(Not) only the circumcised may circumcise

Theological correctness and intuitive religiosity in Judaism

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Annan ben David: Book of Precepts

(L. Nemoy: Karaite Anthology, p. 20; cf. Harkavy's edition, pp. 78-79)

A man must be circumcised by another man and may not circumcise himself with his own hand, since Scripture says: “And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin” (Gen 17:11). Were the meaning to be that a man may circumcise himself with his own hand, it would have been written, “And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin”; the wording “And ye shall be circumcised” indicates therefore that someone else must circumcise him.
Key concepts of my talk today:

- Reference texts: founding myths, legal codes, etc.
- Rituals
- Agency: who performs actions
- “Levels” of religiosity: institutions, power, doctrines, folk-religiosity, etc.
T. Lawson and R. McCauley
(1990, 2002; in my [re-]interpretation)

• Since 1950s: generative grammars provide recursive finite means to encode infinite sets.

• 1980s: Noam Chomsky’s *thematic role theory*.

• Finite mind representing boundless actions:

• L&McC’s **Action Representation Scheme**:
  • Abstract acts: e.g. *eating, giving, cutting, raining*…
  • Entities: e.g. *John, apple, Snow White, gravity*…
  • Combine these finite sets to represent infinitely many actions (and events and state-of-affairs).
A finite mind representing boundless actions:

- **L&McC’s Action Representation Scheme:**
  - Abstract acts: e.g. *eating, giving, cutting, raining*…
  - Entities: e.g. *John, apple, Snow White, gravity*…
    - Ontological categories: humans, animals, plants, artefacts, natural objects, natural forces, abstract notions, parts of entities, groups of entities, etc.
    - Some of them intrinsically *ontological agents*: will and volition, able to perform goal directed motion.
    - Epistemological categories: real, hypothetical, fictional, counterfactual, culturally postulated…
A finite mind representing boundless actions:

- **L&McC’s Action Representation Scheme:**
- **Example:**
  - Set of acts (# = 3): \{eating, cutting, giving\}
  - Set of entities (# = 3): \{John, Mary, apple\}
  - Generate set of actions (# = huge or $\infty$):
    - John eating an apple; Mary eating an apple;
    - John cutting an apple; John giving Mary an apple; …
    + recursion:
    - Mary giving John the apple that Mary is cutting;
    - Mary eating the apple that has been cut by John who was given an apple by Mary; …
A finite mind representing boundless actions:

- L&McC’s Action Representation Scheme:
  - Abstract acts have slots called *thematic roles*:
    - Agent
    - Patient / undergoer
    - Instrument
    - Recipient
    - Time
    - Place
    - etc.  

(cf. Chomsky’s *theta-roles*)
T. Lawson and R. McCauley (1990, 2002; in my [re-]interpretation)

• L&McC’s **Action Representation Scheme**:
  - Abstract acts have slots called *thematic roles*.
  - Religious rituals: acts with some of their thematic roles being filled in by entities originating in a *religious system*.
• Special-agent rituals vs. other rituals.
• McCauley and Lawson 2002:
  - *tedium effect* if too few special-agent rituals in a ritual system, and then
  - emergence of *splinter groups* predicted.
• McCauley and Lawson 2002:
  • *tedium effect* if too few special-agent rituals in a ritual system, and then
  • emergence of *splinter groups* predicted with more special-agent rituals.

• Biró 2013: Judaism lacks proper special-agent rituals. Hence, splinter group emergence?
  • E.g., *tish* in Hasidic groups: rebbe hands over food.

• What about circumcision?
Thematic structure of circumcision

- **Act:** cutting
- **Agent:** circumciser
- **Patient:** circumcised
- **Instrument:** knife or flint
- **Time:** eighth day after birth
- **Location:** any place

Which thematic role originate from a religious system? Which one is “special”??
(Not) only the circumcised may circumcise: thematic structure of circumcision

Ways of having religious ("special") entities involved in an action (a.k.a. ritual):

- **Direct involvement:**
  - Cult. post. counterint. agent in a thematic slot.

- **Indirect involvement:**
  - CP CI agent enables entity X in a prior ritual, and so X may "stand for" CP CI agent in this ritual.
  - Chain of enabling rituals: CPA -> X -> Y -> Z.
  - Recursive chain of indefinite length:
    
    CPA -> X_1 -> X_2 -> ... -> X_n
The case of circumcision in Judaism:

• Direct involvement:
  – Does God participate in contemporary rituals? No.
  – Did God circumcise Abraham? No.

• Indirect involvement:
  – Recursive chain of indefinite length:
    Only the circumcised may circumcise!

(What about the origin of the chain?)
(Not) only the circumcised may circumcise: thematic structure of circumcision
The case of circumcision in Judaism:

- **Direct involvement:**
  - Does God participate in contemporary rituals? No.
  - Did God circumcise Abraham? No.

