

Cambridge in the Land of Canaan: Descent, Alliance, Circumcision, and Instruction in the Bible

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Introduction

The relationship between biblical studies and anthropology is long and complex. Sometimes the two fields have been closely linked, such as in the writings of William Robertson Smith and James G. Frazer.¹ At other times, the fields seemed quite separate. Telescoped genealogies of the subject, focusing on British social anthropology, move rapidly from Smith and Frazer to the period initiated with studies by Leach and Douglas.² Occasionally, harbingers of that period, such as Steiner and Schapera, are also mentioned.³ A broader survey of the topic could point to interest expressed in various quarters such as Mauss's analysis of the Abraham legend or Sapir's contributions to Biblical Hebrew.⁴ Nevertheless, the above cited papers of Leach and Douglas did spark a renewed interest among anthropologists, in trying their hand at biblical interpretation, and among students of the Bible, in acquiring and applying tools of anthropological analysis. Documentation of all the studies on biblical topics inspired by anthropology since the 1960s would be a major project, and beyond the scope of this paper.⁵

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1. T. O. Beidelman, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion* (Chicago, 1974); R. Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge, 1987); idem, "J. G. Frazer and the Jews," *Religion* 22 (1992), 135–50.

2. See, e.g., the overviews in G. Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity* (Washington, D.C., 1994 [1980]), 4, n. 2; H. E. Goldberg, ed., *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies* (Albany, 1987), 26, n. 29; H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington, 1990) 242, n. 1. The groundbreaking works which attracted attention were E. Leach, "Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Science* 23 (1961), 386–96 and M. Douglas, "The Abominations of Leviticus," *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, 1966), 41–57.

3. F. Steiner, "Enslavement and the Early Hebrew Lineage System: An Explanation of Genesis 47:29–31; 48:1–16," *Man* 54 (1954), 73–75; I. Schapera, "The Sin of Cain," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 85 (1955), 33–43.

4. M. Mauss, "Critique interne de la 'légende d'Abraham,'" in V. Karady, ed., *Oeuvres*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1969 [1926]); E. Sapir, "Hebrew ʿargaz, a Philistine word," *JAOS* 56 (1936), 272–81; idem, "Hebrew 'Helmet,' a Loanword, and its Bearing on Indo-European Phonology," *JAOS* 57 (1937), 73–77.

5. This paper deals with the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), referred to here either as "the Bible" or by the Hebrew acronym *Tanakh* which combines *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings).

Attempts at providing overviews of the field, or systematizing certain approaches within it, have been made both by anthropologists and folklorists,⁶ as well as by students of the Bible.⁷ Any comprehensive attempt to examine contemporary links between the fields of study must take into account the diversity within each, for biblical scholars have emphasized different aspects of anthropology. Wilson, for example, sees anthropology as part of a sociological approach.⁸ Lang surveys various anthropological schools, including that of structural analysis, and, while accepting structuralist insights, also calls for further work on biblical *society* including a full study of biblical kinship.⁹

Both Wilson and Lang are primarily students of the Bible, and there is some irony in the fact that two scholars of religion remind us that anthropology has a contribution to make to the study of society! Accepting the implied admonition, I suggest that making the early papers of Leach and Douglas the main guidelines for contemporary anthropological work on the Bible entails certain analytic dangers. Structuralist analysis opened up new vistas in showing interconnections within cultural worlds, but an exclusive reliance on structuralism and other “symbolic” approaches risks neglecting the interpenetration of symbolic and social factors in understanding a society or historical period.¹⁰ The present paper seeks to demonstrate that, without reducing religion to social structure, analysis of symbolic structures within the Bible still has something to learn from the classic paradigm of basing the study of religion on a close examination of social configurations.

