beloved kin (lit. the belovedness of our kin) from destruction.”

11. Josephus, *Wars* II, 138 and *Manual of Discipline* (1QS 5:7-14); see the commentary of J. Licht, *The Manual of Discipline*, (Jerusalem 1965) pp. 128-129 (in Hebrew). On the Dead Sea sect and Christian baptism see D. Flusser, (Jerusalem 1961) pp. 209-239 (in Hebrew). Cf. also J. Ysebaert, *Greek Baptismal Terminology, Its Origins and Development*, Nijmegen, 1962.

12. *Tosefta Berachoth* 6; 13, *Pal. Tal. Berachoth* Chapter IX, paragraph 4; *Bab. Tal. Shabbath* 137b, and in prayerbooks. On the blessing and its textual versions see S. Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-peshutah*, Order of Zeraim—Part I, (New York 1976) pp. 114-115; notes to *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon*, p. 99; *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot*, ed. Azriel Hildesheimer, (Jerusalem 1972) part I, p. 215; and especially the important article of N. Wieder, “Correction of a Corrupted Responsum of Hai Gaon,” *Sinai* LIII (March 1964), pp. 285-289 (in Hebrew). The text cited is that of Ms. Rome to the Palestinian Talmud (not mentioned by Wieder). We have corrected one scribal error in Ms. Rome, which reads, “Godliving” instead of “living God.”

13. The intention is that in recompense for the commandment of circumcision, our lot is the salvation of the circumcised child from destruction. Some read with the addition of an explanatory gloss “let our lot be”; others mistakenly thought that “our lot” is an appellation of God, like the preceding “living God” and therefore supplied the ‘missing’ verb and read “living God our lot, command.” Later there were those who read the verb “command” as “commanded.” On this issue there developed a controversy in the Geonic period; cf. the article N. Wieder cited in the preceding note. The text cited is the optical surviving text of the blessing, but it seems likely that even this is not the original text of the blessing. The expression “in recompense for this” is difficult in a blessing, and it may be that the blessing was once “who sanctified the Beloved in the womb and instituted

Already the unique poetic language points to the fact that this blessing is apparently ancient; as we will see, it was probably customary before the time of Paul. It also seems likely that this was once the only blessing recited at the time of circumcision. It may have been recited by the circumciser himself, since it would be appropriate for him to say, when reciting the blessing over wine, that "Our portion is to save our beloved kin from destruction," viz. by circumcising the infant. The blessing also contains a play on words; God sanctified the Beloved in (lit. from) the womb and instituted an ordinance among his kin, paralleling the description of the circumcised infant as "our beloved kin." This last turn of phrase derives from Jeremiah 12:7 ("I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies"). The descriptions of circumcision, with one exception, are taken from the Bible. The term "ordinance" is taken from Psalms 105:8-10 where circumcision is discussed: "which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute," and the Three Fathers are mentioned. The expression "covenant" occurs in the context of circumcision in Genesis 17:10-11 and also in verse 14, while in verse 11 the expression "sign" occurs as well: "and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."

In the blessing God is said to have "sealed" the descendants of Abraham with a sign of the covenant of holiness. The expression "sealed" in connection with circumcision is known to everyone from the Grace After Meals ("Your covenant which you sealed in our flesh"). This expression is already found in the Aramaic "Testament of Levi" in the story of Schechem.¹⁴ One manuscript of this Aramaic work, found among the scrolls, was written in approximately 100 B.C.E.;¹⁵ if so, the work itself dates from the second century B.C.E. The use of "sealing" in connection with circumcision in the Targum to Canticles has already been cited above.¹⁶ Paul also calls circumcision "a seal" in his Epistle to the Romans 4:11 in a passage which we will deal with later; similarly circumcision is called "a seal" in the Epistle of Barnabas 4:6. The expression "seal"

an ordinance among his kin and sealed his descendants with a sign of the covenant of holiness, to save the beloved of our kin from destruction." On the expression "a goodly lot" see S. Lieberman, *Greek and Hellenism in Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1963) pp. 55-57 (in Hebrew).

14. "Circumcise the foreskin of your flesh and appear (like us) and be sealed like us and you will be sealed like us in the circumcision." (According to R. H. Charles, *The Greek Versions of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* [Oxford, 1908] p. 145) and the *Testament of the Patriarchs*, London, 1908, p. 228.

15. Cf. note 16. D. Flusser, "Qumran and Jewish Apotropaic Prayers," *Israel Exploration Journal* 16, (1966), p. 195.

for Christian baptism occurs, beginning with "the Shepherd of Hermas" (c. 100 C.E.).

