"... AND HE WAS BORN CIRCUMCISED ..."

Some notes on circumcision in Ḥadīth

by

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To Professor R. Sellheim

as a token of esteem and respect

The ritual of circumcision, in practice throughout the Muslim world, is traced back to Ibrahim, the ancestor of the Jews and the Arabs. Arab tradition, like that of the Jews, holds that he was the first who circumcised himself on the order of God. His is said to have performed this ritual at the age of eighty and to have lived until the age of two hundred. Another tradition claims that he carried out circumcision at the age of one hundred and twenty, in a place named Qadūm. According to another tradition, the tool used by Ibrahim for the circumcision was named qadūm, a pick-axe.¹


Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Shībīlī, Maḥāṣīsu l-ʾwaṣāfī fī maʿrifatī l-ʾawāfī, MS Brit. Library, Or. 1530, fol. 48b–49a: God told Ibrahīm that he had already accomplished (the
A slightly divergent tradition about the circumcision of Ibrāhīm is recorded by Abū Bakr Ahmad b. 'Amr b. Abī 'Āṣim al-Shaybānī, in his Kitāb al-awḍū'ī2: Ibrāhīm carried out the circumcision at the age of one hundred and thirty years3. A peculiar tradition traced back to Abū Hurayra and recorded in Suyūṭī’s al-Durr al-manthur4, says that Ibrāhīm circumcised himself in Qadūm at the age of thirty years.

Al-‘Aynī quotes a tradition recorded by al-Māwardī saying that Ibrāhīm circumcised himself at the age of seventy; according to Ibn Qutayba, after this event he lived for a hundred years and died at the age of one hundred and seventy5. Noteworthy is a tradition recorded by al-Bayhaqī in his al-Sunan al-kubrā6: God ordered Ibrāhīm to circumcise himself and he carried out the order using the qadūm, the pick-axe. When the pain increased and became too hard for him to bear, he invoked God. God then asked him why was he so hasty in carrying out the order and Ibrāhīm answered that he did it because he feared to delay the accomplishment of God’s injunction7.

There is, however, one tradition in which the circumcision of Abraham is not linked with an injunction of God. Abraham is said to have waged war with the Amalekites. Since many warriors of both the fighting troops fell in these battles, it was necessary to make a distinction during the burial of the dead between the believing warriors, fighting on the side of Abraham, and the unbelieving Amalekites. Then Abraham introduced the circumcision in order to distinguish by that mark the believing warriors from the unbelievers8. The

injunctions of—K.) his religious belief, qad akmalta imānaka, except a bit, badra, of your body which you would remove; he then circumcised himself, using for it a pick-axe.

Another tradition says that God bade him clean himself on three occasions; at the first time he performed an ablution, at the second time he washed himself, at the third time he carried out the circumcision. And see: al-Baghawī, Maṣāḥīḥ al-sunnah, ed. Muḥammad Saḥīḥ Ibrāhīm Saḥāra and Jamāl ʿAbdī l-Dhahabī, Beirut 1407/1987, IV, 18, no. 4428. Muḥammad Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī, Simsīlatu l-ahādīthī l-sāhiha, Beirut 1405/1985, II, 361, no. 725; and see the references of the author. EP, s.v. khītān.

Muslim tradition is, however, almost unanimous in saying that Ibrahim performed the circumcision on the order of God.

As there is no special verse in the Qur'an enjoining the circumcision, commentators of the Qur'an strove to find some indications in the Qur'an implying that God enjoined Ibrahim to carry out the circumcision. Such was the verse 124 in surat al-baqara: ...wa-idhi btala ibrahīma rabbuhu bi-kalimatīn fa-atammahuna...,” and (remember) when his Lord tried Abraham with certain commands which he fulfilled...” One of these commands, kalimatī, was, according to some scholars, the injunction of the circumcision.

The story of the circumcision of Abraham according to God’s injunction and his suffering is confronted by the story of the circumcision of the Prophet. Unlike Abraham, the Prophet was granted the grace of being born circumcised. The tradition of the miraculous circumcision of the Prophet, as transmitted by his servant Anas b. Malik, says that the Prophet stated: “For the sake of my honourable position at God’s Presence I was born circumcised and nobody saw my pudendum,” min karamatī ‘alā ilāhi annī wulidtu makhtūnān wa-lam yara aḥadun sa‘ātī10.

Al-Munāwī, who recorded this tradition, adduced a remarkable list of reservations and many critical observations of Muslim orthodox scholars. Some


9 See e.g. Iṣḥāq b. Bishr, Muḥi ad-dīn l-dunya, MS fol. 188b, sup. Ibn Abī Shayba, al-Musannaf, (reprint) XI, 521, no. 11877. Shihābū l-Ḍīn l-Khaṭṭājī, Nāṣīmu l-rīyāḍ fi sharhī shifātī l-ṣādī riyāḍ, Cairo 1327, I, 343 inf. Ibn Qāyīm al-Jauzīyya, Ṭuḥṣatū l-maudūd, p. 164: ...wa-l-khiṭān kāna mina l-khiṣālī lattī biṭālā ilāhu subhānahu bihi ibrāhīma khāliṭahu fa-atammahuna wa-akmulahuna fa-jārī alalhu imāman li-nāsī...10

... and he was born circumcised ...

scholars questioned the soundness of the tradition and scrutinized the lists of the transmitters. Some of them were skeptical to such a degree that they asserted that there is nothing firmly based in the tradition stating that the Prophet was born circumcised, lam yathbut fihī shayʿun\(^{11}\). Furthermore, the expression makhtūnān can hardly be accepted: khatana denotes “cutting” and refers in this case to the cutting of the prepuce of the Prophet. It is evident that this may raise the question of who performed the circumcision in Heaven.