My analysis of circumcision in the Bible will be situated in reference to a classic debate in anthropology which arose in the late 1950s concerning “descent” and “alliance,” two of whose main protagonists were Meyer Fortes and Edmund Leach.¹¹

6. J. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem, or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge, 1977), 126–71; Feeley-Harnik, *Lord's Table*; idem, “Is Historical Anthropology Possible? The Case of the Runaway Slave,” in G. M. Tucker and D. A. Knight, eds., *Humanizing America's Iconic Book* (Chico, CA, 1982), 95–126; N. Wander, “Structure, Contradiction, and ‘Resolution’ in Mythology: Father's Brother's Daughter Marriage and the Treatment of Women in Genesis 11–50,” *JANES* 13 (1981), 75–99; E. Leach and D. A. Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth* (Cambridge, 1983); S. Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco, 1987); idem, ed., *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Atlanta, 1990).

7. A. W. Miller, “Claude Lévi-Strauss and Genesis 37–Exodus 20,” in R. A. Brauner, ed., *Shiv'im: Essays and Studies in Honor of Ira Eisenstein* (Philadelphia, 1977), 21–52; R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven, 1977); idem, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, 1980); idem, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1984); J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1978); B. Lang, *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1985); C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York, 1988); Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*.

8. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches*, 17, 22, 27, 40–53, 57–66, 71–80.

9. Lang, *Anthropological Approaches*, 14.

10. M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York, 1973), with the concepts of group and grid, more explicitly inserts the examination of sociological factors in relation to cultural systems. R. A. Atkins, Jr., *Egalitarian Community: Ethnography and Exegesis* (Tuscaloosa, 1991), has applied that conceptual framework to Paul's letters. Recently, M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Sheffield, 1993), has applied it to the study of the Hebrew Bible.

11. Regarding the title of this paper, both Fortes and Leach were Cambridge scholars, as were Smith and Frazer.

While anthropology has moved beyond the debate as it was framed in those days, aspects of it can still enrich understanding of biblical society and religion. It is possible to acknowledge that many concepts entailed in the study of "kinship" stem from assumptions ingrained in European culture, or to appreciate that anthropology "invented primitive society,"¹² while still finding usefulness in the analytical distinction between descent and alliance.¹³ Contemporary advance, in anthropology as well as in biblical studies, is best served when past accomplishments of a discipline are kept in view.

The discussion proceeds by first considering two books on biblical topics published in the past decade in which the authors draw extensively upon anthropological literature. One was heavily influenced by Fortes's approach to lineage structure, while the second sees its inspiration in the work of Leach and Douglas as a basis for interpreting biblical rituals. On the background of these differences, both books relate to patrilineal kinship in ancient Israel. After considering differences in the two works, the present study will suggest that it is useful to take into account the insights of alliance theory, and to examine the interrelationships of descent and alliance within the social world of the biblical text. It then criticizes an analysis of biblical circumcision, suggested in the second work, which understands the kinship connotations of the act solely in terms of patrilineal symbolism. A complementary interpretation is put forth which sees circumcision expressing notions of alliance as well, and also connects biblical circumcision to instruction in tradition.

The biblical text may be read through a variety of anthropological lenses. One set of lenses (worn by the first book to be considered) brings social history, conceived of as discoverable institutional facts, into focus. A second view is cultural, emphasizing sets of meanings, concepts, and symbols which are taken for granted and utilized by the authors of the Tanakh. Whichever perspective is preferred, it is assumed that "local meanings" with regard to relationships within and between families, which form part of the biblical text, are critical in understanding biblical "religion" or "ritual,"¹⁴ in particular the meanings associated with circumcision. We further assume, as increasingly is becoming clear in literary analyses of the Bible, that the Tanakh is a carefully constructed creation, warranting close readings to tease out its meanings and messages.¹⁵ A number of my interpretations will be based on such readings. In

12. D. M. Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor, 1984); A. Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London, 1988).

13. The following analysis will highlight the *distinction between* descent and alliance in the Tanakh, so a precise definition of descent is not offered, nor is it distinguished from concepts such as "filiation."

14. The Tanakh does not explicitly distinguish ritual rules from other kinds of rules, a point in accordance with T. Asad's claim in his book, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993) that anthropological theories of "religion" and "ritual" reflect concepts which have developed in recent centuries in the West.

