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LIKE PRIESTS SET APART

A Source-Critical Problematization of Circumcision, Religious Othering, and Intermarriage

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Abstract

There is no biblical conception that so interferes with public life and invites endless debates and controversies as the theology of election. From a religious studies perspective, the theology of election has created a tremendous, hideous impact on the history of humankind, from colonialization to Shoah to the politics of identity and populism today. Rather than being the doctrine that unites humanity, the concept of election has been regarded as the core cause that creates otherness. This article argues that the ideation of otherness in the theology of election is deeply connected to and cannot be separated from sexuality issues. The notion of circumcision, as the main feature of post-exilic priestly election theology, inevitably constructs the ideal of lineage purity, thus forbidding intermarriage. The unfaithfulness of God's people during the Judean monarchy era would later be perceived as the main cause for the suffering and traumatic experience of exile. Radical holiness in the form of religious separation from other nations must be observed for the priests to enjoy the continuation of God's promise in the form of descendants. The continuation of priestly lineages would assure the continuity of the Temple's existence and worship.

Keywords: theology of election, circumcision, sexuality, religious otherness, intermarriage, source criticism

Abstrak

Tidak ada konsepsi Kitab Suci yang begitu mengundang perdebatan dan kontroversi yang tiada akhir seperti teologi pemilihan. Dari sudut pandang studi agama, teologi pemilihan telah menciptakan dampak yang luar biasa dan mengerikan pada sejarah umat manusia, mulai dari kolonialisasi, Shoah, politik identitas,

hingga isu populisme yang berkembang belakangan ini. Jauh dari menjadi doktrin yang menyatukan umat manusia, pemilihan telah dianggap sebagai penyebab utama yang menciptakan yang liyan. Tulisan ini berpendapat bahwa konsepsi tentang yang liyan dalam teologi pemilihan sangat terkait dan tidak dapat dipisahkan dengan masalah seksualitas. Gagasan sunat sebagai fitur utama dari teologi pemilihan imam pasca pembuangan, mau tidak mau membangun gagasan tentang kemurnian garis keturunan dan menafikan perkawinan campur. Ketidaksetiaan umat Allah di era monarki Yudea dianggap sebagai penyebab utama penderitaan dan pengalaman traumatis pengasingan. Kekudusan radikal, dalam bentuk pemisahan radikal dengan kehidupan agamawi bangsa-bangsa lain, harus diamalkan jika para imam ingin menikmati kelanjutan janji Tuhan dalam bentuk keturunan. Kepastian kelanjutan keturunan imam akan secara otomatis memastikan kelanjutan keberadaan dan pemujaan di Bait Suci.

Kata-kata Kunci: teologi pemilihan, sunat, seksualitas, religious otherness, pernikahan beda agama, kritik sumber.

Introduction

There is no biblical concept that so interferes with public life and invites endless debates and controversies as the theology of election. From a religious studies perspective, the theology of election has created a tremendous, hideous impact on the history of humankind, from colonialization to Shoah to the politics of identity and populism today. Rather than being the doctrine that unites humanity, the concept of election has been regarded as the core cause that creates otherness and has divided the world beyond imagination. It is not surprising for a scholar like Karen Armstrong to say, “The myth of a chosen people and a divine election has often inspired a narrow, tribal theology from the time of Deuteronomy up to the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim fundamentalism that is unhappily rife in our own day.”¹ She even coined a phrase for it, “the fearful theology of election.”² Theologian Sathianathan Clarke states that there are “toxic biblical texts” that are used by fundamentalists to justify their atrocities, including “exclusivist texts” and “explosive texts.”³ He directly connects such texts with a theology of election, saying, “Exclusivist Bible texts contribute to the divine assurance of being favored by

¹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 20.

² Ibid., 20.

³ Sathianathan Clarke, *Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 173.

