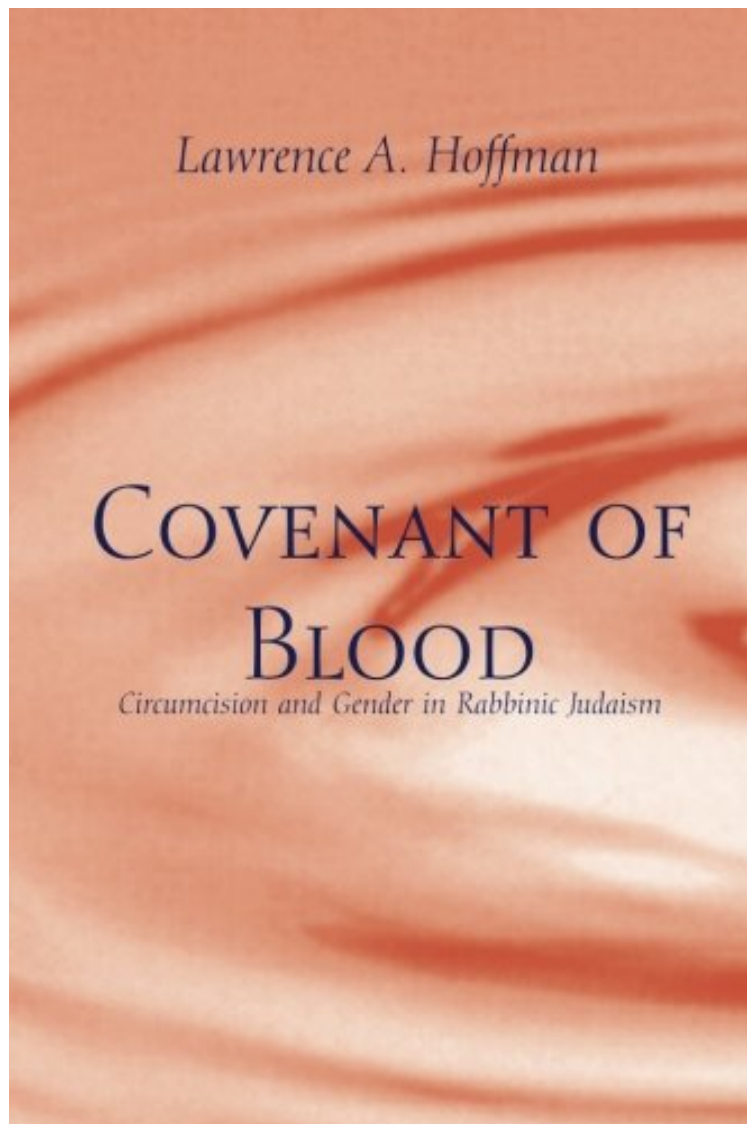


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## **Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism)**

*Lawrence A. Hoffman*

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**Lawrence A. Hoffman : Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Magnificent--One of the Most Fascinating, Learned, Original Books Written Regarding Circumcision

By J. Steven Svoboda

Rabbinical scholar Lawrence A. Hoffman has written that rarest of books: A learned, well-referenced, thoughtful academic work on a very focused topic that nevertheless manages to engage, even grip the reader. Circumcision, Hoffman notes, has long been the sine qua non of Jewish identity. Yet even that apparently simple statement is more complicated than it appears, both because obviously it does not speak to women's Judaic status, and also because the state of one's penis is technically irrelevant to one's membership in the religion. Hoffman, so troubled by his findings that it took him eight years following his completion of his research to actually publish *Covenant of Blood*, proves a thesis so sweeping and yet so simple that it is shocking that no one has breached the issue before him: Circumcision symbolizes a covenant between the males being circumcised and God. The practice thereby expresses the awkward (by today's standards) truth that in traditional rabbinical thought, Judaism, despite its matrilineal passage of religious identity, equates "man" with "Jew," allotting women an appendage-like role. Circumcision made possible and even embodied an analogy that Hoffman shows was implicit in Judaism: man was to woman as Jew was to non-Jew. And how did a male Jew demonstrate that he belonged and was of the covenant? By going under the knife. "One eternal verity... endures in Jewish culture: a tenacious grasp on circumcision to the point where opposition to it was considered a taboo." It is important to realize that things were not this way from the inception of Judaism. Carefully sifting through reams of confusing and sometimes conflicting ancient religious texts, Hoffman shows that circumcision has not always been considered an essential Jewish covenant, but rather was constructed as such a few centuries before the birth of Christ, at a time when animal sacrifice was on its way out as part of Judaism. The blood spilled during circumcision is essential to brit milah because it harks back to the brit's ritual predecessor, animal sacrifice. At the same time, the blood represents the aspect of sacrifice that offers salvation. "By itself, the foreskin is useless, but covered with circumcision blood, it saves." By contrast, menstrual blood was viewed as a pollutant, again demonstrating the exclusion and subordination of women. Interestingly, however, as part of this historical transition, women had to be displaced from the brit milah. In its original form, the ritual placed father, mother, and child at center stage. Later, the brit was reconceptualized to exclude all females including the mother and to emphasize its nature as "a male-only ritual, almost sacramental in both public and official meaning." In a fascinating three-way power struggle between the monarchy, the Jewish "priests" (as Hoffman terms them), and the prophets, circumcision emerged as a ritual of overriding importance. Hoffman pinpoints one particular ancient religious author, the creator of the so-called "P text," as the original promoter of the equation of Jewish identity and circumcision. This writer, palpably obsessed by the need to ensure successful reproduction, which he metaphorically associated with images of horticulture, associated the need for circumcision as "pruning" to promote fertility. Circumcision came to be conceptualized as a ritual form of castration in which the elders' power was publicly demonstrated, with the potentially rebellious son's loyalty made clear by his submission to the circumciser's knife. We get a "bonus": Hoffman deconstructs the entire brit milah ritual in great detail, delving into the historical origins of each step, showing us how it developed through a combination of rabbinic authority and (sometimes unwitting) popular interventions. The author convincingly demonstrates that the rite is "a ceremonial celebration of the obligation that binds men to each other in rabbinic culture." Except for the mother, Hoffman notes, it is men alone who are featured in all rabbinic stories about circumcision. Blood symbolizes the opposition between men and women; women are seen as dirty and as lacking control of their (menstrual) blood and thus of themselves, while men are portrayed as clean and as in control of their (circumcision) blood, thereby supposedly justifying their preferential entrustment with passing on religious doctrine. Lawrence A. Hoffman closes his magnificent book with an afterword meditating on the brit milah in modern American culture. He discusses the positions of some modern Jewish commentators on ritual circumcision, and surveys its disparate forms in the present day US. I urge every reader to be sure not to miss one of the most fascinating, learned, and original books ever written about circumcision.