A peculiar answer to this queer question was quoted by al-Ṣaffūrī in his Nuzhat al-majālis\(^{12}\). God wanted the Prophet and some other prophets to be born circumcised; His order was then accomplished when He merely uttered the word “kun.” Thus there was no need to cut the prepuce; God’s Word was sufficient and no intervention of angel or man was required for the cutting of the prepuce.

But the argument put forward by the skeptical scholars doubting the reliability of the tradition about Muḥammad being born circumcised was indeed the tradition asserting that twelve or even more from among the prophets were born circumcised\(^{13}\). This tradition indicates clearly that the miracle of being born circumcised was not granted the Prophet as an exclusive distinction, karāma. He was merely one of a series of prophets who by God’s grace gained the distinction to be born circumcised.

Additionally, according to Shi‘ī belief, every Shi‘ī imām is born circumcised and purified\(^{14}\).

\(^{11}\) See e.g. al-Diyārbakrī, Taʾrikh al-khamīs, I, 205, 1.1.

\(^{12}\) P. 490.

\(^{13}\) See the list of the prophets who were born circumcised, transmitted by ‘Alī: Ādām, Shīth, Idrīs, Nūḥ, Sām, Ibrāhīm, Dāwūd, Sūlaymān, Lūt, Ismā‘īl, Mūsā, ‘Īsā and Muḥammad, as recorded in al-Majlīsī, Bihār al-anwār, Tehran 1379, XV, 296. And see this list in Ibn Bābūyah’s Uyūnu ʾakhbārī l-riḍā, ed. Muḥammad Maḥdī al-Ṣayyid Ḥasan al-Khārsān, Najaf 1390/1970, I, 190. It is surprising to find in the list the name of Ibrāhīm, who is said to have suffered pain in performing the circumcision. Ahmad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Kindī al-Samdī al-Nazwī records in his al-Musannaf, ed. ‘Abd al-Mun‘īm ʿĀmīr and Jādallāh Ahmad, Cairo 1979, II, 39–40 the tradition on the authority of ‘Alī. Al-Suyūṭī records in his al-Khāṣṣaṣṣu l-kubra, I, 133 a report of Ibn al-Kalbī on the authority of Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, containing a list of the prophets who were born circumcised: Shīth, Idrīs, Nūḥ, Sām, Lūt, Yūsuf, Mūsā, Sūlaymān, Yāhūd, Shu‘ayb, Ḥūd and Sālīh; the last of these prophets was Muḥammad; it is evident that included in the list are two prophets from the Arab peninsula. Slightly divergent is the list recorded by al-Qurtubī in his Tafsīr, II, 100, quoted from Muḥammad b. Ḥabbūs, included in his al-Muḥabbār, ed. Ilse Lichtenstaedter, Hyderabad 1361/1942, pp. 131–132: it contains the name of an additional prophet, Ḥanẓala b. Ṣafwān, the prophet of the people of Rass. Al-Ḥalabī records in his al-Sira al-halabiyya, I, 59 a versified list of the prophets who were born circumcised; one of these prophets was Yāsīn. See further the lists of the prophets born circumcised in al-Diyārbakrī’s Taʾrikhu l-khamīs, I, 205, sup., in al-Bājūrī’s Ḥāshiyya, MS Acre, al-Jazzār, fol. 39a, sup. and in al-Khaṭfājī’s Nastmu l-riyaḍ, I, 364. Al-Saffūrī records in his Nuzhat al-majālis, p. 490 a slightly different list including Ādām, Shīth, Nūḥ, Idrīs, Lūt, Yūsuf, Mūsā, Shu‘ayb, Sūlaymān, Yāhūd, ‘Īsā and Muḥammad.

\(^{14}\) Ibn Bābūyah al-Qummi, Uyūnu ʾakhbārī l-riḍā, I, 169.
A weighty argument against the validity of the tradition saying that the Prophet was born circumcised is the religio-linguistic analysis of the verse. The pivot of the discussion is the word *ibtala*... “He tried Ibrahim.” As suffering and pain was determined for the prophets in the highest degree, it stands to reason that the prophet Muhammad should have been meted out the same amount of trial and suffering as Abraham, so that he should not be inferior to Abraham. Thus the assumption that Muhammad was born circumcised cannot stand criticism. Additionally a tradition attributed to the Prophet said that the ill-fated Ibn al-Sayyād was born circumcised, with his umbilical cord cut. Another story claims that the Byzantine king (qayṣar, maliku l-rūm), who ordered to poison Imrū'ū l-Qays, was born circumcised. Imrū'ū l-Qays noticed it when he entered the bath and saw the king naked. He composed a satirical verse in which he alluded to the fact that the king was born “circumcised due to the moon (shining at this birth—K.).” He was, nevertheless, considered an uncircumcised person.

The best explanation of the *hadrīth* of the miraculous circumcision of the Prophet was that he was born as if he were circumcised. Another explanation of the tradition is that the Prophet was born not fully circumcised and his grandfather completed the circumcision.

A serious theological question asked by the scholars was why the Prophet was born circumcised, being thus cleaned from the dirt of the uncircumcised, while the cleaning of his heart from the lot of Satan was delayed until the opening of his heart. The answer was given by Ibn ‘Aqīl: God divulged the more simple purification, *adwanu l-tathirayn*, performed usually by the midwife and

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19 See the verse in Ibn Qayyim’s *Tuhfat al-maudūd*, p. 161 and in Ahlwardt’s *Kitāb l-ṣiqdi l-thāmin fi dawāwini l-shu’ārā‘i l-jähiliyyīn*, London 1870, p. 133, no. 26: *laqad halafu yamtnan ghayra kadhibatin anaka aghlaJu ilil jana t-qamaru.*
the physician, \textit{jabīb}, but concealed the more important purification, that of the Opening of his Breast and the removal of the black spot, the lot of Satan, delaying it for a later period, when it was performed by the angel Jibrīl\textsuperscript{24}.