God and divine disfavor of religious others....Explosive texts are much more potent at instigating and justifying violence against those religious others.”⁴

Deeply connected with and at the heart of election is circumcision as the mark and sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Like election, circumcision is perceived as problematic and controversial.⁵ While circumcision for Judaism is the mark of God’s special election and covenant with Abraham and his offspring, for others it indicates exclusiveness, separation, and otherness. In Walter Brueggemann’s words, “the same criterion [circumcision] is used for ‘otherness’ that stands under a death sentence (Ezek. 28:10; 31:18; 32:19-32).”⁶ In discussing circumcision from an exclusively Jude-Christian perspective—that is, without attempt to engage the practice in other religious traditions—this article shows that a biblical concept of religious otherness cannot be separated from the ideation of lineage purity and endogamous marriage embedded in the sign of circumcision.⁷

The first part of this article explains that circumcision is closely connected to sexuality issues. The second part discusses how the idealism on sexual purity from the Priestly tradition (P) ideates the concept of religious otherness. The last part of this article discusses how circumcision and the notion of sexual purity eventually impact the idea of purity in marriage as endogamy.

Circumcision and Sexuality Issues

Generally, scholars agree that for the Jews circumcision is the sign and mark of God’s covenant and election to Israel.⁸ P. R.

⁴ Ibid., 174.

⁵ Circumcision is one of the major reasons for the separation between Judaism and Christianity. Circumcision was condemned as superstitious by ancient writers such as Strabo and Tacitus. A ban on circumcision also one of the main reason for the Bar Kokhba revolt. See Lawrence A Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9–10.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 34.

⁷ In his project against supersessionism, respected Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod offers Christian readers a natural orientation which is the opposite to spiritual orientation. Here election is concerned not with “faith or moral excellence” but with “natural human family.” He defines election as “corporeal election, and the foundation of Judaism is nothing other than the family identity of the Jewish people.” Interestingly, Wyschogrod realizes the problem of connecting election with familial lineage, as pointed out by R. Kendall Soulen who writes, “Wyschogrod acknowledges that joining the divine election to the corporeal reality of a particular people invites serious objections.” R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 5–6.

⁸ This does not mean that the Hebrew Bible sees circumcision as the primary mark/sign of the covenant. Derouchie mentions other covenantal signs

Williamson mentions that circumcision “was mandatory for the inclusion within the covenant.”⁹ However, there are different opinions on how to define its meaning and its connection with the covenant. These opinions fall under at least two categories, differentiated by whether or not circumcision is connected with sexuality issues.

Scholars who do not connect circumcision with sexuality perceive circumcision as a primarily theological matter. Drawing upon Genesis 17:1-27, key are God’s promise and blessings, the obligations of the Israelites to circumcise boys on the eighth day after birth, and God’s punishing the Israelites if they disobey this command.¹⁰ Most of the scholars who hold this view have in mind an inclusive perspective on God’s blessings toward other nations. They mainly draw their idea from the biblical information that circumcision was not limited to Israelites only. P. D Woodridge, for example, says, “God’s instruction that Abraham should circumcise every male connected with him, including any ‘slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,’ suggests that circumcision was not meant to be understood as a sign of racial purity....the essence of this covenant is probably to be seen not so much in its sign as in the promise that through Abraham, God will bless many nations.”¹¹ David Bernat, a prominent scholar in Judaic Studies who supports this opinion, agrees with and goes beyond Woodridge, when he writes, “However, circumcision in P is not a symbol of Israelite ethnicity, nor does it ritually demarcate communal borderlines.”¹² Holding these commitments appears to correlate with a disinterest in asking crucial questions, like: Why must the sign be circumcision? Or, why the penis? How about women? Are they included in the covenant? If yes, how? Does their status in the covenant depend on men?

A commonly held opinion within source criticism designates as P those texts which are most elaborate about the

in both the rainbow (Gen. 9:13-17) and Sabbath (Ex. 31:13-17). Jason S Derouche, “Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums: Theology, Rhetoric, and the Handling of Metaphor,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* Vol. 14, No. 2 (2004): 184–185. According to Hoffman, it is the Priestly tradition (P) that successfully makes circumcision the *sine qua non* of the covenant. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 35.

⁹ P. R. Williamson, “Circumcision,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds., T. Desmond Alexander and David Weston Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 123.