This blessing expresses the idea that circumcision saves the circumcised infant from destruction, and undoubtedly this is an expression of the same outlook which was always fundamental to circumcision, namely that circumcision saves one from mortal danger. In fact there were sages who thought that circumcision saves the infant from the fires of *Gehenna*. "Beloved is circumcision, for the Holy One Blessed be He swore to Abraham that anyone who is circumcised will not descend to *Gehenna*."¹⁷ And the term "shachath" (destruction) is one of the seven appellations of *Gehenna* (*Babl. Tal. Eruvin* 19a). But when at the time of circumcision itself it is said that "our portion is to save our beloved kin from destruction," it is difficult to believe that the reference is to judgment in *Gehenna* in the afterlife. Besides, it seems that the idea that the circumcised do not descend to *Gehenna* is only a weakening of the belief, first found in the Torah and reappearing in Israel in various sources, according to which circumcision protects against the depredations of demons from the time of its execution. As we have seen, it seems likely that the *Damascus Document* (6QD 16:4-6) preserved for us, indirectly, the belief that at the time a man is circumcised "the angel Mastema leaves him." It therefore seems reasonable that if the blessing states that the function of circumcision is to protect the child from "destruction," the meaning of the word "destruction" itself is like the destroyer in the story of the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12:23 and also 12:13) and the "destroying angel" in II Samuel 24:16 (also I Chronicles 21:15). According to *Babl. Tal. Berachot* 16b, Rabbi (Judah the Prince) requested in his customary prayer: "may it be Thy will to save us... from a bad neighbour and from the destroyer Satan...", but precisely the words "end the destroyer Satan" are missing in several witnesses.¹⁸ Despite this, the concept "destroying Satan" is itself ancient, as it is already

16. On circumcision as seal, cf. J. Ysebaert (cited in note 11) pp. 250-253, (who overlooked important testimonia), and on this expression for Christian baptism pp. 281-426. See also Billerbeck IV 1, pp. 3-32, and W. Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch*, (Berlin 1958), p. 1577. On the expression "seal" (signaculum) for Christian baptism see A. Blaise, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français des auteurs chrétiens*, (Paris 1954), pp. 758-759. See especially the lovely parable on circumcision as the seal of Abraham in *Exodus Rabba* 19:5.

17. *Tanhuma, Lech Lecha* 20, and cf. *Genesis Rabba* 48:18 (ed. Theodor-Albeck) p. 438 and *Yalkut Shim'oni* 18, paragraph 82 (Vol. I, Jerusalem 1973), p. 250, and the parallels cited there.

18. See *Dikduke Soferim*. These words are missing also in *Ginze Talmud Babli* from the Antonin collection of the Cairo Geniza, (ed. A. I. Katsh, Vol. I, Jerusalem 1976), p. 9.

found in the *Thanksgiving Scroll* of the Dead Sea sect, “rebuke every destroying Satan” (fragment 45). We have already seen that in the *War Scroll* (1QM 13:10-12) says: “And you have made Belial for destruction, the angel Mastema.” True, the basic meaning of “shachath” in the *Thanksgiving Scroll* is Sheol (the nether world) as a place of evil, but the forces of evil come forth from there (see *Thanksgivings* 1QH 3:12), and so the author is enabled to speak of “arrows of shachath” (1QH 3:16) and see also (1QH 3:26-27). If so, it seems likely that in our blessing the “shachath” from which the circumcised infant is saved is a poetic expression for the domain of the demons, mentioned in this context in the Targum to Canticles 3:8.

Our contention, that according to this blessing the circumcised child is saved from the sway of the Kingdom of Evil, will be reinforced if we study closely the beginning of the blessing. In the course of generations there have been those who identified the “Beloved” mentioned in the blessings with each of the three forefathers, but in fact the “Beloved” is Abraham, as this is his usual appellation.¹⁹ We may understand the words of the blessing “who sanctified the Beloved from the womb” in light of a *midrash* cited by Rabbenu Tam (the Tosafist R. Isaac ben Meir);²⁰ “and that which is said in the blessing for circumcision ‘who sanctified the Beloved from the womb’—Rabbenu Tam said that this is Abraham who is called Beloved as we read here (i.e. *Babl. Tal. Menahoth* 53b) and the Holy One Blessed be He sanctified him from the womb, as the *midrash* expounds: It is stated concerning Abraham (Genesis 18:19): “for I have chosen him,” and it is said in Jeremiah (1:5): “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” If so, the *midrash* preserved by Rabbenu Tam based itself on God’s speech to Himself before the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:17-19): “The Lord said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham²¹ what I am about to do... for I have chosen (known) him that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice...’” Certainly the words “I know him” express pre-knowledge, and this pre-knowledge is understood by the *midrash* in light of Jeremiah 1:5: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated

19. See L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, (Philadelphia, 1947), V, pp. 2-7-8, note 4; *Sifrei to Deuteronomy*, paragraph 352, ed. Finkelstein, p. 409; and *Mekhilta* to Parasha 18, ed. Horowitz-Rabin, p. 70.