15. See, e.g., R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981); R. Alter and F. Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA., 1987); M. Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York, 1979); J. P. Fokkelman, "Genesis," in Alter and Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide*, 36–55; E. L. Greenstein, "The Formation of the Biblical Narrative Corpus," *AJS Review* 15 (1990), 151–78; G. A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, 1986); M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, 1985), and references contained in these works.

summarizing the argument, some general thoughts about potential anthropological contributions to understanding the biblical text, a complex literary product of elite religious culture, will also be proffered.

Structure and Symbol in the Bible: Two Studies

Two relatively recent books on biblical topics are heavily influenced by anthropological thought. The first, *The Bet-ab in Israel from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy*, was published in 1986 and the second, *The Savage in Judaism*, appeared in 1990.¹⁶ Bendor's title suggests a specific focus, the patrilineal extended family, while the subtitle places it as part of the larger topic of the social structure of ancient Israel. Eilberg-Schwartz's subtitle defines his broad interest: an anthropology of Israelite religion. His book, however, touches upon some of the specific topics discussed by Bendor, in particular the importance of patrilineages in ancient Israel.

Bendor seeks, at the outset of his work, to determine with precision the meanings of various biblical terms and phrases in order to understand the structure and functioning of the *bet-ʿab*.¹⁷ This unit is constituted in its fullest by three to four generations of patrilineally related family members and their spouses living together. The book also considers the relationship between this unit and larger patrilineal structures—the *mišpaḥa* (glossed by Bendor as “sib” or “clan”), and *šebet* (tribe) into which it is nested. These units are described in terms of rights to land and patterns of inheritance.

These rights are to be understood in terms of the agricultural regime of ancient Palestine.¹⁸ The standard agricultural unit for each *bet-ʿab* consisted of 1) the *kerem*, which included grapevines and olive trees; 2) fields for grain (*šadeh*); and 3) the *migraš* in which domesticated animals were herded. Ownership and use patterns differed in each. Beginning with the last category, sheep were owned by individual families but they grazed in the *migraš* in which they held usufruct rights. The grazing lands were in the hands of the *mišpaḥa*. The *mišpaḥa* was also the unit having rights over the grain fields which were divided and allotted to individual *bate-ʿabot* (pl.). Bendor also makes a case for the existence of a system of rotation, in which land was periodically reallocated among the various *bate-ʿabot* of a *mišpaḥa*, although concrete details are lacking on how this worked, if indeed it took place at all.¹⁹ In any event, the usufruct rights in the *šadeh* were of a different nature from those applied to the *migraš*. The *kerem* was eminently associated with the individual family, even as it functioned within the setting of a *bet-ʿab*. A grown son who married and set up his own “house” within a *bet-ʿab* planted a *kerem*. The *kerem*, as a site of horticulture, demanded constant and intensive investment of work.

16. S. Bendor, *The Bet-ab in Israel from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy: The Social Structure of Ancient Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1986) [in Hebrew]; H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington, 1990). Since this article was written, Bendor's book has appeared in English: *The Social Structure in Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family (BEIT ʿAB) from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy* (Jerusalem, 1996).

17. Bendor, *The Bet-Ab*, 17–57.

18. *Ibid.*, 63–67.

19. *Ibid.*, 67–78.

The influence of Fortes is highlighted in Bendor's approach to the *bet-²ab*. He shows that the Tanakh reflects instances of *bate-²abot* in different stages of a "domestic developmental cycle,"²⁰ when they are just forming as well as a full *bet-²ab* containing three generations.²¹ A crucial aspect of Bendor's analysis concerns the conflict of interests and internal tensions built into the *bet-²ab* due to demographic variation or conflict over inheritance, coexisting with patrilineal principles of solidarity. The *bet-²ab* could be a unit of protection for its members, but also could produce its disenfranchised "orphans and widows."