¹⁰ P. D. Woodridge, “Circumcision,” in *New Biblical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds., T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 411–412.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² David A Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 48.

regulations of circumcision. Building on this understanding, Bernat argues, “The fact that circumcision is performed on the penis does enable the P author(s) (or editor[s]) to perpetuate a patriarchal ethos. Beyond this, circumcision in P has nothing to do with the penis and its function.”¹³ His argument is based on the assumption that the intent behind P had been to eradicate the Canaanite religions, particularly the elements of sexual practice that were embedded in them.¹⁴ To bolster his position that circumcision is all about covenant and has nothing to do with fertility rituals and their symbolic meanings, he quotes Gerhard von Rad to underscore that “circumcision is understood quite formally, i.e., without significant reference to the procedure itself, as a sign of the covenant.”¹⁵

However, Bernat’s argumentations are *ad absurdum* and, thus, very unconvincing for several reasons. First, he readily agrees that P’s view on circumcision helps in creating and promoting a patriarchal society; he gives quite a long explanation about it.¹⁶ He says, “Females stand below males, and their status is tied to the man in whose domain they reside. It is only a male who can carry the sign. A woman is thus part of the community by proxy, an extension of her father or husband.”¹⁷ If this is his conclusion, then why does he say that circumcision has nothing to do with sexuality?¹⁸ What is wrong with Bernat’s opinion is that he primarily sees sexuality from a biological perspective, while sexuality is more accurately a social construct. In line with this latter understanding, Lawrence Hofmann rightly says, “Circumcision was no life-cycle ceremony for a newborn; it was a ritualization of male status within Judaism. Understanding gender as a social category that defines the set of roles appropriate to each sex, we can say that circumcision’s primary meaning was social, not biological.”¹⁹ Second, Bernat says that one of P’s main purposes is to eradicate Canaanite religion, along with its fertility and sexual elements. He then concludes that this is why P contains many regulations regarding sexual purity, as seen in Leviticus.²⁰ However, is it not a self-contradictory conclusion to say that P has nothing to do with sexuality while, in fact, much sexual regulation can be found in it? Moreover, Bernat barely explains the connection between sexual purity and

¹³ Ibid., 50.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48–50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹⁸ On how issues of sexuality are closely linked with marital or familial systems and with a gendered hierarchy, as well as how theology brought significant influence on these practices the world over, see Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

¹⁹ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 80.

²⁰ Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 50–51.

circumcision. Third, he also cannot answer satisfactorily why the penis must be the mark or sign of the covenant and, hence, of election. Regarding such a question, his explanation is ambiguous:²¹

Why, then, would the Priestly trident choose the penis, a sexual organ, as the locus of the ברית sign? Any answer to such a question will, by nature, be speculative. I suggest, in line with a traditional viewpoint, that P did not choose the penis. Circumcision must have had an ancient provenance and been deeply embedded into the fabric of the society, out of which the Priestly community emerged. Thus, the rite had to be integrated into a new ideological framework and marked with a new set of meanings.

For scholars who support the connection of circumcision with sexuality, their opinion stems from the fact that circumcision is not a unique or original tradition of Israel.²² It was a common practice among many nations in the ancient Near East.²³ Egyptians and people from western Semitic groups in Syria and Palestine were already practicing circumcision a long time before the Israelites.²⁴ For those cultures, circumcision cannot be separated from marriage and fertility.²⁵ Quoting Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, the well-known rabbi and anthropologist, Leonard B. Glick makes an essential claim about the meaning of the penis for the ancient Near East peoples, including Judeans in antiquity, seeing it as “a symbol not only of patrilineal social organization but of male reproductive prowess and male supremacy.”²⁶ In Genesis 17, God’s command of circumcision connects closely to God’s promise of progeny (vv. 2, 4-6). Lawrence A. Hoffman emphasizes this connection powerfully: “A close look at the covenant with Abraham demonstrates how central fertility is to God’s promise.”²⁷ The fact that the command was given to Abram/Abraham when he was ninety-nine and Sarai/Sarah was ninety years old only confirms this shared understanding between the people of the Pentateuchal

²¹ Ibid., 51.

²² Woodbridge, “Circumcision,” 411.

²³ Robert G. Hall, “Circumcision,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed., David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1025. See also Williamson, “Circumcision,” 122. Anthropologist Leonard B. Glick even says that circumcision was and is widely practiced among African, Southeast Asian, and a few Pacific peoples. See Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

²⁴ However, there is no culture that so much attached and made circumcision one of its core touchstones of cultural, national, and religious identity *qua* Israel. Hall, “Circumcision,” 1025.

