

# Who Circumcised Abraham?

## Ritual Agency in Jewish Texts

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## Abraham's circumcision

Genesis 17:24,26:

*24. And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. [...] 26. In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son.*

Experiment: what is your first association who circumcised Abraham?

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## Overview

- 1 Cognitive philologies?
- 2 Circumcision and agents: the case of Abraham
- 3 Circumcision and agents: Abraham in midrashim
- 4 Interim summary
- 5 Circumcision and agents: the case of Judaism
- 6 Summary

1 Cognitive philologies?

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## Three goals

- **Cognitive literary criticism:**  
Reading text from angle borrowed from cognitive science.
- **Cognitive approach to history of a text-based religion:**  
Cognitive science contributing to topics in religious studies.
- **Text as data for CSR:**  
Philology contributing to cognitive science.

Additionally:

- **Cognitive modelling:**  
Build formal models for phenomena observed in philology.

Please evaluate my paper along these 3+1 dimensions.

## Further possible goals

- **Neuro-source criticism:**  
Brain mechanisms answering question: why did author write X?
- **Neuro-reception criticism:**  
Brain mechanisms answering question: why did reader read X?

Please do NOT evaluate my paper along these dimensions.

Important discussion points:

- Cognitive approach = neuro-science approach?
- Cognitive approach = evolutionary approach?
- Cognitive approach = mental data processing!

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Analysed along the model of *Lawson and McCauley* (1990):

ACTION	=	circumcision
agent	=	?
patient	=	Abraham
instrument	=	knife
location	=	Plains of Mamre?
time	=	when patient is 99-year-old
...		

Who is the (positional) agent of Abraham's circumcision?

## Searching for an agent of Abraham's circumcision

Who is the (positional) agent of Abraham's circumcision?  
It must be an (ontological) agent.

<i>agent of action</i> <i>"circumcising A"</i>	INERTIA	INCLUDE AGENT	MENTIONED IN CONTEXT	OCKHAM'S RAZOR
∅	*	*		
☞ Abraham				
☞ God				
~ third person			*	
non-human		*		
A and G				*
third and A/G			*	*

# Simulated Annealing for Optimality Theory

<http://www.biroth.hu/sa-ot/>

agent of action	&	Inertia	&	Incl	&	Mentioned	&	Ockham
0	&	1	&		&		&	
A	&		&		&		&	
G	&		&		&		&	
3	&		&		&	1	&	
AG	&		&		&		&	1
A3	&		&		&	1	&	1
G3	&		&		&	1	&	1
AG3	&		&		&	1	&	2

# Simulated Annealing for Optimality Theory

0: A & G & 3

A: 0 & AG & A3

G: 0 & AG & G3

3: 0 & A3 & G3

AG: A & G & AG3

A3: A & 3 & AG3

G3: 3 & G & AG3

AG3: A3 & G3 & AG

Inertia: 3

Incl : 2

Mentioned : 1

Ockham : 0

# Simulated Annealing for Optimality Theory

Results of some experiments:

A	G	3
395	374	31
390	376	34
400	363	37
373	396	31
358	406	36
374	390	36
382	386	32

Other candidates never appearing.

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## Genesis Rabba 49:1

*[Abraham] said in front of Him [God]: “And who is going to circumcise me?” He said: “You, yourself.” Abraham immediately took a knife, he grasped his foreskin and just was to cut it, when he became afraid that he was too old. What did the Holy One Blessed Be He do then? He [God] stretched out his hand, and grasped [Abraham’s foreskin] with him, and only then Abraham cut it. As it is said (Nehemia 9:7-8): “Thou art the LORD the God, who didst choose Abram... [and gavest him the name of Abraham] ... and madest a covenant with him”. It is written madest **with** him, which teaches that the Holy One Blessed Be He was grasping him/it.*

Agent = Abraham, with the help of God.

## Tanhuma, Vayera 2

*Rabbi Isaac Nappaha began the discussion [...] The Holy One, blessed be He, declared: Since I reveal Myself to anyone who brings a burnt offering or a peace offering in order to bless him, who much more so would I reveal Myself to Abraham, who sacrificed himself for Me. Hence, it is said: And the Lord appeared unto Him. R. Aha said: I will prove to you that the Holy One, blessed be He, strengthened Abraham. On the very day he circumcised himself, and while his blood was still flowing, he circumcised Ishmael and all the men of his household.*

Agent = Abraham

(After the translation by Samuel A. Berman, p. 114, with minor changes.)



## Tanhuma Yelammedenu, Lekh lekha 17

*Rabbi Ishmael stated: [...] Abraham sat and wondered how he was to be circumcised, after the Holy One, blessed be He, informed him: I will establish my covenant between Me and thee (Gen. 17:2). What follows this verse? And Abraham fell on his face (ibid., v. 3). Once he fell on his face, the Holy One, blessed be He, indicated that place, and a scorpion bit him there. Forthwith, Abraham found himself circumcised. Whence do we know this? We know it from the verse And God spoke unto him, saying: As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee (ibid., vv. 3-4); that is, behold, thou art [already] circumcised. Furthermore, it is written: In the self-same day was Abraham circumcised (ibid., v. 26). Scripture does not say “he circumcised [himself]” but he was circumcised.*

Miracle: agent =  $\emptyset$  or ??.

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*Reconsider CSR concept of rituals?*

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*Optimality Theoretical account.*

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## Circumcision in Judaism

Is circumcision in Judaism a religious ritual?

Please vote!

## Circumcision in Judaism

ACTION	=	circumcision
agent	=	X
patient	=	Y
instrument	=	knife
...		

Definition of *religious ritual* according to Lawson and McCauley (1990:127):

*Religious actions – including religious rituals – are those in whose structural descriptions action elements from a religious conceptual system instantiate at least one (A) node somewhere within their structures.*

Is it the case?

## Circumcision in Judaism vs. CSR

- Data falsify theory?  
If yes, reformulate definition of rituals in Lawson–McCauley model.

Well, situation is more complex:

- *Theologically correct notion* of circumcision does not agree with definition in Lawson and McCauley (1990).  
NB: Circumcision is one of the 613 commandments.
- *Folk notion* of circumcision closer to L–McC definition.  
NB: Circumcision as *rite of passage* (making someone Jewish).

## Uncircumcised circumcising in the Bible

### Exodus 4:25

*Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.*



## Uncircumcised circumcising in the Bible

### Genesis 34:13ff

*And the sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father deceitfully, and said, because he had defiled Dinah their sister: And they said unto them, We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one that is uncircumcised; [...] If ye will be as we be, that every male of you be circumcised; then will we give our daughters unto you, and we will take your daughters to us, and we will dwell with you, and we will become one people. [...] And unto Hamor and unto Shechem his son hearkened all that went out of the gate of his city; and every male was circumcised, all that went out of the gate of his city.*

Agent = anyone, including women and uncircumcised people.

## Sulchan Arukh, YD 264:1

*Everyone is fit to circumcise, even a woman, a minor and an uncircumcised Jew whose brothers have died due to the circumcision. But if there is an adult Jewish man who knows how to circumcise, then he has priority over all. And there are opinions according to which a woman should not perform a circumcision. [...] But a gentile should not circumcise, even if he is circumcised; yet, if he has circumcised, the circumcision should not be repeated. And to heretic the same applies as to a gentile.*

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# Thank you for your attention!

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