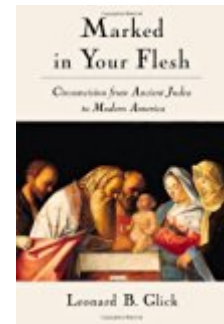


Leonard B. Glick. *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. xiv + 370 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517674-2.

Reviewed by Emily Wentzell (Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan)
Published on H-Histsex (June, 2006)



A Genealogy of Male Infant Circumcision

In his wide-ranging exploration of the religious history, medicalization, and current North American practice of infant male circumcision, Leonard Glick, a retired professor of anthropology, makes a case against the practice by denaturalizing it. While Glick briefly argues directly against infant circumcision at the beginning and end of the book, his central goal is to cause readers to question the unquestioning acceptance of circumcision as a medically advisable act, and, for Jewish readers, to problematize the practice as a straightforward and harmless marker of religious identity.

Tracing a path from the original Jewish circumcision, the Biblical story of God's covenant with Abraham, to portrayals of circumcision as recent as *Seinfeld*, Glick explores the historically shifting social meanings and material consequences of circumcision as a Jewish ritual practice; turns to medical literature to discuss the clinical adoption of circumcision as a secular surgery; and provides an overview of current American debates about the medical value and religious meanings of the practice. Glick argues that this focus on Jewish circumcision is a prerequisite for a study of modern American circumcision, since the doctors who promoted medical circumcision deliberately borrowed the Jewish ritual practice, and the Jewish religious discourse about circumcision continues to coexist with the medical dialogue. Since this work covers so much ground and thus could be useful as a reference for scholars interested in a variety of time periods and topics, I shall provide an overview of the contents of each chapter as well as a discussion of the work as a whole.

The first portion of the book deals with the history of infant male circumcision from its Biblical inception to modernity. Chapter 1 covers the religious and social meanings of circumcision from the advent of Temple Judaism around 500 B.C.E. to the Hellenic world of the first century C.E.. Here, Glick first discusses the earliest ritual significance of circumcision in Judea, relying on a rich variety of early religious texts and secondary sources to map the web of meanings that the practice may have held, in order to explain why the ritual removal of infant male foreskins developed. Glick then addresses the social consequences of circumcision in the Greco-Roman world (using examples such as excerpts from Roman satire and historical accounts of the attempts by Jewish gymnasium-goers to re-stretch their foreskins) to argue that circumcision functioned as an often-derided ethnic marker. Finally, Glick discusses Gentile attitudes toward circumcision as a religious act, as shown in the rhetorical efforts by Philo (first century) to link Jewish circumcision with fertility, physical and spiritual cleanliness, and the diminishment of sexual pleasure.

This chapter exemplifies the way that each portion of the book addresses broad temporal, topical, and geographical spans. This breadth enables Glick to cover a specific genealogy of circumcision in its entirety, flexibly moving throughout space and time to pause at points of particular significance or for which there is especially rich historical information. While this technique enables a great breadth of information to be brought into the history of circumcision, at times it may cause readers to lose their bearings or to feel that, while they have been given

the information necessary to understand an event or actor's role in the history of circumcision, they cannot understand it in its own specific context. At points in this wide-ranging history, the reader may therefore feel that depth is sacrificed for breadth. However, Glick employs this strategy in order to present a particular history that will enable him to make a statement about modern circumcision that can have real-world consequences, and the decision to seek historical breadth is thus appropriate for his goals.

Chapter 2 covers the Christian rejection of circumcision, focusing on the ways in which debates about the practice were implicated in larger disagreements among early Christian theologians about the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Separation of the two was achieved in part by the eventual Christian rejection of physical circumcision in favor of a concept of spiritual circumcision and derision of ritual focus on the flesh. Glick then discusses Roman opposition to politically threatening Jewish proselytism in the second to fourth centuries C.E., and the resulting juridical sanctions placed on the act of circumcision. Next, he outlines the rise of Rabbinic Judaism, focusing on the codification of circumcision in the Mishnah and Talmud, to show how the creation of these texts altered the physical practice of circumcision (calling for the removal of significantly more penile tissue), and cast the rite as central to the very idea of humanity in Rabbinical thought.