²⁵ Ibid., 1026.

²⁶ Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 18.

²⁷ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 38.

witness and the surrounding them (vv. 1, 17). Furthermore, Hoffman also cites two other P traditions in Genesis that mention fertility, viz. God's instructions to Adam (1:28) and Noah (8:17).²⁸

However, there might be other concerns that convince scholars such as Bernat to reject any connection between circumcision and sexuality. Prominent among these is the traditional notion that marriage and fertility are connected with religious purity according to the ideology assumed by P.²⁹ Addressing questions such as this leads us to understand further how circumcision, marriage, and fertility are interconnected in the ideation of religious otherness—to which we now turn.

Circumcision and Religious Otherness

As mentioned earlier, the primary motivation of those who support the concept of circumcision without connection to sexuality involves decoupling circumcision from hereditary purity. In other words, the unfortunate outcome of connecting circumcision with sexuality is racial purity. For them, this is incompatible with the notion of God's extended blessings for all nations through Abraham.³⁰ They argue that it is already apparent from the biblical information that circumcision does not only apply to the Israelites but to the foreign slaves as well.³¹

However, such a perspective comes from an oversimplification of many issues at play here. In his extensive study of the connection between circumcision and social status, Bernat—who notably rejects the connection between circumcision and sexuality—stresses the understanding of *slave* in the ancient world as the master's *property*; they are juridically not persons. When an

²⁸ Ibid., 39. In his article about P in Genesis, J. A. Emerton mentions other verses that deal with fertility, viz. 9:1, 7; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; and 48:4. He says that the notion of fertility in Genesis is “found only in passages ascribed to P.” See J. A. Emerton, “The Priestly Writer in Genesis,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1988): 386.

²⁹ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 39.

³⁰ This sense of the “missional” in the Abrahamic covenant often elaborated upon by Christian theologians is refused by Joel Kaminsky. He states that the biblical notion of Israel as the light of the world has nothing to do with proselytizing and missionizing the gentiles. See Joel Kaminsky and Mark Reasoner, “The Meaning and Telos of Israel's Election: An Interfaith Response to N.T. Wright's Reading of Paul,” *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (2019): 426, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000221>.

³¹ In his comprehensive treatment of the Hebrew Bible, Matthew Thiessen argues in the published rendition of his dissertation, “There is no evidence that circumcision was considered to be a rite of conversion to Israelite religion. In fact, circumcision, particularly the infant circumcision instantiated within Israelite and early Jewish society excludes from the covenant those not properly descended from Abraham.” Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), iv.

Israelite master circumcises his male slaves, it does not mean the slaves now have the exclusive privilege to gain God's blessings or that their social status is equal with that of the Israelites.³² It is more about the mark of the master's total and complete obedience to God.³³ Once a slave is owned by a master, he/she will also observe his/her master's religion. Matthew Thiessen, in his extensive research about the connection between circumcision and genealogy, states:³⁴

No passage in the Hebrew Bible suggests that circumcision functioned as an initiatory or conversionistic rite which enables a foreigner to become an Israelite. Even priestly circles, which require the circumcision of certain non-Israelites, carefully intertwine circumcision and genealogy in such a way as to make it theoretically impossible for them to enter into the congregation of Israel. While non-Israelites no doubt found ways of entering Israel, and Israelites found ways of allowing them to enter, nowhere is this done by explicitly recognizing circumcision as an avenue of entrance into Israel.

Thiessen seems to forcefully affirm certain aspects of Bernat's claim that slave circumcision cannot be used as a justification for God's extended blessings to other nations. Yet, how does this reconcile with Bernat's refusal to see connections to Israelite sexual mores? Consider the fact that Bernat, in trying to further justify and ground his slave-as-property claim, points to the circumcision of Ishmael, saying, "Moreover, the narrative of Ishmael's circumcision conveys, on one level, P's implicit acknowledgment that other nations may practice circumcision."³⁵ It is astounding how he seems to ignore the simple fact that Ishmael was not only a *slave* child (from Hagar) but also Abraham's own *biological* child.

