

4. Circumcision of the heart in Deuteronomy 30:6

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The book of Deuteronomy is of great importance in understanding the message of the Old Testament. This is true both for the approach that this book is the keystone of the Pentateuch and for the approach of the Former Prophets in which the influence on the following biblical books (Joshua–2 Kings) is present (Otto 2019). There are also all kinds of interfaces with the Latter Prophets.

In his farewell speech, in the fields of Moab, Moses speaks about the entering of the promised land and the obedience of the Israelites to the covenant between YHWH and Israel. The end of the book also mentions that Israel might be expelled from this land. Moses gives the promise that God will bring them back to the land if the Israelites repent of their wrongdoing. He will also circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants (Deut. 30:1–6).

This article focuses on the meaning of the expression “circumcision of the heart.” What does this metaphor mean in the context of the book? Associated views on human nature and future expectations are also discussed.

Circumcision

This metaphor goes back to the literal practice. The origin of the practice of circumcision in Israel is mentioned in Genesis 17:9–14. God confirmed his covenant with Abram and promised him many offspring. The sign of the covenant will be a natural phenomenon, such as the rainbow (Gen. 9:13), but a physical intervention in all men and in the future in all male children once they reach eight days old. Anyone who refuses circumcision of the foreskin of the male sex organ shall be considered a breaker of the covenant and shall be severely punished. The question of why circumcision was chosen as a sign is not dealt with in this book.

Circumcision was known to various peoples in the Ancient Near East and is therefore not a completely new practice. It seems to have been chiefly a marriage or fertility rite that was carried out either at puberty or as part of the prenuptial ceremony (Williamson 2003, 122). The Shechemites and Philistines were an exception (Gen. 34; 1 Sam. 17:26). It is likely that for Abram the practice was connected with offspring, which was dependent on God's blessing. What is new is the very young age at which boys undergo the ritual.

Most descriptions and images of circumcision from Antiquity have been preserved in Egypt. These depictions show that the age of circumcision was usually between 6 and 14 years of age, while textual evidence makes it clear that circumcision was reserved and obligatory for the king and those serving in his court (i.e., priests and royal family members). Many Egyptians of the lower classes remained uncircumcised, a surprising discovery if circumcision was a general rite imposed on all Egyptian pubescent males entering puberty and adulthood. Ancient Egyptian circumcision rites seem to have been a sign of admission into the company of those who belonged to the family and household of the god (Meade 2014, 2016). This meaning fits well in the context of a covenant, a sign that one is devoted to God. Other motives, such as ritual purity, are also possible (Ruwe 2014, 77–8).

Metaphor

Literal circumcision is often mentioned in the Bible, but there is also evidence of figurative use. In the latter case, circumcision functions as a figure of speech that allows comparison with an otherwise unrelated concept.

Inventory yields the following texts in the Old Testament (Derouchie 2004):

- Exodus 6:12, 30 Moses considers himself as a person with uncircumcised lips
- Leviticus 19:23 The prohibition of eating the fruit of a new tree for the first three years, during which it is regarded as uncircumcised fruit with a foreskin
- Leviticus 26:41 Israel has an uncircumcised heart
- Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6 Circumcision of (the foreskin) of the heart
- Jeremiah 4:4 Circumcision for YHWH and removal of the foreskin of the heart

- Jeremiah 6:10 The ears of the Israelites are uncircumcised
- Jeremiah 9:25 The Israelites are uncircumcised in heart
- Ezekiel 44:7, 9 Foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, in the temple.

In these examples, being uncircumcised means that there are certain obstacles that need to be removed. This applies to fruit trees as well as to speaking and listening. A “foreskin” (*ʾorlâ*) must be removed. In biblical anthropology, the heart (*lêb*) is considered a center of human reason and will, responsible for making decisions and choices (Janowski 2019, 148–57), and several of the texts point to problems with Israel’s heart. An outer covering makes the heart unable and unwilling to respond to God’s words. Therefore, removal of this covering is necessary.