Bendor places his account of the *bet-²ab* in the context of existing theories concerning kin units in ancient Israel. Some historians deny the importance of extended patrilineal units during the period of the Israelite (and Judean) monarchies (11th–6th centuries B.C.E.), claiming that the biblical images reflecting patrilineal organization stem from an earlier nomadic period. The major reason for the decline of the *bet-²ab*, according to some of these historians, was the encroachment of the centralized kingdom on local kin units, and the alienation of land which was their base. Bendor, in contrast, argues that the *bet-²ab* was an ongoing and viable institution throughout the period of the monarchy.²² He does not deny the importance of the monarchy, and, in fact, seeks to specify some of the points of articulation between the centralized authority and the *bet-²ab*, such as taxation and corvée.²³ He insists, however, that the monarchy modified the functioning of the *bet-²ab* but did not destroy it.

Bendor's portrait of the *bet-²ab* illuminates some features of biblical rhetoric in greater depth and provides the background for understanding a number of moral-religious themes in the Tanakh. The association of the *kerem* with the individual family is the basis of some well-known literary associations, such as the vision of a future peaceful life in which each man sits under his vineyard and under his fig tree (Mic. 4:4).²⁴ A second example is the depth of moral revulsion attached to Ahab's complying with Jezebel in the murder of Navot in order to acquire the latter's *kerem* (1 Kings 21). Also, the constant demands of the legal literature in the Torah, and of the Prophets, to look after the widow and the orphan reflect the internal dynamics of the *bet-²ab* which produced individuals in positions of structural weakness. They were not necessarily individuals set loose in a depersonalized urban society created by the monarchy, but appeared in the context of the rural kin unit itself. Aside from these and a few other suggestions concerning the relevance of social structural underpinnings for an appreciation of some of the "religious" aspects of the Bible, Bendor refrains from dealing with symbolic aspects of patrilineal organization. Symbolism,

20. M. Fortes, "Introduction," in J. Goody, ed., *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups* (Cambridge, 1971), 1–14.

21. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 133–37 points to multiple family dwellings, residential compounds comprised by several conjugal units around a courtyard, as typical of Iron I (pre-monarchical Israelite) village sites.

22. Bendor, *The Bet-Ab*, 111–46.

23. *Ibid.*, 44–50.

24. Biblical citations are illustrative, rather than exhaustive. Unless indicated otherwise, translations from the Pentateuch are those of the Jewish Publication Society's *The Torah: The Five Books of Moses. A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia, 1962).

by contrast, is at the heart of Eilberg-Schwartz's attempt, to which we now turn, at integrating anthropology into Bible studies.

After presenting an historical interpretation of the relations between anthropology and the study of the Bible, Eilberg-Schwartz begins his own application in a chapter subtitled "Animal Metaphors in the Rituals and Narratives of Israelite Religion."²⁵ He explains that the notion of metaphor has become central in anthropological thinking in the past thirty years. Following Lévi-Strauss, he points out that what once was seen as "totemism," a form of religious belief and practice found in certain simple societies which was attributed to ancient Semitic religion by William Robertson Smith, can be viewed more generally as "understanding or experiencing one thing in the light of something else."²⁶ Metaphors, particularly those taken from the realms of animal life and agriculture, are found throughout various genres of biblical literature. He sees many biblical ritual prescriptions and proscriptions as the actualization or dramatization of those metaphors.

One example is his linkage of the laws of *ḥorla* (the fruit of young trees during the first three years of their growth) to the rules of circumcision.²⁷ Leviticus (19:23–25) forbids eating the fruit of young trees, using the same term (*ḥorla*) that refers to the foreskin of an uncircumcised penis.²⁸ Eilberg-Schwartz argues that during these years, the trees are pruned and that the pruning contributes to their ultimate fertility.²⁹ Linking this to the more general claim that Israelite rituals actualize metaphors in which people are likened to flora or fauna, Eilberg-Schwartz claims (in the context of other reinforcing arguments) that the "tree *ḥorla* = foreskin" equation indicates that one meaning of circumcision in ancient Israel was to promote male fertility.