Source analysis offers another set of objections to the shallow claim that rejects any connection between circumcision and sexuality, characteristic as this is of the inclusivist view. There is scholarly consensus that the first text to explain the regulation of circumcision, Genesis 17, should be ascribed to P, which was formed in the late sixth century BCE.³⁶ This dating suggests to scholars that the ideation of circumcision as being mandatory for

³² Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 45.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 134.

³⁵ Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 48.

³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, "Circumcision," in *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), 33.

the covenant emerged during the exile.³⁷ Before then, circumcision was never considered as central to the covenant.³⁸ Instead, central were the animal sacrifices.³⁹ From the time of the exile through the first century CE, circumcision was thus taken to be an integral sign of the covenant, as demonstrated by the New Testament stories involving the circumcisions of John the Baptist (Luke 1:58-59) and Jesus (Luke 2:21).⁴⁰

There are at least two developments brought about by the exile that carried into post-exilic Jewish society. First, the exile marks the end of Israel's monarchic age, and the new temple (i.e., the second temple) now functioned not only as of the center of religious worship but also of political life. During the monarchic age, kings and noblemen controlled the social and political life of Israel, whereas in the post-exilic era the temple priests became *de facto* rulers.⁴¹ Religious, social, and political power became consolidated in the hands of the reinvented priestly class. According to Glick, "These men [as] priests [were] member of the elite class who assumed virtually complete social authority in the newly constituted Judean society that arose after the Babylonian exile....The responsibility was theirs alone; the monarchy had ended, never to be restored."⁴² In this emergent setting, temple rites and religious beliefs became very important for forming this new era of Jewish society.

If the first exilic development was a restructuring of Jewish society under Temple rule, then the second exilic invention was the emphasis on holistic purity. Having consolidated their control of Jewish social, religious, and political life, the priestly class could easily centralize and locate all covenantal activity to Herod's Temple in Jerusalem.⁴³ This could only happen upon the eradication of local cult sacrifices perceived by the ruling priestly class as the source of Israel's impurity, which had led to the Babylonian exile.⁴⁴ From that point on, the priests increasingly instituted strict religious regulations emphasizing purity.⁴⁵

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 37.

³⁹ Ibid., 34, 36–37.

⁴⁰ The tense debates in the early church about circumcision prove that circumcision was still perceived as important by many Jewish Christians in the first century. See Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 37. In my opinion, the view that circumcision only becomes central to the covenant after the sixth century BCE relatives Paul's rejection of salvific circumcision as not so extravagant a conclusion (Romans 2-4; Galatians 5).

⁴¹ Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 15–16.

⁴² Ibid., 15–16.

⁴³ Ibid., 16–17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 17. See also Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2012), 90.

Maintaining purity was the only way for Jewish people to keep enjoying God's blessings and prevent them from exile (cf. Lev. 20:22-24; 26), with *purity* here mainly understood in the sense of extreme standards guarding sexual practices (Lev. 12; 15; 18; 20:13-21; 21:7).⁴⁶ It is within this context that the regulation of circumcision was constituted in P.

On this point, crucial are two further issues interwoven into the provenance of Israelite male circumcision, viz. fertility and sexual purity. In ancient Israel's philosophy, fertility was considered *fruitfulness* in horticultural allegory. Hoffman illustrates:⁴⁷

The first three years of a tree's growth are known as its period of circumcision, the immature fruit being called uncircumcised and consequently forbidden for use. Trees that reach maturity are said to have entered the time of their circumcision. Immediately thereafter, they are expected to bear a maximum yield of fruits, just as Abraham and his male heirs were promised they would.

In order to bear plenty of fruit, trees must be pruned. This practice is also well known as an analogy to circumcision, as Hoffman says, "Both acts involve cutting away unwanted growth from a stem or trunk in order to ensure fertility."⁴⁸ In her research on Jeremiah 2:20-25—the resource that is inspiring Jesus' parable—Dalit Rom-Shiloni stresses the allusion of this text to the P tradition.⁴⁹ What is intriguing, then, might be a concomitant emphasis on the notion of purity.⁵⁰ Such agricultural allegorizing implicates purity as being the sole requirement for fertility. Male circumcision (similar to the pruning of trees) signifies the purification of the seed.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 51–52. See also Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 18.