Scholars who refuted the tradition that the Prophet was born circumcised with his umbilical cord cut\textsuperscript{25} adduced another argument, asserting that many children are born circumcised. Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya records a case of such a child; his father was worried about it, but he was persuaded that there was no reason to be vexed about it, as God already carried out the circumcision of the child\textsuperscript{26}.

Some people hold a superstitious belief that children born circumcised are circumcised by the moon\textsuperscript{27}. This belief of the Arabs in the Jāḥiliyya about the child “circumcised by the moon” “\textit{khatānu l-qamar}” is rationally expli-
cated by Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya\textsuperscript{28}. The belief was based on the opinion that the moon brings about a kind of circumcision, as the prepuce shrinks and be-
comes contracted, \textit{tagallaṣat qulfatuhu wa-tajammaʿat}, if he is born in the evening in the light of the moon. The prepuce, however, does not disappear completely and only the head of the glans is visible; in this case it is necessary to perform the circumcision in order to expose the whole glans\textsuperscript{29}.

The scholars of the Shāfiʿī \textit{madhhb} considered it desirable to pass a razor over the place of circumcision of a child born in this fashion, without further cutting the prepuce. Aḥū Shāma observed that children born in this fashion are not fully circumcised and only a part of the glans is visible; in this case the cir-
uncision has to be completed (scil. by cutting the prepuce—K.)\textsuperscript{30}.

Finally it may be added that there is an odd tradition which contradicts the utterance of the Prophet that nobody has seen his pudendum: Ṣafīyya, the daughter of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalīb, stated that she was eager to know whether

\textsuperscript{24} Al-Ṣāliḥī, \textit{Subulu l-hudāI}, I, 421.
\textsuperscript{25} See this tradition in ‘Abd al-Muʿmin b. Khalaf al-Dimyāṭī’s \textit{Kitāb mukhtasar fi strati sawyidi l-bashar}, MS Chester Beatty 3332, fol. 5b, on the authority of al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalīb.
\textsuperscript{26} Cf. al-Qurtubī, \textit{Tafsīr}, II, 100. And see the statement in al-Nazwī’s \textit{al-Musannaf}, II, 43: \ldots wa-idhā khalaqa l-fāʿilā ilāhhī insānīn makṣhūf l-shaḥṣātī wa-l-khiṭānī lam yajib ʿalayhi l-khiṭānī, li-anna l-qasda bi-l-khiṭānī izhāru l-shaḥṣātī, fa-ṣuḥdā ẓāharat fa-qad wujjadat al-bughayatu. And see: Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya, \textit{Zād al-maʿād fi strati khayrī l-ibād}, Beirut, reprint, n. d. I, 18–19: Aḥū ʿAbdallāh Muhammad b. Uḥmān al-Khālīfī reported that he was born cir-
\textsuperscript{27} Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya, \textit{Zād al-maʿād}, I, 19 sup.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Tuhfatu l-maudūd}, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{29} A similar explanation is recorded by Ibn Ḥajar in his \textit{Fathu l-bātir sharḥ ṣaḥḥī l-bukhārī}, repr. Beirut, n. d., X, 286: \ldots wa-taʿzīyumu l-ṣarīḥu ʿanna l-ghulāma ʿidhā wulaḏā fi l-qamarī faṣa-
khat qulfatuhu, ay itteṣāʾat fa-ṣāʿra kā-l-makhtūnī. And see the verse of Imruʾ l-Qays recorded above, note 19.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya, \textit{Tuhfatu l-maudūd}, p. 156.
Amina bore a male or female child; she managed to see that the child was male, and she saw that he was already circumcised\textsuperscript{31}.

There exist two treatises concerning the tradition that the Prophet was born circumcised with his umbilical cord cut. One was composed by Abū l-Qāsim ʿUmar b. Abī l-Ḥasan b. Hībatullāh b. Abī Jarāda, refuting the story, and another one was composed by Muḥammad b. Ṭalḥa confirming the validity of the story\textsuperscript{32}.

* The birth of the Prophet and his circumcision are connected in several sources with the person of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, who acted in the absence of the father of the Prophet. According to a report, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib was summoned on the day of his birth by Āmina, the mother of the Prophet, who told him about the miracles she had witnessed during her pregnancy and about the tidings of his birth. Some transmitters claim that ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib took the child, entered the Kaʿba with him, invoked God for his grandson and thanked Him for the precious gift granted him by the birth of the child. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib then returned to Āmina and gave the child back to her\textsuperscript{33}.

Another version of this report supplies some additional details: ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, summoned by Āmina, came with his children, took the child wrapped in a tattered piece of cloth, 
\textit{khīrqa}, and entered the Kaʿba with him. He thanked God for His grace and asked for His protection in verses which he recited. He then returned the child to Āmina\textsuperscript{34}. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib was pleased with him and the child enjoyed his favour. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib predicted that his son (i.e., his grandson, the Prophet—K.), will gain a high position, \textit{la-yakūnāna li-bnī hādīhā shāʿun}\textsuperscript{35}. A significant version of this tradition is recorded in Bayhaqī’s \textit{Dālī’ī al-nubuwva}\textsuperscript{36}: ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib was summoned

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by Amina the night when she bore the Prophet. He took the child and brought it to Hubal, who was placed in the Ka'ba; he invoked God and thanked Him for His precious gift, the birth of the Prophet. One tradition links the entrance of 'Abd al-Mu'talib with the child into the Ka'ba with some socio-religious activities practiced in Mecca in the period of the Jahiliyya. It was 'Abd al-Mu'talib who invoked in the Sanctuary for the child, it was he who named the child Muḥammad and it was he who invited Quraysh and prepared a party for them on the occasion of the birth of Muhammad. Some traditions say that 'Abd al-Mu'talib circumcised the child, performing the ritual on the seventh day after his birth. Mughulṭāy confronts in his al-Zahr al-bāsim the tradition that the Prophet was born circumcised with the tradition that 'Abd al-Mu'talib circumcised the child on the seventh day of his birth, arranged a party on this occasion and named him Muḥammad. Mughulṭāy notes that this tradition seems to be more acceptable than that of the Prophet being born circumcised.