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Scholarly, Thoughtful and Provocative

By A Customer

In a private letter to Leopold Zunz, the nineteenth century scholar and advocate of the "Scientific Investigation of Judaism," the Reform leader Abraham Geiger commented on the rite of circumcision as follows: "I cannot comprehend the necessity of working up a spirit of enthusiasm for the ceremony merely on the ground that it is held in general esteem. It remains a barbarous bloody act. . . . The sacrificial idea which invested the act with sanctity in former days has no significance for us. However tenaciously religious sentiment may have clung to it formerly, at present, its only supports are habit and fear, to which we certainly do not wish to erect any shrines." Notwithstanding Geiger's private views on the subject, his public position was quite different when, in 1843, a group of Frankfurt laymen formed the Society for the Friends of Reform and declared, among other things, that the long-standing rite of circumcision was null and void. Like other members of the emerging Reform rabbinate of mid-nineteenth century Germany, Geiger could not consider abrogating the rite, even though every other aspect of Jewish religious practice was subject to reconsideration in the light of modernity. As Lawrence Hoffman notes in the opening chapter of *"Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism,"* when discussing the actions of the German Reform rabbinate in response to the Frankfurt laymen and during three historic meetings in the period between 1844 and 1846: "Rabbis apparently found it possible to commit nothing less than liturgical surgery on their time-honored prayer book; they could cancel age-old mourning and wedding