⁴⁷ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 39. In Glick words, "the creators of the P text described the fruit of immature trees as 'foreskins' and the trees themselves as 'uncircumcised.'" Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 19.

⁴⁸ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 39.

⁴⁹ Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "How Can You Say, 'I Am Not Defiled ...?'" (Jeremiah 2:20-25): Allusions to Priestly Legal Traditions in the Poetry of Jeremiah. (Report)," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 133, No. 4 (2014): 757–775.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 772. Interestingly, in the Hebrew Bible, pruning a tree is also a symbol of purification. In Jesus parable about the true vine (John 15:1-10), that is very grounded in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek word for "prune" (*katharein*) and "clean" (*katharoi*) are from the same root. John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 988.

⁵¹ Regarding the importance of male seed and penis in the covenant, Glick builds on Carol Denaley's research to say that "men 'beget' children by planting generative 'seed' in wombs; hence, while mothers merely 'bear' children, fathers create and own them. The entire Book of Genesis, she [Denaley] remarks, "is preoccupied with the interrelated notions of seed, paternity, and

The second interwoven issue—and summarily the most compelling explanation connecting sexual purity (and fertility) to covenant—can be seen in Hoffman’s analysis of the biblical witness, wherein he concludes that P texts are overwhelmingly obsessed with lineage.⁵² For Hoffman, this fixation cannot be separated from the reality that familial lineage determines the continuity of the priesthood itself.⁵³ This is different from judges and prophets whose role solely based on God’s individual call.⁵⁴ It is not surprising, then, that fertility amid continuity of lineage is crucial for P, given the transition of power to the priestly class following the end of the Judean monarchy. However, line continuation is not everything; for P, fertility must be accompanied by purity. Only those who are not “unclean” may serve the Lord (Lev. 21). The exile that had brought tremendous misery and suffering upon the people of God was seen as being caused by the sloppiness of their kings who, even though they enjoyed God’s blessings of power through the Davidic lineage, had exposed themselves to uncleanness, namely by engaging surrounding nations with their *filthy religions* and *fake gods* (Lev. 18:24-28; 20:1-6; 22-27; 26:30-46). Radical holiness in the form of ethnoreligious separation from other nations must be observed, if the priests want to enjoy the continuation of God’s promise in the form of descendants.⁵⁵

As the continuation of priestly descendants would assure the continuity of their power, so did the existence of the Temple and continuation of its worship cult become the only real sign of God’s presence and favor during the Second Temple period. From the perspective of P, the continued existence of the priesthood itself is critical, if the people of God still want to enjoy God’s

patriliny: who begat whom Men’s procreative ability is defined in terms of potency—the power to bring things into being.’ This is why the ‘sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, circumcision, was carved on the organ felt to be the fountain of generativity, the vehicle for the transmission of seed No great imagination is required to understand why the circumcised penis was an ideal symbol of the Lord’s covenant, and of everything that the priests intended to promote with their new rite of initiation: male reproductive success, continuity in the male line, male-defined ethnic identity and exclusiveness, acknowledgment of patrilineally legitimated priestly authority.” Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 18.

⁵² Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 40.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 40; cf. other P texts: Exodus 28:1; 29; Numbers 3-4; 8:5-22; 18.

⁵⁴ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 40.

⁵⁵ In Jacob Neusner’s words, “Sanctification thus means two things: first, distinguishing Israel in all its dimensions from the world in all its ways; second, establishing the stability, order, regularity, predictability and reliability of Israel in the world of nature and supernature, in particular at moments and in contexts of danger.” Jacob Neusner, “Purity and the Priesthood in the Hebrew Scriptures and Rabbinic Tradition,” accessed December 31, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_c_on_cclergy_doc_01011993_purity_en.html.

presence and favor (and, of course, avoid another exile. In light of these commitments, it is very understandable why circumcision, fertility, and religious purity together become so central for the formation of an emergent, post-exilic Jewish identity. These three central issues unavoidably implicate a fourth concern about intermarriage, which will be discussed in the next section.

