



# (Not) only the circumcised may circumcise

*Theological correctness and  
intuitive religiosity in Judaism*

Tamás Biró

Eötvös Loránd University

*Budapest, Hungary*



# 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).



# T. Lawson and R. McCauley (1990, 2002; *in my [re-]interpretation*)

*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...



# T. Lawson and R. McCauley

(1990, 2002; *in my [re-]interpretation*)

*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; ...



# T. Lawson and R. McCauley (1990, 2002; *in my [re-]interpretation*)

*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.





# T. Lawson and R. McCauley (1990, 2002; *in my [re-]interpretation*)

- 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<sub>1</sub> → X<sub>2</sub> → ... → X<sub>n</sub>

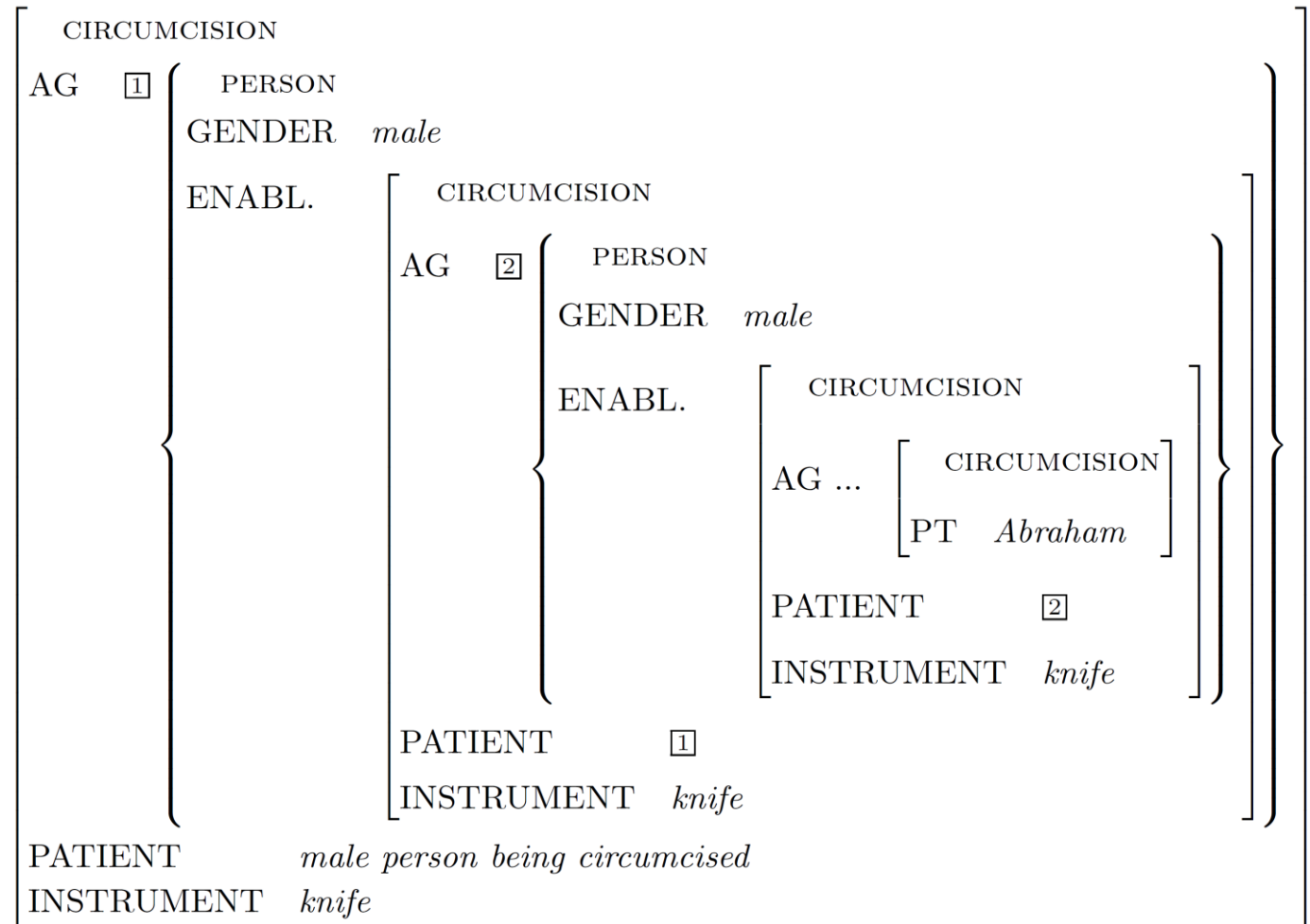


# *(Not) only the circumcised may circumcise:* thematic structure of circumcision

## 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?)