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Conceptualisation of Circumcision as a Purging Ritual: An Inter-Textual Reading of Joshua 5:2-9

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Abstract

This article examines the relevance of the circumcision ritual in Joshua 5:2-9 as it seems to have incapacitated the army of Israel. The article argues that observing the circumcision was a matter of spiritual significance as implied by the Old Greek (OG) translator's use of *περιεκάθαρεν* ('he purged/purified') to render *לָחַץ* ('he circumcised') in Joshua 5:4, instead of any of the expected Greek cognates of the concept *περιτομή* "circumcision." I will discuss the conceptualisation of circumcision implicit in this choice, touching on ways in which circumcision could have been conceived as a spiritual process with morality and cultic purity as its salient factor. The rendering in the later Masoretic Text (MT) tradition of Joshua 5:2-9 as an attempt to harmonise this text with Genesis 17:9-14 account of circumcision as well as its rendering with the concept *περιεκάθαρεν* in the LXX Pentateuch will provide illuminating points of comparison. Finally, the article will broaden its focus to consider the Kikuyu concept of *irua* ('circumcision') and its affinities with the OG conceptualisation of this ritual.

Introduction

The circumcision ritual recorded in Joshua 5:2-9 – considered an interruption to the flow of Joshua's war-like events – is of unclear relevance to the book's overall narrative (Winther-Nielsen 1995:164). Joshua 5:1 depicts an ideal opportunity for an Israelite military advance as it describes rival kings whose hearts had melted with fear and who had no courage to face the Israelites.

However, 5:2 confounds any expectation that the Israelites will attack as the Lord commands Joshua to circumcise the sons of Israel, incapacitating the army for some days (see Genesis 34:24-29, where recently circumcised men are successfully attacked). The importance of the circumcision ritual at this moment is thus evident, though a number of explanations for it have been advanced. It has been suggested its observation re-established the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the new generation born in the wilderness, a view seemingly attempting to harmonise the Joshua 5:2-9 ritual with that described in Genesis 17:9-14 (Butler 1983:58). Another interpretation is that the ritual was a preparation for the Passover, which is not one of the reasons given in Joshua 5:4-7 but follows from the understanding that only the circumcised could partake of the Passover (Goslinga 1986:62; Bratcher and Newman 1983:60; see Exodus 12:43-50). Alternatively, the passage does serve to explain the source of the name 'Hill of Foreskins' at Joshua 5:3 (Gray 1967:68), though identifying this specific location seems of little importance within the Book of Joshua (Soggin 1972:69-70). Nevertheless, in his translation of Joshua 5:4, the Old Greek (OG) translator gives his own interpretation of the circumcision ritual's role. Deliberately rendering the Hebrew concept לָחַץ ('he circumcised') as περιεκάθαρεν ('he purged/purified'), rather than as any of the conventional Greek cognates for περιτομή or 'circumcision', tacitly highlights this ritual's conceptualisation as a spiritual process whose salient factors are morality and cultic purity. I will discuss the OG translator's conceptualisation of this ritual and discuss why the later Masoretic Text (MT) tradition sought to correct the OG attitude in light of Genesis 17:9-14.

I will begin by analysing this conceptualisation of Joshua 5:4 circumcision as a process of purging or purifying, before examining similar views of circumcision throughout the LXX Pentateuch to argue that the OG translator adopted his conceptualisation from there. The article will then discuss the MT tradition's textual treatment, establishing that it drew from a later textual tradition than the OG translator did and discussing likely motives for the Masoretes' difference. Finally, I will demonstrate that the OG conceptualisation of the ritual has affinities with that of *irua* or 'circumcision' in the Kikuyu context.

The Conceptualisation of Circumcision as a Purging Ritual

The concepts of circumcision and uncircumcision occur eight times in the Old Greek text of Joshua 5:2-9, conveying the Hebrew concept of קָטַן . In every instance but one, a cognate of *περιτομή* is used (Liddell et al., 1996:1375c; Muraoka 2009:549a). Consequently, the peculiarity of 5:4's invocation of purging/purifying suggests it is more than stylistic variation or euphemism. To better understand it, I will analyse extrabiblical treatments of the concept before suggesting reasons for its rendering in Joshua 5:4.

