

Circumcision

Circumcision is a surgical procedure that removes the foreskin of a male penis. It has been and still is practiced by many cultures for a variety of reasons: it is sometimes cosmetic or linked to health concerns, but in many traditions the rite has taken on symbolic meaning connected with puberty, fertility, or spiritual devotion.

In ancient Israel, male children typically were circumcised on the eighth day of their life (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3). Both Jesus (Luke 1:59; 2:21) and Paul (Phil. 3:5) are said to have been circumcised in keeping with this sacred tradition, which still is practiced by most Jewish groups today.

In Israelite and Jewish religion, circumcision was regarded as “the sign of the covenant”: males were circumcised to indicate that they belonged to the chosen people of God, that they were heirs of the promises to Abraham, and that they intended to keep the Torah, given by God to Moses. Prophets sometimes spoke of circumcision in symbolic terms, accusing those who were stubborn or unreceptive of having “an uncircumcised ear” (Jer. 6:10) or an “uncircumcised heart” (Lev. 26:41).

The apostle Paul favors the symbolic meaning of circumcision (Rom. 2:29) but regards the physical act as irrelevant, since all people are now made right with God through Christ (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15). Paul’s strong opposition to circumcision voiced in certain passages (e.g., Gal. 5:2) has nothing to do with the value of the act itself: he is not opposed to Jews (or Gentiles) observing religious traditions that they find meaningful, but he is incensed by the notion that any such tradition is necessary to affect one’s status with God, which, for Paul, is maintained solely by grace through faith.