Surveying circumcision in several African tribal cultures, Eilberg-Schwartz states that it frequently constitutes a symbolic representation of male identity, sexuality, and patrilineal kinship.³⁰ This claim is hardly startling to anthropologists, and is also the basis of an important interpretation of circumcision by a biblical scholar which Eilberg-Schwartz ignores,³¹ but he seeks to place his thesis in contrast to scholars who claim that there is little to learn from comparative study.³² The biblical scholars he cites maintain that circumcision takes on a special meaning in Israelite religion—that of a covenant between God and his people, the descendants of Abraham. As such, circumcision is an arbitrary "sign," being unmotivated by "natural meanings" associated with male genitals.

Eilberg-Schwartz, like Fox,³³ asserts that the association of circumcision with the notion of covenant (*berit*) does not sever it from the meanings found in other so-

25. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 115–40.

26. *Ibid.*, 117.

27. *Ibid.*, 82, 123, 149–54.

28. *Ibid.*, 154–55 points out that Philo and some rabbis in the Talmud and Midrash consider this analogy. Another midrashic source dealing with the same metaphor is discussed by S. Cooper, "Laws of Mixture: An Anthropological Study of Halakha," in Goldberg, ed., *Judaism Viewed*, 69.

29. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 149–53.

30. *Ibid.*, 145–46.

31. M. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly *ḥorla* Etiologies," *RB* 81 (1974), 557–96.

32. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 142–43.

33. *Ibid.*, 146–48; Fox, "The Sign," 591–94.

cieties in which “fertility is one of the basic motives.”³⁴ He further stresses the patrilineal symbolism of circumcision by linking anthropological argumentation with source criticism—the analysis of the biblical text with reference to its separate literary strands.³⁵ Again paralleling Fox,³⁶ Eilberg-Schwartz builds upon the fact that the presentation of circumcision as a sign of the covenant and the requirement that circumcision take place on the eighth day (Gen. 17:9–14) are found in the strand of literature identified as the Priestly document, P (itself often divided into strata³⁷). But while Fox’s view of the priestly approach to circumcision stresses how the priests retained older meanings shared by other Israelites while placing them into a new theological framework (proclaiming circumcision to be a “sign”—*ʾot*), Eilberg-Schwartz argues that circumcision had special meanings within priestly circles because the priesthood was an inherited status and patrilineal descent was especially crucial to them. Rituals stressing male identity and fertility were thus emphasized in P, in Eilberg-Schwartz’s view, while patrilineality was not central in the social and religious life of non-priestly Israelites:

There is one important difference between the priestly community and the African societies discussed above. In the latter, all members of the society are defined genealogically. There are many different lineages, but all persons trace themselves back to some ancestor. The priests, however, competed with Israelites for whom descent played little or no role in their own self-understanding and in their consequent understanding of the covenant.³⁸

Bendor and Eilberg-Schwartz thus have very different views on the place of patrilineal organization in Israelite society generally. Below, we shall argue that both authors would have done well to attend to the developments in social anthropology, in the late 1950s, which began to fully consider “alliance” as well as descent. Before discussing this perspective, it is useful to note some other general differences in their respective approaches.

As stated, Bendor is interested in social structure and Eilberg-Schwartz is interested in symbolism: the latter’s focus is on Israelite *religion* and ancient *Judaism* more than ancient Israelite *society*. Bendor’s utilization of Fortes’s perspective, by contrast, stems not only from the fact that Fortes was a student of lineage systems, but that his analysis of cultural forms was closely anchored in his reading of social arrangements. Eilberg-Schwartz’s point of departure is the breakthroughs of Leach and Douglas in understanding biblical myth and rituals.³⁹ The contrast between Eilberg-Schwartz and Bendor is highlighted in that the latter also refers to Leach, citing his study of “Pul Eliya” in Sri Lanka,⁴⁰ a “functionalist” study which Leach published after he had begun to engage in structural analysis. Bendor cites Pul Eliya as a comparative example in which different ownership or usufruct arrangements were operative in the same community for many generations.⁴¹ The fact that Leach’s papers on

34. Fox, “The Sign,” 592.

35. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 143, 163–73.