- **Indirect involvement:**
  - Recursive chain of indefinite length:
    Only the circumcised may circumcise!
    
    *(What about the origin of the chain?)*
  
  - However: “Everyone is fit to circumcise, even a woman, a minor and an uncircumcised…”
    *(Mishne Tora, Hilkhot Milah 2:1; Sulchan Arukh, YD 264:1.)*
Further ways of having religious (“special”) entities involved in an action (a.k.a. ritual):

- **Direct involvement:**
  not applicable to circumcision.

- **Indirect involvement:**
  not applicable to circumcision, at least not to standard halakhic sources.

- **Enabling conditions** (Biró 2013, cf. ritual bath):
  Patient of circumcision satisfies recursive enabling condition (viz. being born to Jewish mother).
(Not) only the circumcised may circumcise: thematic structure of circumcision
Further ways of having religious (“special”) entities involved in an action (a.k.a. ritual):

- **Direct involvement:** *not applicable.*
- **Indirect involvement:** *partially applicable.*
- **Enabling conditions** (Biró 2013, cf. ritual bath) *applicable to standard halakhic sources.*
- **Cause:** God said: “On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised” (Lev. 12:3; see also Gen. 17:12).

*See also the blessings during the ritual:*
“Blessed are You... and has commanded us regarding circumcision.” “Blessed are You... and has commanded us to bring him into the covenant of Abraham.”
Further ways of having religious ("special") entities involved in an action (a.k.a. ritual):

- **Direct involvement**: not applicable.
- **Indirect involvement**: partially applicable.
- **Enabling conditions** (Biró 2013, cf. ritual bath) applicable to standard halakhic sources.
- **Cause**: God said: “On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised” (Lev. 12:3; see also Gen. 17:12).
- **Teleology/goal** (divine reward or punishment): “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people” (Gen. 17:14).
Further ways of having religious ("special") entities involved in an action (a.k.a. ritual):

- **Direct involvement:** *not applicable.*
- **Indirect involvement:** *partially applicable.*
- **Enabling conditions** (Biró 2013, cf. ritual bath) *applicable to standard halakhic sources.*
- **Cause:** God said: “On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.” (Lev. 12:3; see also Gen. 17:12)
- **Purpose** (reward / punishment): “Any uncircumcised male (...) will be cut off from his people” (Gen. 17:14).
- **Intertextuality:** repeating the act of Abraham.
Proposed working hypothesis:

• Religion as a set of “actions” falling into different epistemological categories:
  • *real*: rituals (+ institutions, etc. here and now)
  • *culturally postulated*: stories in mythologies, holy books, statements about reward/punishment, etc.

• Connections between these actions. Different types of connections with different cognitive difficulties to be maintained. For instance,
  • Direct involvement easier than short chain, which is easier than indefinite recursive chain (cf. McC&L’02 *PSI*).
  • Goal (teleology) easier than cause (cf. Deb Kelemen).
Maintaining the mental concept of circumcision in Judaism

• The doctrinal, theologically correct mode: *rabbanite legalistic rabbinic Judaism*
  • “Everyone is fit to circumcise” (*Mishne Torah, Sh.A.*)
  • Circumcision because God said so (type: *cause*).
  • (Reward & punishment, mentioned tangentially.)

• Alternative, more imagistic, more intuitive forms of Judaism:
  • Intuition of the unlearned
  • Aggadic midrashim
  • Splinter groups

ways to facilitate maintaining mentally the concept
Maintaining the mental concept of circumcision in Judaism

More imagistic, intuitive forms of Judaism:

• Intuition of the unlearned: indefinite chain

Our informants [...] seemed to think that the mohel [a person trained to perform the circumcision in lieu of the father – TB] was necessary. They were uncertain as to the procedure by which a person became a mohel, but seemed to regard mohels as a special class of person, uniquely eligible to carry out the bris [circumcision]. The tradition of the bris extends, in Jewish mythology, back to Abraham, who was the agent of the first circumcisions (including his own). We therefore interpret the bris as a special agent ritual. (Malley and Barrett 2003: 6.)
Maintaining the mental concept of circumcision in Judaism

More imagistic, intuitive forms of Judaism:

- **Aggadic midrashim**: Chain starting with a counterintuitive event (although not CP CI agent)

  *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.
Maintaining the mental concept of circumcision in Judaism

More imagistic, intuitive forms of Judaism:

- **Splinter groups**: Anan’s (unsuccessful) attempt to introduce a real chain of enabling rituals.

  **Anan ben David**: *Book of Precepts*:

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Summary

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• Rituals

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sets of actions, events, state-of-affairs, described as abstract acts + entities filling thematic roles.

Different types of connections between them, maintained with various cognitive effort.
Thank you for your attention, and see you around!

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