

# **Circumcision in the Old Testament**

*versus*

## **The New Creation in the New Testament**

*During the time of the feasts of the Nativity, the Coptic church celebrates a special feast on the eighth day concerning the circumcision of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Father Matta often wrote about this subject, one of his articles is this article written back in 1998. Enjoy!*

“For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal 6:15 RSV).

**C**IRCUMCISION in the Old Testament was “God’s covenant in Abraham’s flesh.” It was also applied in his descendants after him: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:13).

In its sacred concept, circumcision was limited to the cutting off of the eight-days-old male foreskin. In other words, as explained by Paul the apostle, it was the removal, in the physical sense, of sin from the flesh.

However, circumcision in the Old Testament was not a gift nor did it offer any power of grace for life and spiritual behavior. This was because sin existed in the flesh, exerting a power greater than human willpower. Thus mankind was enslaved by sin, as seen in Paul the Apostle’s words:

“We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. ... Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ... There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (through the resurrection from the dead) has set me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom 7:14-15, 17, 20, 24, 25; 8:1, 2).

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gift of the spirit of life has superseded the flesh with its inherent sin. It consequently has superseded the operation of circumcision in the flesh, which had not given any power against sin. In fact it superseded the law of Moses.

This counterpart to circumcision is wonderful. Abraham was still uncircumcised at the time when he believed in God, and God counted his faith as righteousness. Then Abraham was given the sign of circumcision as God's seal on his faith. We read in Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

“Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after but before he was circumcised. He received circumcision as a sign or seal  $\sigma\phi\rho\rho\alpha\gamma\iota\delta\alpha$  of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom 4: 9-11).

Circumcision in Abraham's flesh represented a physical indication that Abraham had received the state of righteousness from God without having fulfilled any scriptural works.

The new creation was given by God to whoever believes in Him and in His work through Christ. God offered Him up to death to bear our sins in His flesh. In doing so he made atonement for everyone's sins with His blood on the cross. He annulled mankind's sin and paid the penalty of death and the curse. In Him man rose from death as a new creation, prevailing over sin and death and inheriting a new eternal life with Him:

“For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

Faith in Christ, his death and his resurrection reaches us today. We read that, while we are still in the old flesh, dead in our sins and defiled by our deeds, “Even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:5-9). This faith in Christ grants to us a state of righteousness on the same level as Christ's righteousness. The price tag of this righteousness is the new creation, which Christ presented with his resurrection. It represents the seal of the righteousness of faith in the same way that Abraham was considered circumcised though he was still uncircumcised, meaning in a sinful state of the flesh without works! With the death and the resurrection of Christ the old flesh in all its sins was completely annulled:

“We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom 6:6).

“O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Cor 15:55, 56).

He completely destroyed the old flesh. From ancient times, all the way back to Adam's sin, the penalty was being imposed. But with the resurrection from the dead, the era of the old flesh came to an end. Being made of dust and having failed to please God, the old

flesh was replaced and therefore removed from God's wrath. When Christ was crucified he fulfilled the penalty and curse of death. Having reconciled God to mankind, Christ rose in His body from the dead and raised us with him. Through His flesh, Christ presented a new body as the new spiritual creation from heaven. This was done through His flesh and bones, which He showed His disciples after the resurrection. Thus the new creation of mankind was born through the resurrection of Christ for eternal life.

Thus the new spiritual man as a new creation before God replaced circumcision, which was annulled with the old creation.

However, in St Paul's mind, circumcision remained the symbol representing the removal of the sinful part of man's flesh. He used it to describe the complete removal of the old nature with its sins by taking on the new creation through the resurrection from the dead:

"Seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Col 3:9, 10).

Christ created man anew through His resurrection from the dead. We should note that man is made in the image of His creator, which grows from glory to glory by the Holy Spirit, but the image of God which Adam took on in the first creation was disintegrated and effaced through sin.

A Jew in origin, St Paul's point of view on circumcision underwent a profound transformation, to the extent that he considered the entire new creation and new circumcision to be done without hands, heavenly. It annulled the circumcision of the flesh:

"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11).

St Paul also considered that the baptism of water and the Holy Spirit produced the same effect on us as our death and resurrection from the dead with Christ:

"And you were buried in him with baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2:12).

Taking into consideration that burial in the waters of baptism gives us the same sacramental death as Christ's, then his resurrection after being buried in the water offers us the same sacrament of resurrection with Christ.