Extrabiblical sources lean variously towards the MT or OG renderings. Though overall the fragmentary 4QJosh^a seems to represent an independent Hebrew tradition (De Troyer 2003:35; Woudstra 1981:40), it follows the MT tradition for this specific conceptualisation in Joshua 5:4 (van der Meer 2004:94, 96). So do translations such as the Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate (Soggin 1972:68). Notably, the Vulgate is distinctive in retaining the ambiguity of 'they' in 5:6, allowing for the possibility that the first generation born in the desert was already consumed and Joshua circumcised their successors.¹ Josephus does not mention the circumcision ritual at all but only discusses the Passover in 5:10-12, possibly embarrassed to admit to a Roman, non-Semitic readership that the Israelites failed to maintain the covenant of circumcision (Auld 2005:124). Conversely, the *Codex Vaticanus* (B) – the oldest Greek manuscript of Joshua, dated fourth century AD – uses the same concept as the OG translator (Auld 2005:12; van der Meer 2004:23). Philo, in *The Special Laws* 1.1-11, calls circumcision 'an act of purification that sanctifies the whole body as befits the consecrated order' (van der Meer 2004:349), similarly according with the OG.

With the OG translator's use of the concept of purging for Joshua 5:4 not universal (even if not entirely unique), the question arises why he translated it as he did. Crucially, of what were the Israelites to be purged or purified? Joshua 5:9 refers to the Lord removing 'the reproach of Egypt' from them, possibly alluding to the shame of Egyptian slavery disgracing the Israelites before other nations (see Zephaniah 2:8-9 and Ezekiel 36:15). E.J. Hamlin, who agrees with

¹ <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=6&c=5>

that interpretation, argues that circumcision should be understood as a restoration of freedom and dignity and a purging of servitude (1983:34). However, it has also been suggested that this ‘reproach’ refers to the Israelites’ uncircumcised state (van der Meer 2004:353). That view gains credibility from Genesis 34:14, where uncircumcision is a reproach that was supposed to be removed by ‘cultic ritual in obedience to Yahweh’ (Butler 1983:59). J. Neuser – quoting M. Nedarim 3:11 – points out that Rabbis described ‘the foreskin as a disgusting imperfection, the removal of which renders the body perfect’ (1996:121), further associating ‘reproach’ specifically with uncircumcision. Moreover, between the second and fourth centuries AD, there was a ritual script with five liturgical parts that accompanied the operation of circumcision, the first two of which were prayers of sanctification (Hoffman 2000:91). Thus, uncircumcised males were viewed as unclean and needed to be specifically purified through the ritual of circumcision (van der Meer 2004:347). This is why the translator of OG Joshua 5:4 made salient the ritual’s role of purging or purifying the Israelites.

The Influence of the LXX Pentateuch

With the ritual in Joshua 5:2-9 conceptualised as purifying the Israelites, I will now discuss the translation technique that could have determined the OG translator’s choice of verb, arguing that it was influenced by the Greek translation of the Pentateuch. This will be demonstrated via an analysis of three LXX Pentateuch passages that could have influenced his decision. As S. Olofsson points out:

One major contribution to the study of the Septuagint is the theory that the Pentateuch, the first translated part of the LXX, has served as a sort of a text-book for the rest of the translators. It is only natural that the Greek Pentateuch should influence the translation of the subsequent books, because this translation not only preceded that of the other books; the Pentateuch is also without doubt the most important part of the Holy Writ in Jewish tradition. (1990:26)

The particular verb used in OG Joshua 5:4 is found only once in the LXX Pentateuch, at Deuteronomy 18:10. The context is that of a parent offering his

or her child to the god Molech by sacrificing him or her with fire (Chingota 2006:160), which would violate Exodus 20:3's stricture not to entertain any god apart from Yahweh. The MT renders this act as מַעֲבִיר ('one who makes to pass [through fire]') while the LXX translates it as *περिकाθαίρων* ('one who purifies or purges [his/her child with fire]'). The purification here is achieved 'by means of an object calculated to absorb defilement or contagion', metaphorically denoting a complete purification (Lampe 1961:1066a; Liddell, et al.:1996, 1375c; Muraoka 2009:549a). This condemned practice is said to have been used to 'turn away a divinity's wrath or as part of the cult of the dead', possibly with 'the survival or death of the child indicat[ing] a yes or a no answer' (Nelson 2002:233). Fire is the means of purification in this passage and the god's wrath upon one's family is what is removed. The passage thus seems close to Joshua 5:4, where circumcision is the means of purification and reproach is what is removed. Their main difference concerns the role of the divine being, who supposedly grants the favour after receiving the human's sacrifice in Deuteronomy 18:10 but is an agent throughout the process in Joshua 5:4.