Some of the traditions saying that 'Abd al-Mu'talib circumcised the child stress that he performed it according to the practice of the Arabs.

The reliability of the tradition saying that 'Abd al-Mu'talib circumcised the child stress that he performed it according to the practice of the Arabs.
in pre-Islamic times is convincingly demonstrated by Uri Rubin in his article: "Hanifiyya and Ka'ba, An inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic background of din Ibrāhīm." 43

It is indeed noteworthy that the traditions transmitted by Ibn ʿAbbās emphasize the role of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib and the continuity of the Jāhili customs, according to which ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib acted.

The practice of circumcision of females in the period of the Jāhiliyya is indicated in a verse of Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, in which he mentions young girls captured in a raid before they were circumcised.44

A third group of traditions says that the angel Jibrīl performed the circumcision of Muhammad in the abode of Ḥalīma, when he opened his breast and purified his heart.45

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Arab sources emphasize the persistence of the Abrahamian beliefs in the Arab peninsula.46 A tradition recorded on the authority of ʿIkrima asserts that uncircumcised persons were not to perform the circumambulation of the Ka'ba. No uncircumcised person ever circumambulated the Ka'ba since the time of Abraham, the tradition says.47

Al-Jāḥīz is quoted as stating that the practice of female and male circumcision remains continuous since the time of Ibrāhīm and ʿHājar until now:

... qāla l-jāḥīz: wa-l-khitanu fi l-ʿarabi fi l-nisāʾi wa l-rijāli min ladun ibrāhīma ʿalayhi l-salāmu wa-hājara ilā yauminā ḥādhā.

Al-Jāḥīz adds the following observation: ... thumma lam yālad ṣabiyyun makhtūnan au fi sharati makhtūnīn. wa-nāsun yāʾumūna anna l-nabiyya ʿalayhi l-salāmu khuliqā makhtūnayni.48

The Arab character of the practice of circumcision is reflected in the story

43 JSAI, vol. XIII (1990) 103: "... The pre-Islamic deity of the Ka'ba was Hubal. His was the one and only statue situated inside the Ka'ba. The rituals performed in front of this statue contained typical Abrahamic elements, circumcision in particular..." See the links established by Rubin between the circumcision practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia and Abraham as indicated by Rubin, ibid., p. 104, based on the passage in Josephus Flavius' Antiquities of the Jews.


47 Al-Qurṭubī, Taṣfīr, II, 99.

48 Al-Nazwi, al-Muṣannaf, II, 39.
of the prediction that the "Kingdom of the Circumcised" is near. When Heraclius was informed about it he could hardly believe it, as he knew of only one people who practised circumcision: the Jews, and he could not believe that the Jews would rule the world. Then one of the people of Heraclius met an Arab, who asserted that the Arabs had the same practice. The prediction thus referred to the Kingdom of the Arabs, and it was true.

Al-Munawi quotes the opinion of al-Qurtubi about the continuity of the practice of circumcision among the descendants of Ibrahim and the followers of the religious communities related to his faith; circumcision is a practice enjoined by God in the Torah for the Banu Isra'il. Banu Isra'il continued to practice circumcision until the time of Isā.

Nevertheless the Jews who practised circumcision could not be considered ḥunafā' as one might conclude from verse 67 of surat al 'imrān: bal millata ibrāhīma hanīfan, as the Qurān plainly states that Ibrahim was neither a Jew nor a Christian. A Shi'i adherent asks the imām in a remarkable letter whether the believers should not abide by the rule of circumcising the children on the seventh day of their birth, because the Earth cries, complaining to God of the urine of the uncircumcised. No qualified circumciser being found among the believers, the adherent asks the imām, al-Hasan b. 'Ali, is it permitted to invite Jewish experts in order to circumcise the children of the believers? In his answer the imām affirms that circumcision should be performed on the seventh day since the birth of a child, but does not answer the question of whether it is permitted to invite a Jewish practitioner to carry out the circumcision of the children of the believers.

Some groups from among the Christians interpreted the injunction of circumcision reported in the Torah as referring to the prepucce of the heart, not to that of the glans. They thus abandoned the injunction of the Torah concerning circumcision, replacing it by a kind of foolishness, fa-tarākū l-mashrū'a mina l-khitan bi-ḍarbin mina l-hadhayān. Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya asserts

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49 I read: mulku l-khitīnī, not: maliku l-khitīnī.
52 Ibn Bābūyah al-Qummī, Man lā yaḥḍuruhu l-faṣqīl, III, 314 inf.–315 sup., no. 1329.
54 Tuhfatu l-mauḍūd, pp. 136 inf.–137 sup.
that Ibrāhīm obeyed God’s injunction, circumcised himself and turned the practice into a *fiτra* which will last in his posterity forever.

All the prophets summoned their peoples to carry on this practice. Thus the Son of the Virgin, the Word of God and His Servant (i.e., ʾIsā—K.) followed the practice of God’s Friend, Ibrāhīm and became circumcised; the Christians admit this and acknowledge that it is an injunction of the *injil*. They nevertheless followed the bad inclinations of a people who went astray and misled others and wandered from the right way55.

Ibn ʿAbdūn recommends in his treatise56 to alter the corrupted rules introduced in the Christian church, to compel the women in the household of a priest to marry, and to force the priests to undergo circumcision and to marry. The heads of the Christian Church twisted the faith of Jesus and imposed the prohibition of circumcision on the priests, even though they were aware of the fact that Jesus himself was circumcised and they observed the Feast of his circumcision.