Addressing the practice and public perception of circumcision in Europe, chapters 3 and 4 cover the development and significance of European circumcision rituals and Gentile reactions to the practice. Glick argues that circumcision became a key marker of Jewishness in medieval Europe, and he discusses the social significance of various aspects of the circumcision rite, many of which persist today. In the context of increasing stigmatization of Jews due to economic changes in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Glick analyzes the writings of figures such as Peter Abelard, Martin Luther, and Benedictus de Spinoza on circumcision as emblematic of differing ways of thinking about Jewishness in their particular historical and social locations. Glick then discusses the social and sometimes juridical impact of popular stories told in twelfth-through-fifteenth-century Europe about Jewish kidnapping, circumcision, and murder of Christian boys, and their supposed use of Gentile blood in religious practice, including circumcision. Chapter 4 concludes with a discussion of the discourse on the barbarity of circumcision that was employed to overturn an Act enabling the naturalization (and thus economic advancement) of

British Jews in 1753.

Glick separates the book into two sections, stating that the work's "pivot" point occurs in chapter 5, with the advent of modernity in the mid-nineteenth century, and a reform movement within Judaism that enabled some reevaluation of circumcision as a necessary and appropriately modern practice. Here, Glick seeks to show both how circumcision persisted, and how the persistence of circumcision was remarkable in the face of such change. The latter is a difficult point to argue, as it requires a demonstration that circumcision was and is counterintuitive in its social and historical contexts. While this argument gives the story of circumcision a political framing appropriate to Glick's project of questioning the modern necessity of the practice, his historical analysis of the specific ways in which circumcision did persist, both as a religious and then as a secularized medical procedure, is much stronger than his discussion of the strangeness of this occurrence. Glick effectively shows that circumcision remained a marker of Jewish identity that even the most radical reformers were loath to challenge, and he traces the complex links between religious ritual and medical circumcision that enabled popularizing of the practice as a secularized medical procedure in North America and Britain. There were several outspoken critics of circumcision among nineteenth-century German Jews, including the remarkable Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim, who argued that the practice should be entirely dropped, but they did not succeed in convincing more than a few individuals in their community. Glick demonstrates that religious and medical reforms, such as early state public health activities, combined not to eliminate, but to medicalize circumcision—for example, by calling for the medical training or licensing of practitioners of the rite.

Chapter 6 details the pro-circumcision bent of doctors in Victorian and early-twentieth-century America, as an astonishing range of maladies, from chronic masturbation to paralysis, were attributed to the sexual stimulation and supposed dirtiness of the foreskin. Glick writes that doctors took up circumcision as a weapon against both disease and immorality, and that Jewish doctors further supported the medicalization of the practice by arguing that doctors, not *mohels* (ritual circumcisers), should perform the operation.

Glick further discusses the medicalization of circumcision in chapter 7, presenting medical discourse about the health benefits of the procedure from 1910 to the present. He argues that during this period circumci-

sion became viewed as a preventative health procedure, thought to ward off the most feared diseases of the early and late twentieth century—cancer, syphilis and HIV/AIDS. Glick focuses on discussions of the health benefits of circumcision in the medical literature, detailing the arguments of the highest profile participants in this discourse, evaluating the legitimacy of their case, and contextualizing them with biographical information about their popularizers, including consideration of the effect of their religious beliefs on their advocacy for or rejection of circumcision. Glick also discusses the often-fraught statements that medical governing bodies, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, have made about the validity of the practice, and he grounds this discussion in material medical practice with a brief history of the development and use of the clamps now commonly employed in medical circumcision procedures. This chapter provides an excellent topography of the key figures in twentieth-century American debates about the medical value of circumcision, and demonstrates that their arguments continue to shape medical ideas about, and the practice of, this surgery.