LXX Deuteronomy 30:6 is another passage where the concept of purging or purifying occurs, this time in the context of restoring the people of Israel. The MT phrase וְנָלַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־לִבְבְּךָ ('and Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart') is rendered in the LXX as *καὶ περिकाθαριεῖ κύριος τὴν καρδίαν σου* ('and the Lord will purge/purify your heart'). The idea behind the LXX rendering is that God purges people's hearts by removing whatever prevents them from following his teachings (Christensen 2002:739). Contextually, the things to be purged include rebellion and iniquity; the agent of this process is Yahweh himself. The same metaphor occurs in LXX Deuteronomy 10:16 but is rendered differently to Deuteronomy 30:6, using the word *περιτεμεῖσθε* ('you circumcise') with *τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν* ('stubbornness') as its object. The individual himself is called upon to take the necessary steps towards fearing, loving, and serving God and walking in his ways (see Deuteronomy 10:12-13). These two different renderings of the same metaphor indicate that the LXX Pentateuch translators used the two concepts interchangeably, since both renderings call for moral uprightness and obedience to the terms of the covenant by getting rid of everything that hinders commitment to God. They also demonstrate that physical circumcision is insufficient to put an individual in a right relationship with God.

Yet another LXX Pentateuch passage that uses the same conceptualisation of circumcision is Leviticus 19:23. There the translators use a synonymous Greek cognate, *περικαθαριεῖτε* ('purge away'), with the object *τὴν ἀκαθαρσίαν αὐτοῦ* ('its uncleanness') (Lampe 1961:1066a; Muraoka 2009:549a). The passage concerns how the Israelites are to behave when they enter the Promised Land: for the first three years, the produce of the fruit trees was to be regarded as unclean and not to be eaten (Hartley 1992:306). The MT uses the phrase *וְעָרְלָתָם עָרְלָתוֹ*, which means they were supposed to regard the fruit as uncircumcised or as a foreskin. Though they are to consider the fruit as foreskin – i.e. something to be removed – the MT does not present the practical act of removal as something the Israelites were expected to do. Nevertheless, the LXX translators clearly give instructions on how the Israelites are to go about in dealing with such unclean fruit; they are to purge or remove the fruit's uncleanness by plucking it off (Milgrom 2000:1679). Thus, according to the LXX, the unclean fruit was to be purged from the trees as a practical expression of holiness. Since the context of this passage is that of pruning trees, the literal rendering of the Hebrew verb *וול* would not have been a good choice by the translator (van der Meer 2004:346). Just as in the Joshua 5:4 passage, the context has to do with purging or removing uncleanness.

The Reformulation Behind the MT Tradition

This next section seeks to establish the motive behind the Masorettes' harmonisation of the ritual in OG Joshua 5:4 with Genesis 17:9-14. To do so, I will first argue that the *vorlage* used by the OG translator of Joshua 5:2-9 is older than the one behind the MT text.

The OG as a Pre-Masoretic Text of Joshua

It is important to establish whether the Hebrew *vorlage* behind the MT and OG texts were the same or different. If they were based on different recessions, then it is vital to establish which among the two is older. In this section, I will seek to establish the differences between these two texts as proof that the parent Hebrew texts behind the two recessions were different. After establishing that difference, I will proceed on the basis that the earliest recoverable reading is the shorter and more difficult of the two (Nelson 1997:23).