Circumcision and Intermarriage

Biblical texts such as Ezra and Nehemiah attest to the importance of a pure priestly lineage for both the ongoing legitimacy of Temple worship and the prevention of another exile. Naturally, historical Ezra and Nehemiah were two leading figures ministering around the time that the P tradition was taking shape. According to Hoffman, that fact helps to explain the genealogical framing of the Book of Ezra as implicitly condemning exogamy or intermarriage, with lineage lists appearing near its beginning and end (chapters 2 and 10).⁵⁶ These hereditary rolls were deployed to rule out anyone claiming to be of a priestly line, with the implication that intermarriage somewhere along the claimant's defiled lineage now invalidates any such claim of membership in the true (that is, *pure*) priestly community. As seen in Ezra 2:59-63, those without genealogical proof will not be allowed to serve in the Temple. Of particular interest is Thiessen's interpretation of this gatekeeping procedure—particularly, in how closely it seems to relate to Leviticus 19:19's evaluation of good and evil "seed":⁵⁷

The officials who approach Ezra describe these intermarriages as the mixture of the holy seed (הקדש זרע) with the peoples of the land (האֲרָצוֹת עַמִּי). This holy seed imagery signifies the genealogical distinction between Israel (holy seed) and the nations (profane seed) and demonstrates the inappropriateness of intermarriage, for if Lev 19:19 requires that a person not sow a field with two different types of seed, how much more inappropriate is it to combine two forms of human seed, holy and profane, Jew and Gentile?

Consider, too, that in his prayer of repentance Ezra explicitly mentions *intermarriage* as the main warrant for the exile (Ez. 9:1, 7-8) and argues against exogamy by adjuring all priests (and the lay people, as well) to not give their daughters in marriage

⁵⁶ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 40. The Book of Malachi—another text contemporaneous with the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah—also condemns intermarriage (Malachi 2:10-13).

⁵⁷ Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 135–136. That is why it is impossible to separate between intercultural marriage and interreligious marriage in P tradition.

to foreigners and to abstain from marrying any foreign woman (9:12-15). Furthermore, it seems crucial to note that the pure lineage of the priests serves as redemptive if also troubling rationale, following their extreme show of repentance in the sending away of their foreign wives and children (Ez. 10:18-24).

The Book of Nehemiah also includes listings of priestly lineage (Neh. 7, 10-12).⁵⁸ The record of the priests' recommitment (Neh. 10) includes specific mention of their pledge not to intermarry (vv. 30). The book even concludes with a cautionary tale of what happened to the house of Eliashib, the chief priest, whose grandsons took foreigners for wives (Neh. 13:28-31).⁵⁹ Intriguing are the layman Nehemiah's responses (vv. 29-30a), which we note with emphasis (*italics*) in what follows: "Remember them, O my God, because they have *defiled* the priesthood, the *covenant* of the priests and the Levites. Thus, I *cleansed* them from everything *foreign*" (NRSV). Key words such as "defiled," "covenant," and "cleansed" are all interconnected within the context of exogamy restrictions. Note Nehemiah's intertextual echo of Leviticus 21:13-15, a quintessential verse from P:

He [a priest of Aaronic lineage] shall marry only a woman who is a virgin. A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, a prostitute, these he shall not marry. He shall marry a virgin of his own kin, that he may not profane his offspring among his kin, for I am the LORD; I sanctify him (NRSV).

Matthew Levering has a critical opinion regarding this, "He expels Eliashib's grandson from Israel's community on the grounds that *he has contaminated the high priestly lineage* not merely by intermarriage but by breaking the precept of the Torah."⁶⁰

Another intriguing point emerges from a consideration of the structure of Nehemiah 13, which rhetorically ties the problem of Judean leadership inseparably with the priests' concern for ancestral purity. I suggest the following outline:

⁵⁸ These hereditary rolls overtly emphasize the exclusivity of post-exilic Jewish society; *ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁹ Eliashib himself was a scandalous figure tied to deep corruption at the Temple (cf. Neh. 13:4-13).

⁶⁰ Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 204.

Intro	1-3
Problem with the priests	4-14
Corruption (4-10)	
Nehemiah's action (11-13)	
Nehemiah's intercession (14)	
<i>Judah's leadership problem</i>	15-22
Corruption (15-20)	
Nehemiah's action (21-22a)	
Nehemiah intercession (22b)	
<i>Judah's leadership problem^a</i>	23-27
Intermarriage (23-24)	
Nehemiah's action (25-27)	
Problem with the priests^a	28-31
Intermarriage (28-29)	
Nehemiah's action (30-31a)	
Nehemiah intercession (31b)	

The *inclusio* situating the “problem with the priests” (beginning: vv. 4-14; end: vv. 28-31) sends a strong message that any interference with a priest’s purity will eventually lead to the defilement of national leadership. The future of this people or nation, only recently returned from exile, depends critically on how attentive and scrupulous the priests could guard their (own) purity.