Muḥammad b. Rushd states that the believer has to circumcise the male and female slaves in his possession, as circumcision is the purification of Islam; he is obliged to perform it with his servants as he is obliged to perform it with his sons and daughters57.

As mentioned above, circumcision was considered an injunction of God. It formed one of the marks of the people who believed in God in the periods of ignorance, of the lack of knowledge of the existence of God, of brutality and savagery. This remarkable group, distinguished by its spiritual values, was known as the “People of the *fiτra*.” They followed the conduct of Abraham, *the sunan ibrāhīma l-khaliṭ*58.

55 Comp. Bashr Ahmad Orchard, “Religious Background” (of Circumcision—K.), *Review of Religions*, LXXXVI (1991) 29: ... “It was not until Paul deviated from the teaching of Jesus by converting the Gentiles to his own brand of Christianity that a schism arose in the early church on the subject of circumcision” ... Although every year on the first of January the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches observe the Festival of the Feast of Circumcision commemorating the circumcision of Jesus, circumcision is not obligatory for Christians. The practice is observed, however, by the Ethiopian Church.” I owe the information about this article to Professor Yohanan Friedmann.


57 Abū l-Walid Ibn Rushd: *al-Bayān wa-l-taḥṣīl*, Beirut 1984, II, 162–163: ... inna ʿalā ʾl-rajuli an yakhṭina min ʿabidīhi wa-yakḥiṭa min imātihi mà yuṣmīfuʿalā imātkīhi, li-annāhum khabaluhu (in text: ʿoulahu, which is a mistake) wa-mulku yaminīhi, fa-yatzamahu min khitāni dhuḵārī-him mà yatzamahu min khitāni dhuḵārī wuldihi li-anīa l-khitāna tahrū ṭ-l-islāmi wa-shfwrūhu, fa-huwa sunnatin wujabatun; wa-yustahabbu lahu min khifādi ināthihi mà yustahabbu lahu min khifādi ināthi wuldihi, li-anīa l-khifāda fi l-nisbi makrumatun wa-layṣa bi-sunnatin wujabatin ... I owe this reference to Professor Joseph Sadan, who kindly sent me the passage.

58 See al-Khafajī, *Nastμu l-riyād*, I, 343. And see on the *fiτra* and the idea of the *hantf*: M. Gil, “The Creed of Abū ʿAmir,” *IOS* XII, 1992, 9 ff. And cf. the explanation of the word *fiτra* in
Al-Munawwī gives a similar explanation of the hadīth: khamsun mina l-fitrā, marking the fitrā as a sunna chosen by the prophets: ... ay khamsun mina l-sunnati l-qadimati llatī n khtāraḥā l-anbiyā'u wa-ttafaqat ʿalayhā l-shārdātī'u ḥattā ʿārāt kā-annaḥā amrun jubbīlī ʿalayhi... According to an interpretation recorded in Ibn Abī Shayba's Muṣannaf,60 one of the injunctions, kalimāt, of the verse: wa-idhi bitalā ʿibrāhīma rabbhu bi-kalimātīn of Sūra II, 124 refers to the injunction of the circumcision61.

Al-Mawardī in his Tafsīr mentions the injunctions which God imposed on Ibrāhīm, marking them as sunanu l-islām; among these injunctions was the practice of circumcision.

There is however no unanimity among scholars on the question of whether circumcision was one of the practices enjoined by God and obliging the people of the fitrā. According to an utterance of the Prophet recorded by al-Ṭahāwī the people of the fitrā used to follow three practices: paring their nails, trimming the moustache and shaving the privy parts (qaṣṣu l-ażfār wa-akhdhu l-shārib wa-halqu l-ţaṇī)

In another list of God’s injunctions for the people of the fitrā there were five practices that had to be followed; one of these practices was the circumcision. A third list provided by al-Ṭahāwī records ten practices; one of them was the circumcision. Al-Ṭahāwī gives a convincing explanation for the growth of the injunctions from three to ten: God enjoined the people of the fitrā at the beginning to follow three practices. He extended this later to five practices, and added finally a further five, thus reaching the number ten64. The traditions of the five injunctions and of the ten injunctions revealed to the People of the fitrā were widely circulated65.
The circumcision, *khitan*, was linked with another expression referring to the People of the *fitra*, the *sibghatu ilahi*.

Circumcision was unanimously agreed upon by Muslim scholars as a religious practice concerning males and females. There were, however, differences on whether it is an obligatory practice, *wājib*—considered even by some of the scholars as an injunction, *fard*—or merely a *sunna*, a customary religious practice which should be followed.

Some scholars were of the opinion that the circumcision of a male holds an intermediate position between a recommendation, *nadb*, and an obligatory practice.

The circumcision of a female was however considered of lesser importance than that of a male, and the observance of circumcision for females was to some extent treated more lightly.

There were indeed two contradictory opinions concerning the circumcision of females: the one considered circumcision obligatory for men and women alike, referring to the utterance of the Prophet: *idhā ltaqā l-khitanāni wajaba l-ghusl*, and the other one asserting that circumcision is obligatory only for males.

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271 no. 11 records an utterance of the imām Mūsā b. Ja'far: *...khamsun mina l-sunani ft l-ra's wa-khamsun ft l-jasad ... wa-ammātt latt ft l-jasad fa-l-khitan wa-ḥalqu l-ʿāna ...* 'Ali b. Balābān al-Fārisī, *al-ḥṣān bi-tarīḥī sāḥīhi bni hibbān*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt, Beirut 1407/1987, VII, 409, nos. 5455–5458, records utterances about five injunctions, including circumcision, and mentions on p. 408, no. 5454 the utterance about the three injunctions, not including circumcision. Al-Suyūṭi records in his *Jamʿu l-jawāmiʿ*, Cairo 1390/1970, IX, no. 13682 a tradition counting five practices of the *fitra*: trimming the moustache, paring the nails, shaving the privy parts, plucking out of the hair of the armpits and using the tooth stick (*the siwāk*, made from the tree of *arāk*,—K.); there is, however, another version of this tradition in which the injunction of using of the *siwāk* is replaced by the injunction of the circumcision; and see *ibid.* the abundant references of the editors. And see the tradition about the ten practices of the *fitra* recorded by Muḥātī in his *Faydū l-qādir*, IV, 316, no. 5432, which however does not include the circumcision.