There are some distinct differences between the MT and OG in Joshua 5:2-9. In verse 2 the MT has וַיָּשׁוּב (‘and return/again’) while the OG has καθίσας (‘sat down’). This could be attributed to a mistake if the OG translator read ושוב (‘again’) as ושב (‘sit down’) in the source text (Butler 1983:55). Alternatively, the *vorlage* behind the OG could have been detailed to the point of mentioning the posture of those performing the ritual. Again in verse 2, the translation of שְׁנֵי־פְעָמִים (‘a second time’) is omitted in the OG. This could be a result of the Greek translator avoiding ‘the literal understanding of a second circumcision of adult males that had already being circumcised’ (van der Meer 2004:341). The OG has added the phrase ἐπὶ τοῦ καλουμένου τόπου to verse 3 to help clarify that Βουνὸς τῶν ἀκροβυσιῶν (‘hill of circumcision’) is the name of a place, which readers cannot have known. The OG translator also further explains הַרְבֵּוֹת צִיָּרִים (‘flint knives’) as μαχαίρας πετρίνας ἐκ πέτρας ἀκροτόμου (‘stone knives made from sharp rock’), possibly to help his audience understand what flint knives were. Another omission occurs in the OG in verse 9 where the closing formula הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה (‘until this day’) is not translated. Similarly, the MT has an omission in that it refers to Joshua without mentioning his father’s name while the OG describes him as ‘the son of Naue’.

The OG seems to offer a completely different interpretation than the MT of the events of Joshua 5:4-6. In verse 4, apart from the unusual rendering of the verb מָלַךְ as the Greek verb περιεκάθαρσεν (the subject of this article), the OG focuses on the uncircumcised born in the wilderness and omits reference to those circumcised *before* leaving Egypt who died in the desert. In the last part of that verse, the MT talks of הַזְּכָרִים כֻּלָּם אֲנָשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה מָתוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּיָרֵךְ בְּצֵאתָם (‘all the males, the men of war, had died in the wilderness during the journey after they went out from Egypt’), which is not translated in the OG text. In verse 5, the MT distinguishes between the two groups by laying emphasis that *all* those who left Egypt were circumcised and therefore it is only those born in the wilderness whom Joshua circumcised. Conversely, the OG states that most of those men who came out of Egypt were not circumcised. This would allow the possibility that among those who were circumcised by Joshua there were those who had come out of Egypt. The OG rendering is plausible, since only those who were twenty years old and above were condemned to die in the wilderness and since it is possible the Israelites circumcised their boys in the later teenage years (Hamlin 1983:31; Gray 1967:68; Num. 14:29).

Another difference between the MT and OG concerns the exact period that the Israelites stayed in the wilderness: forty years according to the MT and forty-two according to the OG. It is possible the MT rounded the number down to forty or that the OG included the Israelites' two years in the wilderness before their rebellion against God (see Numbers 10:11-12). Moreover, whereas the OG calls the wilderness through which the Israelites wandered *Madbaritidi*, the MT omits this name. It has been suggested this resulted from the OG translator misreading a reduplicated *mabr* ('desert') (Boling and Wright 1982:189, 193), though it may instead be due to the Masoretes erasing the name in order to avoid the difficulty of tracing the historical site or due to them reading the word once rather than twice. That *Madbaritidi* was probably a historical place is reinforced by its reoccurrence in OG Joshua 18:12.

All these differences indicate that the Hebrew *vorlage* behind OG Joshua is based on a different recession from that of the MT parent text (Soggin 1972:18). Since the Greek text of Joshua is five percent shorter than the MT, it can be concluded that the OG was dependent on an older textual variant since 'the shorter or more difficult reading is judged to be the earliest recoverable one' (Tov 1999:387; Nelson 1997:23). It is therefore plausible that the OG translator worked from a pre-Masoretic text that came from a different recession than the MT's parent text.

The Tendenz Behind the MT Tradition

Having established that the Hebrew *vorlage* behind OG Joshua 5:2-9 reflects an older tradition than that of the MT's parent text, in this section I will argue that the MT or its parent text was restored from the parent OG text. I contend this happened for two reasons: to harmonise the MT tradition with the conceptualisation of circumcision described in Genesis 17:9-14 (i.e., as a covenant sign between Yahweh and the people of Israel) and to present Moses as an obedient servant of Yahweh who would not allow his covenant of circumcision to be broken (Soggin 1972:18, 70; Butler 1983:56).