Composition of Deuteronomy

Before we focus on the two texts in Deuteronomy about the circumcision of the heart, it is good to first consider the structure of the book. It can be displayed as:

- Part 1: Title: introduction (1:1–5).
- Part 2: Historical prologue: remembering God’s grace in history (1:6–4:43). After Moses’ retrospective view, there is a threat of expulsion from the land. The possibility of grace after the penalty is mentioned (4:25–31).
- Part 3: Basic stipulations of the covenant: the Ten Commandments and showing love to YHWH (4:44–11:32).
- Part 4: Detailed stipulations: a program living with YHWH in Canaan (chs. 12–26).
- Part 5: Sanctions: blessings and curses of the covenant (chs. 27–30).
- Part 6: Farewell and succession of Moses (chs. 31–34; cf. Paul 2018).

For centuries, Moses was considered the author of the book of Deuteronomy. However, many researchers in the 19th and 20th centuries began to argue instead that the book originated only in the time of the kings of Israel. They emphasized Deuteronomy’s relationship with the Reformation of King Josiah (2 Kings 22), and in doing so, gave rise to questions about the extent of the original text discovered in the temple and the identity of any later additions. The legal texts (chs. 12–26) were often considered to be the oldest, while the introductions, the provisions on blessings and curses, and the succession of Moses were assigned a later date. Based on the view that experiences can be represented in the form

of prophecies by Moses (*vaticini ex eventu*), sections on the exile and return could therefore not be written until after the Babylonian exile. However, other researchers believe there is evidence for a much earlier dating, as is suggested by the book itself. That approach has been reinforced by the discovery of vassal treaties in the Ancient Near East, especially the discovery of Hittite treaties from the 14th century BCE. Deuteronomy appears to have significant similarities with the structure and themes of those treaties, although the Bible book is not a treaty document in the strict sense of the word, but is composed of speeches (cf. Paul 1988; for an overview of recent scholarship and evaluations, see Van Bekkum 2022).

Deuteronomy 10:16

The first text in Deuteronomy in which circumcision is mentioned is 10:16. In the preceding chapters, Moses warns the Israelites and admonishes them to live according to the Torah. Chapter 9 describes Israel as suffering from serious problems: Israel is rebellious and disobedient (9:7–8, 23–24), unbelieving (v. 23), and “stiff-necked” (vv. 6, 13). After Moses prays to Him, God is willing to carry on with Israel; however, it is still necessary to address the problems. That is why God says: “And now, Israel, what does YHWH your God ask of you but to fear YHWH your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love Him, to serve YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe YHWH’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (10:12–13). After a reference to God’s love and election, the exhortation is: “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (v. 16). This fits into the structure of the passage. In fact, it forms the center.

- a) Exhortation to loyal devotion, expressed in five verbs (vv. 12–13) + YHWH is praised (vv. 14–15).
- b) Exhortation to loyal devotion, expressed in two verbs: circumcise and do not be stiff-necked (v. 16) + YHWH is praised (vv. 17–18).
- c) Exhortation to loyal devotion, expressed in five verbs (vv. 19–20) + YHWH is praised (vv. 21–22).

Werner Lemke has cast doubt on the originality of Deuteronomy 10:16, but he does not supply a reason why a later redactor would insert this verse into the narrative flow (Lemke 2003, 300–3). The verse nicely fits in this context (Meade 2014, 73–4).

The metaphorical circumcision should have a significant impact on the attitude of the Israelites, both men and women (Goldingay 2000; Dziadosz 2019), towards YHWH and his commandments. The circumcision of the heart should be understood as an activity analogical to the actual circumcision (removal of the foreskin), but one that is performed within the mental and volitional activity of a human being. Circumcision of the flesh is not enough, and it is not mentioned in Deuteronomy as an identity marker (Block 2017, 356–8). In this context, we can explain the metaphor as removal of the obstacles to serving God. The Israelites are called to fear God, to follow his ways, to love Him, to serve Him with heart and soul, and to observe the commandments (10:12–13). This seems possible in itself, but against the background of Chapter 9, doubts may arise as to whether the entire populace will manage to keep these requirements. While the commandment indicates the possibility of Israel’s compliance, it also, at this point in Israel’s history, lacked underlying empowerment. In Deuteronomy, many arguments are used to convince the Israelites, but it does not seem easy for them to circumcise their hearts.