66 See Qur(214,213),(304,229)(211,229),(304,245), II, 138; *sibghata ilahi wa-man aḥsanu mina ilāhi sibghata wa-nahnu lahu qaḍāna*. See the explanation of this expression as referring to the circumcision in Ibn Qayyim’s *Tuhfatu l-maudud*, pp. 145–148.


69 See e.g. al-Nāṣirī, *Isḥāratu l-nisāʿi*, ed. ʿĀmar al-ʿUmarī, Cairo 1408/1988, p. 198, no. 241; and see *ibid.* the references of the editor. According to this tradition *khitan* denotes the vulva of
males, on the basis of the utterance of the Prophet: *al-khitānu sunnatun li-l-rijāli, makrumatun li-l-nisā'ī*.\(^{70}\)

The proper method of circumcision of females was defined by the Prophet in an advice given to a woman circumciser, Umm 'Aṭiyya. He advised her to excise gently a part of the prepuce of the clitoris, avoiding a total excision of all the parts of the clitoris: *ashimmī wa-lā tunhikī*; a total extirpation may annul the sexual lust of the woman and may even endanger the life of the girl\(^{71}\).

As mentioned above the difference between the degree of obligation of male and female circumcision was defined by the Prophet in his utterance: *al-khitān sunnatun li-l-rijāli, makrumatun li-l-nisā'ī*.\(^{72}\)

There is, indeed, a difference between the purpose of male and female circumcision: the intent of female circumcision is to diminish her sexual desire; that of male circumcision is to secure the proper performance of his religious duties\(^{73}\). Additionally, female circumcision can be deduced neither from an Islamic practice nor from a practice of the "people of the fiṭra." It is therefore linked with the story of Hājar and the story of her strife with Sārah. The dissen-

the female as well as the penis of the male. See the explication of the khitiJnānī in Ibn al-Jauzi's Gharībū l-hadīthū, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'tī Amīn Qalāṣājī, Beirut 1405/1985, I, 264 and the references of the editor.

\(^{70}\) See the discussion in Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya, Tuhfatū l-maudūdū, p. 152: *wa-ṣan ahmada* (i.e. Ibn Ḥanbal) *ft dhālīka riwāyatānī: ihdāhumā yajibu 'ālā l-rijāli wa-l-nisā'ī, wa-l-thāningat: yakhīṣsu wujūbihu bi-l-dhukār* ... And see the argument of idhā ltaqā l-khtiJnānī used against a modern scholar who claimed that the traditions about the circumcision of females are "weak" none of them being sound, in Muḥammad Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī, Tamāmū l-minnū fl tuftiqī al-sunna, beirut 1409, p. 67.

\(^{71}\) Faḍlullāhī l-Jīfānt, Fadlu l-Iṣāba, II, 669–670, no. 1245. And see ibid. the explanation of the details of the practice: *wa-l-mustabiqīq min khafīrī l-marjātī qāfū shayīn min jildatin takānu ft fī l-dhārī fajīwq madkhāli l-dhakāri kaʿūrsī l-dhikī min ḥayri isṭiʿāqīn* ... See also the tradition in Muḥammad Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī’s Siṣīḥu l-ahdīthū l-muṣannafū, Beirut 1405/1985, II, 353–358, no. 722 and the abundant references of the author with different versions of the utterance. See also Ibn Ḥajar, al-Isāba, ed. 'Ali Muhammad al-Bijawī, Cairo 1392/1972, VII, 262, no. 12168; and note the version ashimīnī wa-lā tuḥfi fa-ınannahū asrā li-l-wujūbi we-haṣmīna l-dhārī. A curious explanation of the words asrā li-l-wujūbi, recorded by Faḍlullāhī l-Jīfānt, Fadlu l-Iṣāba, II, 670, says that it refers to the beauty of the pudenda of the woman. See the traditions in al-Nazwī’s al-Muṣannafū, II, 40 and in Bayhaqī’s al-Sunān al-kubrā, VIII, 324. Compare also the argument concerning the desire of the woman being diminished by circumcision in Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya, Tuhfatū l-maudūdū, p. 148.


\(^{73}\) See e.g. al-Zabīdī, Ithāfu l-ṣadīqūn l-muttaqīnū, II, 418; *wa-lṭajiqī l-qafūnī l-wujūbihi bīanna baqā'ā l-qulfīsī yāḥibī wajībī l-naṣirātā wa-yammūnū ẓihīnū al-ṣalātī l-tajībū īzalūhā*...
in a race and gained the favour of Abraham. Sarah, enraged by Ishāq’s loss in the competition, took a vow to cut three limbs of the body of her servant, Hājar. Abraham, wary of Sarah’s demand, proposed a compromise, which was accepted by Sārah: the two ears of Hājar would be pierced, and she would be circumcised. A curious opinion of some scholars says that there is a difference between women in the East and in the West; women in the West do not possess the part of the pudenda which is destined for circumcision. Some scholars advised to draw a razor over the place where circumcision was to be carried out.

As mentioned above circumcision in Islam was tied to the practice of the “people of the fitra,” the “people of the hanifiyya,” and the “people marked by the sībgha of Islam.” It is thus possible that Islamic circumcision was conceived as a mark of the covenant between God and the believer. The believer is distinguished by the cutting of the prepuce (or the removal of the part of the clitoris—K.), an act that denotes subservience to God. This is reminiscent of the cutting of the edge of a slave’s ear or the cautering of his forehead in order to indicate his servitude. In the same way circumcision helps to distinguish the servant of God, the ḥanīf, from other people who do not undergo this noble, cleaning and purifying treatment which moderates and calms desire.