20. *Tosefot to Menaḥot* 53b s.v. “Beloved son”; cf. *Tosafot to Shabbat* 137b s.v. “Beloved from the womb.”

21. The Septuagint adds ‘my servant’ (cf. Genesis 26:24) the Palestinian and Neofiti *targumim* add ‘who loves me.’

you." From this the conclusion is drawn that God sanctified Abraham in the womb, and already then knew him.

What is the reason for the development of this idea? It seems likely that the intention is to explain how Abraham could have been righteous while still uncircumcised. He had already been freed from the domain of evil before he was circumcised, before "God instituted an ordinance among his kin." The broader problem which the *midrash* and the blessing attempt to solve is the well known problem, how there could have been righteous men among our forefathers before the Torah was given. In our case this problem is restricted to the commandment of circumcision, since this was given to Abraham himself before the giving of the Torah. Yet this happened at an advanced age to Abraham. He had already proven himself to be righteous. From an even more specific point of view, we may say that since Abraham had already been sanctified in the womb, he himself, in contrast to his descendants, did not require circumcision in order to be saved from destruction. But what about our righteous forefathers who lived before Abraham? In the list of those who were born circumcised, found in *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (Recension A, Chapter II, ed. Schechter, pp. 12-13) and beginning with Job, we find the following personalities before Abraham: Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, and Melchizedek, king of Salem. Of those born circumcised after Abraham we will mention only Moses, Balaam and Jeremiah: Also Jeremiah was born circumcised, for it is said (Jer. 1: 5): "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." So the verse which once served to support the view that Abraham was righteous even before he was circumcised is now used to prove that Jeremiah was born circumcised.

From all that has been said, we conclude that the righteous before Abraham were born circumcised and did not have the blemish of a foreskin. Concerning Abraham himself, of course, it was impossible to relate that he was born circumcised, since Scripture explicitly reports that he circumcised his foreskin: despite this he was saved from the time of birth, from (the forces of) destruction, because God "sanctified the Beloved in the womb." Now we may understand the religious burden of the blessing for circumcision. We may not impeach the righteousness of Abraham even before he received the commandment of circumcision, before God "instituted an ordinance among his kin." Nevertheless, his descendants, among them the infant circumcised today, must be sealed with the sign of the covenant of holiness in order to be saved from destruction. Thus we see that this blessing expresses the fundamental

conception that circumcision has an apotropaic aspect, and so we have learned a chapter in the thought of Israel.²²

We have seen that there exists a sort of dialectical tension between the first half and the second half of the blessing. His descendants are saved from destruction by virtue of circumcision, while Abraham himself, although uncircumcised for ninety-nine years, was sanctified in the womb by God, and was entirely righteous. This idea led Paul to a *midrash* (Romans 4:9-12): "We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised..." It may be that Paul developed his idea on the basis of the blessing alone as he understood its significance; or it may be that in addition, he knew of *midrashim* on which the blessing is based. At least it seems likely that Paul utilized the language of the blessing in his own remarks: here also there appears the biblical description "a sign" as well as the non-biblical description "a seal." Paul speaks of "circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith" while in the blessing we say that God "sealed" the descendants of Abraham "with the sign of the covenant of holiness." In Paul's special interpretation the problem with which the author of the blessing for circumcision grappled and which he solved in a profound and interesting way, led to unanticipated conclusions. The blessing asserts that the descendants of Abraham were saved from destruction by virtue of circumcision, because God sanctified him in the womb. From this, Paul concluded that man achieves righteousness not by circumcision but by faith. The dialectic out of which our blessing was formed, was given a novel and surprising interpretation by Paul.

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22. In another literary current we find an attitude parallel to that of our blessing in a citation in the name of "it was learned in the house of R. Eliezer" in *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Genesis 17:1 (ed. M. Margolith, Jerusalem 1947, p. 269); circumcision saves from destruction, and Abraham was worthy that circumcision be commanded through him because he walked in purity and truth of heart.