Title: The uniqueness of the Abrahamic circumcision: a comparative study from biblical and non-biblical perspectives

Author: Joel O. Yoyo

Date completed: May 1993

Granting Institution: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS)

Description: Unpublished Thesis (MTh): 188 pages

Abstract:

Emblems have a grand significance in the religion of the Bible. Their places in the Old as well as in the New Testament serve to intensify and reinforce the lessons they stand for in the specific realms of Biblical faith.

Genesis 17 states that Yahweh gave the rite of circumcision to Abraham and his descendants to be a “sign of the covenant” between the Hebrews and God. This biblical statement seems to suggest that circumcision was exclusively known and practiced by the Hebrews only. However, studies reveal a contrast to this supposition.

Extant historical records, both biblical and non-biblical, reveal that nations in the ancient Near East and elsewhere practiced circumcision possibly hundreds of years before the birth of Abraham. One of the main arguments pertains to circumcision among the Egyptians. Historians have asserted that the Hebrews adapted the practice of circumcision from the Egyptians. However, the Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch, testify that circumcision among the Hebrews was quite independent of other nations’, and in fact, specified by God to the Hebrews. In principle, the rite of circumcision was the same, both for the Hebrews and other heathen tribes which practiced it. The question then is, what uniqueness or essence did the Abrahamic
circumcision have among the Hebrews that made the difference from other modes of circumcision among the “heathen”?

Limited attention has been given in theological writings regarding the uniqueness of the Abrahamic circumcision. However a proper understanding of this uniqueness gives insight into what God intended to teach his people concerning his redemptive plan through covenantal relationship.

The practice of circumcision among the heathen related merely to their own traditional and social mores. The uniqueness of the Abrahamic circumcision lies in the fact that it established a bond between Yahweh and the Hebrews. The rite of circumcision with its spiritual implications, singled out the Israelites as a covenant people. Abraham might have known about the rite of circumcision from his sojourning in Egypt and elsewhere. But in the Genesis account, God instructed its observance to the Hebrews with the redemptive intent that was never known or accepted by the heathen world of Abraham’s time.

Studies in the NT and extra-biblical sources such as the Jewish writings in the intertestamental period indicate that the issue of circumcision caused some problem in the early Christian church. Paul offers the proper perspective from which to view this Jewish rite. He neither approved of the misconception of the Jews concerning this rite, nor did he deny the role of the rite in the OT. He affirms that Christ has fulfilled all the requirements of the “law” (Eph 2:15).

The uniqueness of the Abrahamic circumcision motif finds parallel in Christian faith. Whereas the rite stood as a signifier of faith, and for a covenant relationship in the OT, it typified faith in the grace of God through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is now symbolized by the believer’s commitment through Christian baptism. Circumcision does not bind any more,
however, to the OT reader, it remains one of the blueprints of true faith and an example of total obedience to and trust in God.