Springing from his Jewish origin, St Paul understood that the new creation replaced circumcision. It is through this truth that we realize the actual theological depth of the new creation within the range of the covenant. Circumcision represented the ultimate worth of any Jew, for through it he gained belonging to the great Jehovah and membership among His chosen people. Therefore, the uncircumcised was refused by God and His people. The theological and social value of circumcision in the Old Testament reached no further than this.

For this reason, the value of the new creation was of great importance to St Paul. For it is the sign of the new covenant. It belongs to Jehovah alone, yet its essence is granted to whoever has believed and accepted his death and resurrection with Christ. Not only that, but the new creation in Jesus Christ is so comprehensive that it annuls not just circumcision but also the old covenant, with its signs, offerings, rituals and laws. This is the essence of Paul the Apostle's words when he says that there is no circumcision in Jesus Christ, rather, a new creation.

Prior to the new creation in Christ, the siege of circumcision was set against the nations. But with the new creation, all men were able to become members, without discrimination, in the inheritance of God's only Son and to become His chosen people. This was the mystery that had been hidden until the time that God revealed it to Paul the Apostle. Paul, in turn, spread the gospel among the nations, declaring that there is no longer a circumcision, Sabbath or law to follow. Everything has been made new. Whoever believes in the death and resurrection of Christ for his sins has been forgiven. The contract with mankind was destroyed in its entirety, being nailed to the cross with the nailing of the flesh. He himself took the penalty and the curse of death for whoever believed in Him. He offered mankind the new creation through his resurrection.

Accordingly, whoever believes but does not accept the new creation, for him God's wrath remains on him, as do his sin and the penalty of death and its curse. Circumcision or uncircumcision, both have become useless. Happily, the opposite is true for the one who believes and has faith in Christ. He gains, in Him, the new creation by sharing the death and resurrection. This is the new circumcision without hands, to remove the flesh of sin with its works and to put on the new that is renewed in knowledge according to the image of his creator. He takes pride, not with the fleshly pride of the Jew in his circumcision, but with the pride of him who has become, with this new creation through Christ, higher than all the other heavenly creatures.

The thing I want to emphasize to the reader in the analogy between the new creation in Christ and Abraham's circumcision is that it is completely free of charge. In fact, in the original Greek δωρεάν means 'gift.' In the same way that God gave Abraham circumcision for free as a seal or "godly sign" for the righteousness of his faith in God, so also God gave mankind in the New Testament a new creation freely to whoever believes in Christ as a reward for his faith.

**The righteousness God offered man for his faith is a gift and a work of grace:**

"They are justified by his grace as a gift δωρεάν, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation (an offering of atonement on the cross) by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness (God's righteousness through Jesus Christ for whoever believes in the New Testament), because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time (the New Testament) that he himself is righteous (God's righteousness for

the new man) and that he (God) justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:24-26).

With his statement in Romans 3:27, Paul concludes the comparison between the righteousness given to Abraham because he believed in God and was given circumcision as a seal and the righteousness given to anyone in the New Testament who has believed in the blood of Christ and was given the new creation as a seal:

“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith” (Rom 3:27).

Here St Paul reaches a brilliant conclusion in his analogy between circumcision in the Old Testament and the new creation in the New Testament:

“That is why his faith was ‘reckoned to him as righteousness’. But the words, ‘it was reckoned to him’, were written not for his (Abraham’s) sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him, that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death, for our trespasses (to be forgiven) and raised for our justification (through offering the new creation)” (Rom 4:23-26).

It is important to mention some additional points St Paul makes concerning the analogy between circumcision and the new creation.

When Abraham believed God he created within himself a living nucleus to God’s glory. God rewarded him by giving him a state of righteousness. In other words he granted him a justification δικαιοσύνην before God similar to him who has been tested and has passed the test.

It is thus for whoever believes in Christ. For God offered Christ as an offering of atonement for man’s sins on the cross. He resurrected Him to justify the sinful before God. With this faith man creates a living nucleus within himself to God’s glory, which he himself has attained. In atonement for his sins, he accepts the work of Christ’s death in his flesh, and for his justification in his resurrection. He becomes justified before God: “Who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

It is a new and powerful truth that faith in Christ created in man a living fellowship in the work of Christ: faith in death creates in man a fellowship in death, and faith in the resurrection creates in man a fellowship in the resurrection.

The reward of faith in Christ is equal to Abraham’s reward for his faith.

Faith in both cases created righteousness that reflects itself on mankind. Abraham’s righteousness was revealed through circumcision as a work of justification. With Christ the work of justification is revealed in the new creation.

“It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).

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