The ethnocentric and gendered notion of circumcision as marking the male Israelite’s commitment to sexual purity challenged the danger of cultural assimilation, brought about on a massive scale with Hellenism’s cultural dominance tied to Roman imperial ambitions (and subjugating victories). According to ancient Near Eastern historian John Barclay, circumcision thus became a vital practice for maintaining the purity of God’s people:⁶¹

One of the most important functions of circumcision was in identifying with whom a Jewess may have sexual intercourse....It fulfilled this function by making it taboo for Jewish women to receive from an uncircumcised man what Philo calls “alien seed.”Jewish girls were taught to shudder at the thought of a sexual encounter with an uncircumcised man.

One need only consider how Samaritans are depicted in the New Testament (e.g., John. 4) to recognize how thoroughly both the Jewish rejection of exogamy and the doubling-down upon

⁶¹ This important insight, which alternates the gendered gaze on male circumcision from a distinctly (if also problematically formed) female vantage, is cited in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 29.

ancestral purity prevailed as the mainstream view on marriage—and, thus, peoplehood—during the post-exilic until at least the end of the Second Temple Period (70 CE).

Conclusion

The Hebrew Bible's perspectives about intermarriage—far from being monolithic—are rich, complex, and diverse, and this article is not intended to convey only one stream of theological reasoning with regard to intermarriage.⁶² According to Thiessen, this perspective is coming from a dissenting opinion among Jews against the mainstream theology in the second century about the possibility for Gentiles to become Jews.⁶³ According to the older tradition such as Yahwist (Y), Elon Gilad also explains that intermarriage is a common practice in the ancient Israelite society.⁶⁴ He says:⁶⁵

The Bible is full of Israelite men marrying foreign women. Abraham marries Keturah, who couldn't have been a daughter of Israel as Israel, Abraham's grandson, was yet to have been born. Judah marries Shu'a the Canaanite. Joseph marries Asenath, daughter of the Egyptian priest Potiphera. Moses marries Zipporah, daughter of the Midian priest Jethro, the kings of Judea married all sorts of foreign princesses, and the list goes on and on.

However, as this essay has shown, the Babylonian exile cannot be dismissed in its far-reaching implications for how God's people understood not only God but—I argue—themselves, as well, vis-à-vis the nations. The P tradition introduced a new interpretation of covenant and, with it, the theology of election. The bitterness of exile and the people's struggle for existence were transposed as radical commitment toward sexual purity, with circumcision as its main mark. The only way to survive after the Exile is the same way Israel survived it in the first place: according to P, this is through lineage preservation. From this cultic-

⁶² The case in Esther 8:17, where Gentiles become Jews (and become circumcised), cannot be separated from the information that Esther was married to a Gentile king (Ch. 2).

⁶³ Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 136–137.

⁶⁴ Elon Gilad, "Intermarriage and the Jews: What Would the Early Israelites Say?," *Haaretz*, 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-intermarriage-and-the-jews-1.5249817>. From his research on intermarriage in Pentateuch (except P), Fanie Snyman concludes, "It is however interesting to note that instances of intermarriage occurred within the Pentateuch and apparently the custom is not criticized. Fanie Snyman, "Investigating the Issue of Mixed Marriages in Malachi, Ezra-Nehemiah and the Pentateuch," *Scriptura*, Vol. 116, No. 2 (2017): 182.

⁶⁵ Gilad, "Intermarriage and the Jews."

confessional vantage, the theologies of election and covenant can still be perceived as God's guaranteeing the reproduction and continuation of Israelite lineage, even amid successive environs of hatred and the history of colonial (and neocolonial) subjugation that has continuously threatened the history of Israel. Efforts to be antiracist, decolonial, and rightly intolerant of antisemitism would do well to consider the trajectory plotted by source critical biblical studies.

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