Deuteronomy 30:1–14

In the first verse of Chapter 30, Moses says: “When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever YHWH your God disperse you among the nations, . . .” Blessings and curses have been presented in the preceding chapters (chs. 27 and 28). Among the blessings is living safely in the land (28:1–14). The curses speak of being defeated by their enemies and of the Israelites being taken into exile (28:32, 36, 41). “Then YHWH will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other” (v. 64). The speech in Chapter 30 presupposes that there may be good periods and times of blessing, but sooner or later there will also come a time when the aforementioned curses will come into force and Israel will be scattered among the nations. This negative expectation is also reflected in the intervening Chapter 29, in which Moses talks about the renewal of the covenant in the land of Moab (vv. 9–14 [ET 10–5]) and about the past. There is also a grave warning that God’s wrath will ignite in the event of transgression. When the heart hardens, no peace will follow (v. 18 [ET 19]). The land of Canaan will be comparable to Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 22 [ET 23]) because of all the disasters, and the inhabitants will be taken away to other countries (v. 27 [ET 28]). The chapter

contains an exhortation to be faithful but draws attention to a fundamental problem: “But to this day YHWH has not given you a heart that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear” (v. 3 [ET 4]). This makes it clear that there is a fundamental problem among the Israelites and that Moses expects that the threats will be realized. Therefore, 30:1 is a comment that indicates a correlation between the preceding verses and the next section (McConville 2002, 413, 423).

The punishment does not mean the end of the relationship between God and Israel. In the period of exile, both repentance and renewed obedience to the stipulations of the covenant are possible (30:2). Verses 1 and 2 should be taken as subordinate clauses to verse 3, and it then follows that the clause *wēhāyâ kî* introduces the subordinate clause. It happens more often that the word *kî* introduces a subordinate clause, followed by an imperfect form (such as Ps. 23:4). However, some interpreters are of the opinion that the clause *wēhāyâ kî* introduces a principal sentence. This difference in approach has consequences for the interpretation of the text: in the first case, conversion is a condition for removing the curse, and in the second case, conversion of the Israelites is part of God’s work. Due to the aforementioned grammatical argument, the first view is preferred. Another advantage of this view is that it links in to Deuteronomy 28, where obedience is a condition for recovery.

The theme of repentance has already been mentioned in the historical prologue (4:27–31). There the possibility of being scattered among the nations is mentioned, as is the possibility of repentance. Deuteronomy 30 clearly states that as a consequence, God will have compassion and gather the Israelites from distant lands and bring them back to the land of their fathers (30:3–5). With this hopeful message, the question arises as to how the new restored situation might be any different from the old, the one that produced such wretched and apparently inevitable results. This, indeed, is the central problem posed by Deuteronomy, and we are therefore close to the heart of what may properly be called Deuteronomistic theology. In addressing the problem, Deuteronomy shows that it espouses no simplistic answer. While the Israelites are characterized as “stiff-necked” (9:6; 10:16; 31:27) and the song of Moses (Deut. 31–32) is pessimistic about their behavior, God also promises to circumcise their hearts. In 10:16 the admonition to circumcise the heart was given, but in 30:6 a shift occurs: YHWH Himself declares that He will take the initiative in this respect. This results in Israel’s ability to obey the exhortation to love Him with all their heart and soul (an exhortation first made at 6:4–5).

Deuteronomy 30:7–10 repeats the conversion of the people, their obedience, and God’s gift of blessings. This passage about YHWH’s initiative in enabling Israel to be faithful is followed by one that contains the most explicit statement in the whole book regarding their ability to obey his commands (30:11–14). There are two interpretive options regarding these verses and their relationship to the preceding section: (a) Verses 11–14 return the reader to the present and teach that the Torah is not too difficult for Israel to keep; (b) Verses 11–14 continue to describe the future reality of verses 1–10 and therefore highlight that keeping the Torah will be easier after circumcision of the heart and future return from exile. The first option is commonly found in the commentaries, but in recent years many arguments have been made for the second option (Coxhead 2006; Meade 2014, 75–8; see however Otto 2017, 2071–3).