The obligation of circumcision ceases with the death of the believer. An uncircumcised believer should not be made to undergo the ritual obligation after his death. That was the opinion of the religious leaders of Islam. There were, however, some fuqahā who asserted that an uncircumcised believer should be circumcised after his death.

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76 See e.g. Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya, Tuhfūt īl-maudūd, p. 127: ...wa-qāla ghayru wāḥidin mina l-salāfīn: man yahū wa-hajja wa-khtatāna fa-huwa ḥanīf, fa-l-hajj wa-l-khitān shī‘ārū l-ḥanīfī, wa-hiyya fitrātī lāhī ilātī futīra l-māsī ‘alayhā...

77 Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya, Tuhfūt īl-maudūd, p. 148; and see ibid. p. 145, inf.: God ordered Ibrāhīm to circumcise himself and promised him to make him an imām of the people, a father of many nations, shu‘ūb, to make kings and prophets among his progeny and turn the circumcision a mark of his covenant with God.

78 See Ibn Qayyīm al-Jauziyya, ibid. pp. 131, 157: ...fa-lā yajibu khitānū l-ma‘yyītī bi-ttīfaqi l-imāma; wa-hal yustahabbū fa-jumhūrū ahli l-fīli mi ‘alā annahu l-yustahabbū, wa-huwa qawlu l-a’immati l-arba‘ātī, wa-dhakara baddu l-a’immati l-mutau‘akkhirīna annahu mustahabbū...
... and he was born circumcised ..."

The day recommended for the performance of circumcision is the seventh or eighth day after birth. Some scholars, however, had some reservation as to the circumcision on the seventh day after birth, because this is the time of the circumcision prescribed for the Jewish children. The circumcision may, however, be delayed up to forty days from birth, or even until the seventh year of the child's life.

There were, in fact, different opinions concerning the desirable age for the circumcision: some scholars argued that it is not permissible to circumcise a boy before he reaches his tenth year. It is at that age that a boy is punishable for not observing the prayer. Circumcision causes more pain than the punishment of beating caused by neglecting the obligatory prayer and should therefore be delayed until that age. According to one tradition people did not circumcise their children before the age of puberty. Ibn 'Abbās was circumcised at that age: at the death of the Prophet he was fifteen years old and was already circumcised.

It was indeed Ibn 'Abbās who related that the people of the Jāhiliyya used to circumcise their children when they reached puberty.
Some scholars, however, held fast to the tradition of circumcision on the seventh day after birth.\(^{85}\)

Fātima is said to have ordered to circumcise her children on the seventh day after birth.\(^{86}\) The Prophet is said to have circumcised al-Hasan and Ḥusayn on the seventh day.\(^{87}\) An accepted opinion was that there was no designated time for circumcision.\(^{88}\)

A widely circulated tradition was that Ibrāhīm circumcised his son, Ishāq, when he was seven days old, and his son Ismā'īl when he was thirteen years old. The time of circumcision of each of the two, Ishāq and Ismā'īl, became a sunna followed by the descendants of that son.\(^{89}\)

Many cases of death caused by circumcision raised the problem to what extent the circumciser or the man who took the decision to circumcise was responsible in cases of cold, heat or weakness of the child.\(^{90}\)

The opinion of the scholars concerning the circumcision of the converts to Islam was unanimous: the circumcision was a necessary condition. The Prophet is said to have stated: *man aslama fa-l-yakhtatin wa-in kana kabiran.*

Another tradition, an utterance of the Prophet found allegedly in the scabbard of his sword, says that an uncircumcised person should not be left in Islam unless he would undergo circumcision even if he were eighty years old.\(^{91}\)

Circumcision was compulsory for embracing Islam. The convert had to per-
form circumcision even if he was of advanced age. The Prophet is said to have formulated this in the following utterance: *man aslama fa-l-yukhtatan wa-in kāna kabīrān*.

Another utterance of the Prophet, found allegedly in the scabbard of his sword, is even more explicit: a convert should not be left in the fold of Islam until he undergoes circumcision, even if he is eighty years old. "Eighty years" is, of course, an allusion to the age at which Abraham performed his circumcision.

Some scholars of Muslim Law were of the opinion that an old convert should undergo circumcision even if this might bring about his death.

A convert cannot be counted as a member of the Muslim community before his circumcision: his prayer is not accepted, he is not permitted to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, he will not be allowed to act as witness in court, the believers are not allowed to eat the meat of an animal slaughtered by him.

There were, however, some scholars who held the opinion that circumcision should be delayed in case the child is weak or ill and it may endanger its life. The same applies to circumcision of an old person: if it endangers his life, the practice has to be considered void and the convert should be freed from this ritual.

According to Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya this opinion conforms to the consensus of the Muslim scholars, with slight exceptions.

A test case for this attitude is in the story of the converts of Kaskar. They embraced Islam and declared that they were Muslims. The governor of Basra

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92 Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya, *Tuhfatu l-maudūd*, p. 128. This tradition, transmitted on the authority of al-Zuhri, is *mursal*, and is marked by scholars of *hadith* as "very weak," *fa-maṣūlī l-zuhriyyī ‘inda hum min aqṣāfī l-marāsīlī, lā tasluḥū bī-l-iḥtiṣāj*; see Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya, ibid. p. 133. And see Fadlullāh l-Jilānī, *Fadlul l-liḥšī l-samād*, II, 675, no. 1252; al-Bukhārī records a tradition on the authority of al-Zuhri saying that a convert should perform circumcision even if he was aged. The commentator emphasizes the dangers of circumcision of an old person.


94 Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya, *Tuhfatu l-maudūd*, p. 130, sup.