*

# (Not) only the circumcised may circumcise: thematic structure of circumcision





# *(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, Hilkhhot Milah 2:1; Sulchan Arukh, YD 264:1.)*

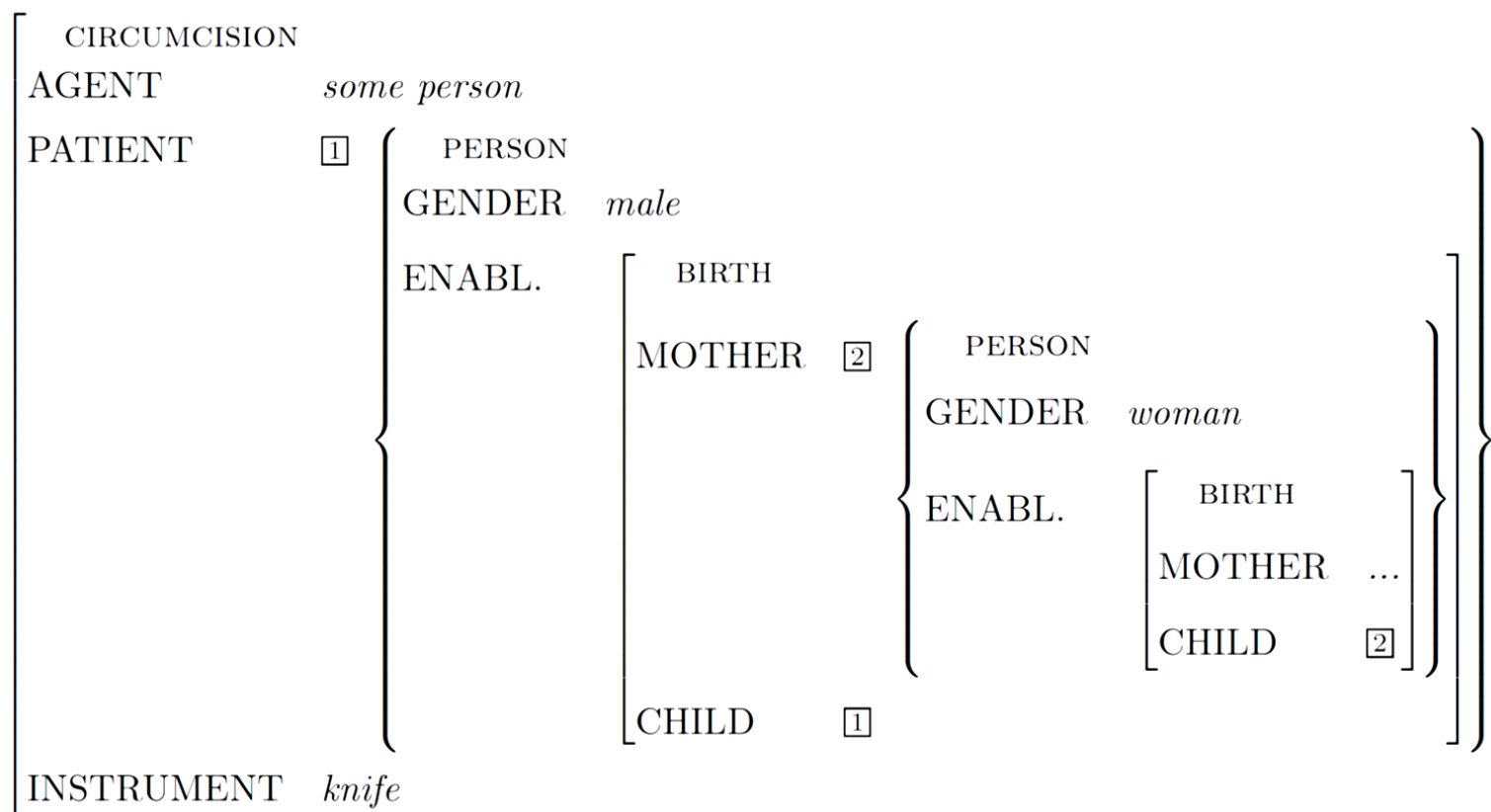


# *(Not) only the circumcised may circumcise:* thematic structure of circumcision

Further ways of having religious (“special”) entities involved in an action (a.k.a. ritual):

- Direct involvement:  
*not applicable 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







# *(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.”



# *(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).
- 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).

# *(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)
- 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*:

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.



# Summary

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.

*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!**

Tamás Biró

*Eötvös Loránd University*

<http://birot.web.elte.hu/>

<http://www.birot.hu/>