customs; they even declared the Talmud no longer binding. They had no trouble dispensing with Hebrew and cutting off their ties to a Jewish Land of Israel. They would even think seriously of declaring a marriage with a non-Jew 'not forbidden.' But they could not even consider abrogating circumcision. Moreover, they could not even agree that males who are not circumcised are still Jews! Nowhere else, to the best of my knowledge, were the reformers so adamantly tied to their past as in the case of circumcision."Indeed, the atavistic power of tradition almost prevented Professor Hoffman himself from publishing this fascinating and compelling exploration of the role of circumcision in Judaism, a work that he largely completed as early as 1987 (nearly ten years before its publication). Struggling to find the light of day, he admits to having erased the text from his computer and then lost the only hard copy in his possession. In the end, fortunately for those interested in better understanding the real meanings of Judaism, he decided "it is better to come to terms with the crawly creatures in the basement than to pretend that they are not there." "Covenant of Blood" methodically explores the development, importance and meaning of circumcision within Judaism. Tracing the rite from its original textual origins in the story of Abraham, Professor Hoffman combines close analysis of Jewish texts with anthropological theory (particularly the seminal and insightful writings of Mary Douglas and Claude Levi-Strauss) to demonstrate how circumcision evolved into a binary system that served to reinforce Jewish patriarchy while simultaneously marginalizing women. It is a system that developed initially from the dichotomy between the salvific meaning ascribed to the blood of circumcision and the impurity of the blood of menstruation. From this dichotomy, Professor Hoffman demonstrates how the rabbinic system evolved in a manner that effectively excluded women from the religious culture of Judaism (while recognizing that the preserved rabbinic texts do not always reflect the reality of cultural practice). In a characteristic passage showing how "Covenant of Blood" relies upon anthropological analysis to illuminate Jewish theology (and which reminds me of some of the linguistic observations of Judith Tannen), Professor Hoffman summarizes why Jewish women were excluded from compliance with positive commandments dependent on time: "[W]ith regard to gender, the rabbinic system presents a cultural diad of in control/out of control. Men are controlled, they learn the system of controls, and they exercise control to transform the environment; women are the opposite: they are out of control; they are nature; they are wild, loose, unable (by temperament) to master the application of those commandments that must be done precisely 'on time.' Therefore, the system necessarily exempts them from those commandments. In a word, men are nature transformed by culture; women are nature, dependent on culture, that is, on men. They enter men's domain at times like marriage (thus requiring one-sixth of the Mishnah to tell their men how to deal with them), but they are never fully 'cultured.' They do not learn Torah and are not obliged to effect culture's-that is, Torah's-transformation of nature. Using Levi-Strauss's celebrated categorization scheme loosely, we can say that men, as culture, are the cooked while women, as nature, are the raw." Tracing the circumcision rite through history, Professor Hoffman demonstrates through careful textual and philological analysis how women were finally excluded entirely from participation in the rite by the Medieval rabbinate, making circumcision an exclusively male ritual in the synagogue. For those who view Judaism as revealed religion, and Torah and its Talmudic elaborations as revealed texts, "Covenant of Blood" will appear to be nothing more than heresy. Similarly, for those who unquestioningly accept Judaic tradition and practice without regard to its origins and effects, there will continue to be a cultural, if not religious, imperative for circumcision, "the sine qua non of Jewish identity throughout time." But for those willing to examine the religious ritual of circumcision in the light of reason, Professor Hoffman has written a text worthy of careful reading and consideration. 15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Excellent Scholarship, Very Readable By Chuck Hoffman begins his analysis of the meaning of male circumcision in Rabbinic Judaism by recounting the attempts in the nineteenth century by the movement in Germany to eliminate circumcision a requirement in Judaism. The effort was largely unsuccessful. This prompts him to study the ritual's public meaning through the history of Judaism. Hoffman admits that his the results of his investigation made him uncomfortable enough to sequester the manuscript for several years before returning to it. Fortunately, he decided to resurrect the work and publish it. Hoffman's painstaking research and analysis led to a clear conclusion: the purpose of male circumcision in Rabbinic Judaism was to exclude women. The focus of his research was to attempt to understand what circumcision meant to average practicing Jew at the various periods of Judaism. I found his approach and findings fascinating. One nearly indisputable finding is that circumcision for Abraham was not a sign of the covenant. It most likely a common practice that Abraham and his family adopted, but the connection between circumcision and the covenant between God and Abraham was added during the Babylonian exile around 600 B.C.. The importance and meaning of male circumcision evolved over time to become the ritual as it is practiced today. In the process an understanding of the evolution of Rabbinic Judaism from a temple/priest centered religion is explained. More importantly, the gradual exclusion of women from the practice of religion in the synagogue is linked to changes in the circumcision ritual. Hoffman's writing style makes Covenant of Blood easy to read despite its depth of analysis. For those interested in the religious aspects of circumcision in Judaism, Covenant of Blood should be required reading. Even if the reader has difficulty agreeing with Hoffman's conclusions, his analysis and point of view cannot be ignored.

Central to both biblical narrative and rabbinic commentary, circumcision has remained a defining rite of Jewish

identity, a symbol so powerful that challenges to it have always been considered taboo. Lawrence Hoffman seeks to find out why circumcision holds such an important place in the Jewish psyche. He traces the symbolism of circumcision through Jewish history, examining its evolution as a symbol of the covenant in the post-exilic period of the Bible and its subsequent meaning in the formative era of Mishnah and Talmud. In the rabbinic system, Hoffman argues, circumcision was neither a birth ritual nor the beginning of the human life cycle, but a rite of covenantal initiation into a male "life line." Although the evolution of the rite was shaped by rabbinic debates with early Christianity, the Rabbis shared with the church a view of blood as providing salvation. Hoffman examines the particular significance of circumcision blood, which, in addition to its salvific role, contrasted with menstrual blood to symbolize the gender dichotomy within the rabbinic system. His analysis of the Rabbis' views of circumcision and menstrual blood sheds light on the marginalization of women in rabbinic law. Differentiating official mores about gender from actual practice, Hoffman surveys women's spirituality within rabbinic society and examines the roles mothers played in their sons' circumcisions until the medieval period, when they were finally excluded.

From the Back Cover Combining a close reading of rabbinic texts with an interdisciplinary method drawn from the human sciences, this is an important contribution to Jewish studies and gender studies. About the Author Lawrence A. Hoffman is professor of liturgy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. His many books include *The Art of Public Prayer*, *Beyond the Text*, and *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*. Hoffman co-edits *Two Liturgical Traditions*, a series exploring worship in Judaism and Christianity from antiquity to today.