Deuteronomy 30:6

The promise in 30:6 and the context resemble the exhortation in chapter 10. Note the parallels:

Deuteronomy 10:12–22	Deuteronomy 30:1–10
to love Him (10:12)	you will love Him (30:6)
with all your heart and with all your soul (10:12)	with all your heart and with all your soul (30:2, 6, 10)
to keep YHWH’s commands and statutes (10:13)	to keep his commands and statutes (30:10)
which I am giving you today (10:13)	which I am commanding you today (30:2)
for good (10:13)	for good (30:9)
your fathers (10:15, 22)	your fathers (30:5, 9)
affection to forefathers (10:15)	delighted in forefathers (30:9)
numerous (10:22)	numerous (30:5)
circumcise the foreskin of your heart (10:16)	YHWH will circumcise your heart (30:6)

The message is that God Himself is going to do what He first asked of the Israelites. Chapter 30 indicates that the Israelites should take events to heart if they are scattered (v. 1). Intended is a condition, as in 4:29. The conversion in verses 2, 8, and 10 involves a change of behavior and,

in concrete terms, indicates a renewed obedience to God's commands. The repentance of the people also means that God will return his people to their land. He will do good to his people. One of the most important blessings is that He promises to circumcise the hearts of the Israelites and their descendants. Not only in the generation that returns but also in later generations, the fundamental problem of disobedience will be tackled. Circumcision makes it possible for the Israelites to love YHWH their God with all their hearts and with all their souls. The obstacles mentioned earlier are eliminated, and in this way, the old situation is prevented from repeating itself. It means that a time of salvation is coming in which Israel experiences all kinds of blessings and can "live." It is a life in God's favor and according to his intentions (Deut. 5:3; 16:20; 30:16, 19, 20; 32:47; cf. Lev. 18:5).

Relationship of God and Israel

In the Old Testament, several covenants between God and men are mentioned: with Noah, Abram, Israel, Levi, and David. God gave many more promises to people, but only in a few cases did He confirm these promises with a covenant. We can characterize a covenant as an official agreement to seal a relationship between certain parties (Williamson 2007, 57, 75–6; Gentry and Wellum 2012, 151–2). This description is important because it follows that the relationship between YHWH and his people involves more than a covenant. The covenant with Israel in Exodus (Exod. 24 and the renewal in Exod. 34) and the elaboration in Deuteronomy did not replace the promises to the patriarchs but contributed to their realization. As such, the Mosaic covenants are an elaboration of the Abrahamic covenant. The sanctions against the breaking of covenants come to the fore in the texts concerning the covenant curses (Lev. 26 and Deut. 28). Despite the warnings, God's unconditional faithfulness is highlighted even here. This is presented as the realization of many earlier promises to the forefathers and the covenant with them (Deut. 4:31; 9:5, 27; 30:9). Even after the promise of a future circumcision, the expectation of Moses is negative, and he foretells the breaking of the covenant (31:16, 20). Yet this breach is not an end to the relationship; God's grace – if the people repent (cf. Vlach 2016) – can be received again in the future. The striking thing about 30:6 is that the hearts of the people are renewed, and a beneficial future is made possible.

A similar message is found in Leviticus 26:41. At the end of the book, blessings and curses are mentioned. Among the curses is that Israel will be exiled. "I will then scatter you among the nations" (26:32). The

verses that follow describe the terrible consequences. Then a change occurs in verse 40: when the Israelites confess their iniquity and that of their ancestors, God will remember his covenant with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. In this context, the expression that is used is that their uncircumcised heart will be humbled, although it does not mention how the heart will be humbled. The Niphal passive (*yikkāna*; v. 41) most likely indicates that it is YHWH who will do this. The promises in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 4 do not exclude a repetition of failure and exile, but the promise in Deuteronomy 30:6 creates a fundamental change as an eschatological event (Otto 2017, 2071).

In this context, it is also good to point out that Leviticus and Deuteronomy appeal to the whole nation. Not every Israelite believes and obeys in the same way. A flashback to the story of the spies in Canaan indicates that many were infidels and that only Caleb and Joshua behaved differently (Deut. 1:22–38). Their attitude of faith and trust can be considered a form of circumcision of the heart, as requested in Deuteronomy 10:16, but one that is not yet equal to the promised circumcision of the heart promised in 30:6 (Block 2017, 370).

The Latter Prophets

The theology of the book of Deuteronomy has exerted great influence on prophetic writings.

The prophet Hosea is very critical of the behavior of Israel. One of his sons received the name Lo-Ammi, “not my people” (Hos. 1:9). However, in the next chapter YHWH declares his love (2:23). In the last chapter He promises an inward change: “I will heal their waywardness” (14:4).