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ordered to check whether they were circumcised and commanded to circumcise those who were not. This was in autumn (ṣītā), and some of them died (because of the cold). Al-Ḥasan al- Başrī was displeased by the governor's action and remarked with anger that at the time of the Prophet many Abyssinians, Byzantines and Persians embraced Islam without the Prophet ordering to search them.98

The problem of compulsory circumcision of converts to Islam was a controversial theme even in later periods of Islam. In the period of ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīẓ the people of Khurāsān flocked to embrace Islam in order to be freed from payment of jīzya. Some people advised the governor, al-Jarrāḥ b. ʿAbdallah, to put as a stipulation that they should undergo circumcision. ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīẓ being asked about this ordered the governor to desist from forcing circumcision as a condition for conversion to Islam. "God sent the prophet Muḥammad and entrusted him to summon people to embrace Islam. He did not send him as circumciser."99

The controversy as to circumcision as a compulsory condition for conversion to Islam is reflected in the polemics between the scholars of Islam.100 The contradictory views of the scholars are reflected in the chapter of ʿAbd al-Razzāq's al-Muṣannaf, dealing with the problem of eating the meat of an animal slaughtered by uncircumcised believers.101 Ibn ʿAbbās is said to have regarded the slaughter of uncircumcised believers as reprehensible. The testimony of such people at court should not be accepted and their prayer is void. This opinion of Ibn ʿAbbās was contradicted by al-Ḥasan (al- Başrī) and by Ḥammād (b. Salama). According to Ḥammād there is nothing wrong in the slaughter of an uncircumcised believer; he is permitted to give evidence in court and his prayer is valid. Al-Ḥasan was of the opinion that circumcision of an aged convert should be avoided if this may endanger his life, and that there is nothing wrong in consuming the meat of an animal slaughtered by him.102 Females captured in military operations, willing to embrace Islam, were entrusted to women who performed circumcision and were duly purified, i.e., circumcised.103 A con-

100 See e.g. Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya, Tuḥfatu l-maudūd, pp. 127—141.
102 ʿAbd al-Razzāq, op. cit., IV, 473—4, no. 8562.
103 Fadlullahi l-Jllānī, Fadlu lāḥi l-ṣamad, II, 669, nos. 1245, 1249. And see Ibn Ḥajār, al-ʿIsāba, VIII, 313, no. 12274.
troversial subject was the attendance of parties arranged on the occasion of circumcision. According to tradition, some of the Companions of the Prophet spurned attending such parties, while others arranged parties and even invited singers to comfort the circumcised boys and to alleviate their pain. According to an utterance attributed to the Prophet he recommended to arrange a party on the occasion of circumcision, *wallmatu l-řdhār*.

There were some unusual situations discussed in the sources. Among them was the case of a man with two active penises, and that of a hermaphrodite.

It may be useful to draw the reader's attention to a few observations on the traditions concerning circumcision in the Arab peninsula during the period of the Jāhiliyya, on the utterances of the Prophet as to the obligatory character of this ritual practice, and on the conflicting opinions of the scholars of ḥadīth and religious Law connected with the implementation of the injunction.

According to early Muslim tradition, circumcision was one of the tenets of the faith of Ibrāhīm. This assumption is reflected in the reports about the practices of the people of the *fitra* and the people who observed the *sunan ibrāhīm*. Muslim scholars presumed that the unbelievers in the period of the Jāhiliyya abode by the *sunan ibrāhīm*. They acted according to the ritual practices followed by Ibrāhīm; these were the *baqāyah din ibrāhīm*, "the last tenets of the faith of Ibrāhīm" observed by the unbelievers in Mecca. Some Muslim scholars assumed that the Prophet himself shared with his people, the Quraysh, the ritual practices which originated in the tenets and principles of the faith of Ibrāhīm and Išmā'īl. They formulated it in a significant definition: *kāna ʿalā dīnī ibrāhīm*.

Circumcision, one of the ritual practices of the faith of Ibrāhīm, became a feature distinguishing the Arab population of the peninsula and they were called *ummatu l-khitān*.

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The *sunan ibrāhīm* were adopted in Islam and became *sunan al-islām*. Circumcision became a compulsory condition for converts to Islam. Scholars considered it as a mark of Islam; some of them were of the opinion that it denoted servitude of the believer and his bondage to God, a visible sign that the believer carried out God's injunction. This is reminiscent of the Jewish idea of circumcision, according to which it is a sign of the covenant between God and His people.

Circumcision is said to have been imposed on males and females alike. Some scholars advocated, however, the idea that females may be treated with certain leniency, basing their opinion on the utterance of the Prophet: *al-khitānu sunnatun li-l-riāli makrumatun li-l-nisā‘i*, “circumcision is an obligatory ritual practice for men, a virtuous deed for women.”

As to the circumcision of males, there was a clear tendency to avoid any thought that it had been influenced by the Jewish practice.

The early reports concerning circumcision state plainly that the Arabs were not influenced by their Jewish neighbours in that ritual practice.

Similarly scholars bade to refrain from following the Jewish date of the circumcision on the seventh day after the birth of the child.

A heated discussion concerning the problem whether the Prophet was born circumcised indicates that some scholars assumed that his circumcision was a miraculous event, following in this matter the traditions about other prophets who were born circumcised. It is noteworthy that in some lists of these prophets the names of some prophets from the Arab peninsula were added. Other scholars maintained that the Prophet’s grandfather, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, took the newborn child from his mother, brought him to the Ka‘ba, circumcised him and named him Muhammad. The tradition which maintains that he acted according to the Arab usage bears evidence that the tendency of the tradition is to stress the Arab custom of circumcision and the activity of the Prophet’s grandfather in a framework of the old Arab tradition.

The simple and modest celebrations of the circumcision in early Islam turned into popular and sometimes sumptuous festivities in the various countries of the Muslim empire.108

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108 See e.g. *EI*, s.v. khitān.