36. Fox, “The Sign.”

37. J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16, AB* (Garden City, NY, 1991).

38. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 176.

39. *Ibid.*, 2, 5, 17, 21, 75.

40. E. Leach, *Pul Eliya* (Cambridge, 1961).

41. Bendor, *The Bet-Ab*, 65.

biblical topics, of which Bendor was aware (personal communication), do not appear in his bibliography indicates that he did not view them as closely relevant to his research.

This difference is reflected in the way Eilberg-Schwartz deals with the patrilineality of the priesthood. His account of how descent functioned within the priestly community is sketched thinly. His interpretation of circumcision consists of an intricately worked out set of symbolic connections which exhibit internal consistency in terms of what is assumed to be the boundaries of a document, P. It throws little light on detailed aspects of priestly organization itself, parallel to the way Bendor utilizes social anthropological tools to analyze the *bet-²ab* in wider Israelite society. Some general remarks on the priesthood, and on the relation of P to other biblical sources, are in order before continuing the discussion of kinship.

Puzzles of the Priesthood

Providing an account of the social organization of the priesthood in ancient Israel still presents a major challenge to researchers. While scholars confidently assign much literary material to “priestly circles,” there is a great deal of debate concerning the organization of the priesthood, its relationship to the rest of Israelite society, and how these changed over time.⁴² Even without reference to source criticism, some questions of consistency jump out of the text, so to speak, and present themselves to the reader. For example, the narrative from Exodus to Numbers presents a clear account of the priesthood being assigned to Aaron and his descendants who thereby constituted a distinct branch of the tribe of Levi—while the remaining, ordinary, Levites were relegated to secondary duties with regard to the Tabernacle. Deuteronomy, however, sometimes uses the phrase “Levitical priests” (17:9), a term that is puzzling in light of the aforementioned narratives. Another question concerns Samuel, who was neither a priest nor a Levite, but from the tribe of Ephraim. His mother brought him to the sanctuary at Shiloh, to serve with Eli the Aaronide priest. The story describes Samuel as wearing an ²*epod* (1 Sam. 2:18), which is a priestly garment, leading some researchers to conclude that the priesthood initially was not assigned by descent but referred to a ritual role in sanctuaries.

For this reason, the knowledge that certain biblical passages are firmly associated with P from a literary point of view, and the assumption that the passages included in P reflect ideas and laws that serve priestly interests, still leaves open the question of *what those interests were*. Moreover, that question might be answered differently according to period and region of the country. Were the priests/Levites tightly organized social units with firm control over the “sacred goods” of Israelite society working closely with the political elite in Jerusalem, or were they an “estate” of mendicants with some ritual skills, scattered around the countryside, dependent on those who owned land, as is suggested by the text which places the Levites in proximity to strangers, widows, and orphans (Deut. 26:12)? And if, as Eilberg-Schwartz claims, they had some rights which they vigorously sought to hold on to by virtue of a patri-

42. A. Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood* (Rome, 1969).

lineal descent rule, what was the substance of those rights vis-à-vis other members of the society?

Assigning the account of circumcision associated with Abraham to priestly circles (as many biblical scholars do), thus raises as many questions as it solves. In addition to the lack of clarity concerning the social structure of the priesthood, it ignores the problem that biblical texts had integrity to those who put them together.⁴³ It seems clear that the Torah, as it eventually took shape in Israelite-Jewish society, sought to stress the integrated nature of the priesthood vis-à-vis the rest of society. With regard to the commandment of circumcision and its link to the covenant, the manifest content of the story makes circumcision the property of Israelite society as a whole, i.e., all the descendants of Abraham. What interest would the priests have, if seeking to distinguish themselves and their line from the rest of the society, in placing a mark of their special privilege in the hands of the rest of society? It is even more difficult to fathom what motives the priests may have had for including a story of the circumcision of a non-chosen son (Ishmael) who is not even an ancestor of the Israelites.⁴⁴ These questions are addressed by Fox's explanation that one of the aims of the priestly interpretation of circumcision as a "sign" was to restrict the blessing of fertility attached to the covenant to the descendants of Isaac and to exclude other Abrahamic groups.⁴⁵ This suggests that it is oversimplified to conclude that the association of circumcision with P represents priestly "interests," narrowly defined.