Conceptually, the Genesis 17 circumcision ritual is the sign of a covenant that every Israelite male child was supposed to undergo, a normative practice that was to be observed on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 21:4; Lev. 12:3). Anyone who broke this covenant sign was supposed to have been cut off from God's people. In using the Hebrew word לִּלְבֹּאֲם to denote the ritual, the Masoretic

reformulation of the Hebrew *vorlage* behind the OG tradition could be theologically motivated – an attempt to present the ritual event in Joshua 5:2-9 as Yahweh re-establishing a covenant with the new generation born in the wilderness. A.G. Auld describes the Masoretes' *tendenz* behind restoration of the MT tradition by pointing out that '[t]he MT is not only longer, but more strident and more orthodox; and it is fair to assume that this text has been reformulated for dogmatic reasons, and probably in the light of God's command to Abraham (Genesis 17:9-13) that the rite should be carried out universally and after but one week of life' (1998:14).

Another motive behind the reformulation may be the Masoretes' desire to portray Moses, the hero, in a positive light. The OG implication that there were uncircumcised men among those who went out of Egypt could not go unchallenged by the Masoretes. That is why the MT repeats a number of times that *all* males who came out of Egypt were circumcised. Admitting that there were some who were not circumcised would allow the interpretation that some of the men partaking of the Passover feasts in Exodus 12 and Numbers 9 were uncircumcised. That could portray Moses in a negative light, since he must have failed to keep the people of Israel in obedience to God's commands and allowed this abomination to take place. The Masoretes seem to have assumed the responsibility to protect Moses from such an accusation.

The Purging Effect of Circumcision in Kikuyu

Viewing circumcision as a purging/purifying ritual is consistent with the Kikuyu conceptual understanding of the role of *irua rĩa arũme* ('the circumcision of males'). *Irua* is conceived as the step of being purged from the behaviour of uncircumcised boys and from fear. Accordingly, I will discuss the purging or purifying effect of *irua* in relation to both of these purged qualities.

The first associated meaning is that upon circumcision *waana* ('childish behaviour') or *ũhĩĩ* ('behaviour of one who has not undergone *irua*') is removed and the circumcised male is not supposed to participate in such behaviour anymore. From then on, he is expected to take on the behaviour of an adult; hence, one of the synonyms of *irua* is *kũgimara* or 'to become an adult' (Kanogo 1987:77). The cutting of the foreskin symbolises the purgation or removal of the childhood behaviour of the uncircumcised. The association of

foreskin with childish behaviour is demonstrated by the advice normally given to initiates, that they need to leave childish behaviours (such as naughtiness, mischievousness, or playing childish games) just as their foreskin is detached from their bodies and thrown away.

The second associated meaning is that fear is removed and the circumcised one automatically acquires the title of *mündũ mürũme* ('a man of courage'). J. Gray hints at this perspective, seeing the circumcision ritual as a signal for fitness for war (1967:68). Since initiates are not anaesthetised during the surgery, the moment of the cut itself demands a display of courage against a process made as painful as possible. Those who go through the ritual courageously are applauded while those who show signs of fear are labelled cowards and teased for the rest of their lives (Gatheru 1966:59; Murray 1974:22-23; Mugo 1982:19). Essentially, the one undergoing the ritual is expected to prove that he has what it takes to be *mündũ mürũme* ('a man of courage'), with a number of tests imposed during a seclusion period (Muriuki 1985:14). Going through circumcision courageously qualifies him to become a warrior, with the role of protecting his community from raids and perpetrating cattle raids on neighbouring communities. This principal cultivation of courage among initiates – its centrality to the circumcision ritual – coheres with the warlike tone of Joshua and its exhortations for warfare (see Joshua 1:6, 1:7, 1:9, 1:18, 8:1, 10:8, 10:25, 11:6).

Conclusion

This article has looked at the semantic domain of *circumcision*, focusing on the rendering of $\text{לָחַט$ ('he circumcised') as *περικαθάραρον* ('he purged/purified') in the OG translation of Joshua 5:4, rather than as a cognate of *περιτομή* as might be expected. I have argued that this is due to the OG translator's view that uncircumcised males were unclean and required this purification. The translator likely adopted this concept for Joshua 5:2-9 under the influence of the LXX Pentateuch, which includes similar concepts and related cognates. I also discussed the Masoretes' reformulation of the passage, suggesting it was intended to harmonise the ritual in Joshua 5:2-9 with that in Genesis 17:9-14 and to portray Moses in a positive light. The article concluded by describing the similar conceptualisation of circumcision as purging in the Kikuyu ritual.

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