In the final chapters of the book, Glick addresses modern American discussions and representations of circumcision. Seeking again to show the persistence of circumcision as counterintuitive, he presents a somewhat paradoxical argument—that circumcision, through medicalization, has lost its meaning as a Jewish practice, and that this loss of meaning makes it anachronistic for secular Jews to continue viewing the practice as central to Jewish identity. However, the evidence he presents in chapter 8—accounts from Orthodox, Reform, and Humanistic Jews about their struggles with certain ethical aspects of circumcision that usually conclude by reaffirming that the practice is the key to Jewish identity, as well as Jewish books on baby care and text from Mohels’s web sites—tends rather to demonstrate that circumcision has retained strong meaning for Jews, despite its medicalization and its adoption by non-Jews.

Chapter 9 provides an overview of representations of circumcision in American popular media, discussing selected texts from Jewish periodicals, children’s books dealing with the circumcision of a sibling, feminist discussions of circumcision as a patriarchal practice, fiction by Jewish authors, sitcoms such as *Seinfeld* and *Sex in the City*, and jokes. While all the chapters move selectively between key texts, events, and actors over a broad spatial and temporal range to provide a wider picture of the genealogy of circumcision, this chapter is the least successful, as it seems to cover texts chosen for their ac-

cessibility rather than their cultural significance, while the discussion of the texts is sometimes more descriptive than analytic.

In the epilogue, Glick lays out his political stance against circumcision. He argues that the validity of circumcision boils down to two questions: whether the practice is medically effective, and whether parents have the right to alter a child’s healthy body so significantly without the child’s consent. Glick’s previous argument about the medicalization of circumcision sheds ample light on his first question; his historicization of medical discourse of circumcision frames it as social text rather than presentation of biological fact, making his historically grounded discussions of the invalidation of claims for the health benefits of medical circumcision very convincing. However, the second question is hurriedly contextualized in a discussion of human rights that ignores long-standing critiques of the concept as inherently Western and individualistic.[1] While Glick makes passing references to discussions about female circumcision (in this case, unproblematically discussing activist critiques without noting that some feminists have argued that this type of activism is culturally imperialistic) and to male circumcision rites in religions like Islam, he does not fully develop these links.[2] Further developing these connections would have enriched the analysis of modern portrayals of and discussions about circumcision practices. Glick also uses his case that circumcision has lost religious significance to argue against the necessity for Jews to circumcise their male infants; but again, this argument is muddled by the evidence he has presented that circumcision remains a culturally salient practice.

If elements of Glick’s final argument against circumcision are not fully developed, however, it is because in large part his project is an historical one, geared toward detailing the development of Jewish and then medical circumcision in order to present it as a historically and socially located practice that can be questioned by modern practitioners. The great strength of the book is its thorough yet wide-ranging genealogy of infant male circumcision. While other in-depth scholarship has increased our knowledge of the medicalization of circumcision, Glick’s work sets this phase of circumcision’s history into a broader historical and social context; further, his rich discussion of the original meanings of the Jewish practice fills a gap in the literature on circumcision.[3] In short, Glick’s project is to provide a complete history of circumcision, ranging across place, time, and the divide between religion and medicine, in order to enable individuals to make better-informed choices about whether

they will participate in the practice, and this he ably achieves.

Notes

[1]. For a discussion of this and the opposing point of view in relation to female circumcision, see Alison T. Slack, "Female Circumcision: A Critical Appraisal," *Human Rights Quarterly* 10 (1988): pp. 437-486.

[2]. Ellen Gruenbaum, *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

[3]. For discussions of the medicalization of circumcision, see Frederick Hodges, "A Short History of the Institutionalization of Involuntary Sexual Mutilation in the United States," in *Sexual Mutilations: A Human Tragedy*, ed. George C. Denniston and Marilyn Milos (New York: Plenum Press, 1997); David L. Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); and Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation: The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of Circumcision in Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Emily Wentzell. Review of Glick, Leonard B., *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11858>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.