Indeed, one can easily speculate about other historical logics. For example, perhaps the incorporation of a P document into Genesis precisely expresses the interests of non-priestly Israelites wishing to co-opt a symbol which could mark off the priests, giving them special privileges. Alternatively, the placing of the Abraham-covenant-circumcision account alongside non-priestly material might stem from a certain school within the priesthood seeking to forge links with other groups and their traditions. Such a hypothesis has recently been put forward by Knohl.⁴⁶ From yet another perspective, Douglas argues that the priestly book, Leviticus, is a tract opposed to Ezra's attempt to limit marriage to unions within the Israelite community.⁴⁷ But rather than slide into historical conjectures or conclusions at this juncture, we simply note that with regard to certain kinds of questions it appears legitimate to relate to the biblical corpus, or large parts of it, as a whole. That is the strategy which Bendor utilizes in examining the *bet-ʿab* during the period of the monarchy, as he found no systematic variation among sources from different periods with regard to the topic of his interest.⁴⁸

43. E. L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (Atlanta, 1989), esp. 29–51.

44. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 148, argues that in P's view, the circumcision of Ishmael and the blessing of fertility that he earns demonstrate the importance of fertility in relation to circumcision, as opposed to its covenantal meaning, because Ishmael's descendants are not part of the covenant. But if priests had so much invested in transmission according to an isolating patrilineal principle, why should P mention Ishmael at all?

45. Fox, "The Sign," 588–89.

46. I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: A Study of the Priestly Strands in the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem, 1992) [in Hebrew].

47. M. Douglas, "The Stranger in the Bible," *Archives of European Sociology* 35 (1994), 283–98; idem, *In the Wilderness*, 225–30.

48. Bendor, *The Bet-Ab*, 13–14.

On the basis of a similar assumption, I propose to further examine the topic of circumcision, inquiring into its social structural matrix and cultural associations. The argument begins by suggesting that in addition to matters of patrilineal descent, an understanding of biblical kinship and society could benefit from explicit attention to what came to be known in the late 1950s as “alliance theory.” This perspective has been incorporated into several anthropological analyses of Genesis,⁴⁹ and a close look at the text will further demonstrate its usefulness.

Descent, Alliance, and Circumcision

In exploring the potential contribution of an alliance perspective to understanding the Tanakh, we examine the broader setting of the covenant with Abraham. Two covenants accompany Abram who later becomes Abraham.⁵⁰ The first covenant (Gen. 15:7–21) is called the *berit ben ha-betarim* (the covenant between the halves [of the animals]) in rabbinic sources, and the other is the covenant of circumcision itself (Gen. 17:1–14). Eilberg-Schwartz argues that patrilineal symbolism is found within both ceremonies. For example, he claims that the *berit ben ha-betarim* appears “immediately after” the household of Lot, Abram’s patrilineal nephew, has segmented off from Abram’s household (Gen. 13:5–13;⁵¹ this claim skips over a relevant section of the narrative—see below). The birth of male sons are closely linked to the stories of the covenants. Ishmael is born after the first covenant, and Isaac after the covenant of circumcision. A contrastive look at the two incidents, however, signals another concern as well; each covenant is associated with a distinct pattern of *linkage to women*.