The prophet Jeremiah is familiar with the symbolic meaning of circumcision. He calls for circumcision for YHWH and removal of the foreskin of the heart (Jer. 4:4). He mentions that the ears of the Israelites are uncircumcised (6:10) and that the Israelites are uncircumcised in heart (9:25). According to the prophet, it is in his time that the post-exodus covenant with Israel has been broken (11:8, 10; 22:9; 31:32). The breach of the covenant incurs a punishment, but the relationship does not end as a result of this. YHWH maintains his promises even in the very midst of judgment, and He promises a new covenant with the internalized obedience described in Deuteronomy 30. God wants to give them a heart to obey Him (Jer. 24:7). He promises to give them a new covenant, saying, “I will give my Torah within them, and will write it in your heart” (31:33; cf. 32:39–40). The direct consequence is that God will never turn his back on Israel as long as the cosmos exists (31:35–37; cf. 33:25–26).

The prophet Ezekiel foretells many disasters for Judah and Jerusalem, especially in the first part of his book. However, in Chapter 36, a restoration and a return from exile are prophesied (Ezek. 36:24). Ezekiel also foretells that YHWH will cleanse his people of all impurities, that He will give them a new heart and a new spirit, and that He will remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. He will put his Spirit in them, and as a consequence, they will follow his decrees and keep his laws (vv. 25–27). The prophet is acquainted with the metaphorical usage, as he speaks about foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, in the temple (44:7, 9).

These three prophets use different terms to describe how God will grant an inner renewal through which the people will serve and obey Him. During the exercise of punishment, the relationship remains unbroken, and there will be a new period in which past disobedience will no longer be practiced.

Qumran and New Testament

The Qumran authors emphasized the spiritual interpretation of circumcision. The Rule of the Community (1QS v 5) states the need to circumcise the foreskin of the evil inclination and stiffness of neck, while the Habakkuk Peshet (1QpHab xi 13) refers to the circumcising of the foreskin of the heart. The Hymns mention uncircumcised lips (1QH x 18) and an uncircumcised ear (1QH xxi 5). In the text “Bless, O my soul” (4Q434 fr. 1 i 4), the author says God has circumcised the foreskin of their hearts. See also Jubilees 1:23, which combines the circumcision of their hearts and their children’s hearts with the creation of a holy spirit.

In the New Testament Stephen considers his audience as “stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears” (Acts 7:51). The apostle Paul points to the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Rom. 2:29). He also mentions the putting off of the sinful nature, describing it as a circumcision performed not by the hands of men but by Christ (Col. 2:11). Both in Deuteronomy and in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the internal orientation of the believers is the central issue. Paul affirmed and built on Moses’ work rather than debunking or subverting him or his teaching (Block 2017, 340, 341, 358).

Biblical Theology

So, the meaning of the metaphorical use of circumcision of the heart is related to removing obstacles in order to serve God. Moses’ message is

one of permanence and pessimism. Sooner or later, disobedience will prevail and exile will result. However, even in this situation, the possibility of repentance remains, with the result that God blesses the people again and renews them inwardly. Apparently, the relationship between God and Israel persists, even during a period of punishment.

This message resonated in later writings (e.g., Neh. 1:8–9), which is why this subject is biblically important. Biblical studies at ETF Leuven try to connect, to draw lines between, the Old and New Testaments. The example of circumcision shows who God is and how He wants to deal with people. On the one hand, He stands for righteousness and punishes more than once. However, that punishment is not intended as an end to the relationship. It is intended to allow for a new beginning. Human responsibility weighs heavily, but eventually He intervenes to realize salvation. As Christians, we see this especially in the coming of Jesus Christ to earth.

In the relationship between the Old and the New Testament, an important question concerns the position of the people of Israel, as salvation has also been granted to other peoples. On the basis of the texts discussed here, there is much to be said for the thesis that God is permanently faithful to the people of Israel (cf. Rom. 9:4). Moreover, Deuteronomy 30 and its related passages also comprise building blocks for pneumatology in systematic theology and spirituality in practical theology and ethics. In this way, both the content and practice of research and education in Old Testament at ETF make it clear that biblical studies are critical to knowing God and to being renewed in order to serve Him better.

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