The *berit ben ha-betarim* stresses the giving of land to Abram’s descendants. It assumes that Abram will have descendants, but the emphasis in the covenant is on land. Immediately after the *berit ben ha-betarim* (in the narrative), Abram takes Hagar, an Egyptian maidservant, as a concubine and subsequently Ishmael is born. Thirteen years later (but immediately within the text), Abram is presented with another covenant (and his name is changed), this time involving circumcision. Abraham hastens to obey God’s command and circumcises himself, Ishmael, and all the members of his household. Immediately thereafter, Sarai, Abraham’s full wife, is given the name Sarah, and it is announced that she will give birth to a son. Abraham responds with some doubt, given both their ages, and prays only that Ishmael will survive. God acknowledges that Ishmael is indeed Abraham’s seed, but that the true recipient of the blessing and the one to continue the second covenant is Isaac. While circumcision is linked to the full blessing of seed, and this encompasses both Ishmael and Isaac, what primarily distinguishes Isaac from Ishmael is the pattern of “alliance” in the background of the birth of each son, Sarah on the one hand and Hagar on the other. The women involved are not incidental to the narrative, but are clearly part of the pro-

49. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem*; Wander, “Structure, Contradiction” (see n. 6 above); J. Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient, and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia* (Cambridge, 1990), 342–60.

50. Abram is the name of the individual later called Abraham in Gen. 17:5, at the beginning of the description of the covenant of circumcision. We use either name, following the original narrative.

51. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 168.

creational and socializational processes. Patrilineality is present throughout, as stressed by Eilberg-Schwartz, but the distinction between the two covenants is correlated with differential links to women: full-status marriage and concubinage respectively.⁵²

The distinction between descent and alliance, which also entails an examination of the interaction between two modes of representing social connectedness, is germane to studying family life in ancient Israel. Whether or not the ideas which informed the social anthropological study of kinship are a reflection of Western culture,⁵³ the *distinction between* descent and alliance is helpful in deciphering the biblical text. The notion of alliance is quite parallel to the associations surrounding the biblical term *berit* (covenant). Discussions of the notion of *berit* have emphasized that it can link equal partners or unequal partners,⁵⁴ and as such it is appropriate as a trope describing the relation between God and Israel. At present, it is emphasized that relations of *berit* are conceptually distinct from, and often empirically in tension with, relations based on patriliney. On the other hand, a *berit* may also compensate for the lack of patrikin. Moreover, once a *berit* is created it often is perpetuated through patrilineal descent.

Various examples of the distinction and potential tension between relations of *berit* and those of patrilineality are found in the Tanakh from the stories linked to Abram and onward. Abram separates from Lot, formerly a member of his *bet-ʿab*, because of conflict over pasture land. Eilberg-Schwartz states that the *berit ben ha-betarim* follows “immediately after this incident,” imparting to the latter a patrilineal connotation, but in fact what comes immediately after the separation from his patrilineal relative is that Abram has to cooperate with his local Canaanite allies (*baʿale berit ʿAbram*—Gen. 14:13) in rescuing Lot. The contrast between relations formed in a *bet-ʿab* and those of *berit* are clearly implied. Later in Genesis, Jacob follows a pattern of migration which in some ways is similar to, and in some ways contrasts with, that followed by Abraham. When God commands Abram to leave Ur Kasdim (permanently), he is told to go from his “father’s house” (*bet ʿabika*, Gen. 12:1), while Jacob, upon leaving Canaan, makes a vow in hope that he will return to his father’s house (*bet ʿabi*, Gen. 28:21). When Jacob decides to leave Laban and return to Canaan, this involves a break-up of the *bet-ʿab* of which Jacob and his wives (Laban’s daughters) had formed a part.⁵⁵ Fishbane sees Gen. 30:25 as the “thematic and structural pivot of the [Jacob] Cycle. As soon as Rachel gives birth, Jacob plans his return home.”⁵⁶ Jacob presents the matter of leaving in terms of “when shall I make

52. Wander, “Structure, Contradiction,” 92–95.

53. Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 211–16, places the beginnings of alliance theory in Frazer’s Old Testament studies, *Folklore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend and Law*, 3 vols. (London, 1918) 2:97. One might ascend a generation and recall that Tylor cited the story of Jacob’s sons and Shechem (see below) in his classic statement on exogamy in E. B. Tylor, “On a Method of Investigating the Development of Institutions: Applied to Laws of Marriage and Descent,” *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 18 (1889), 267.

54. J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London, 1926), 1:293.

55. This constitutes one example of a man taking up residence in the *bet-ʿab* of his wife’s father. Other possible examples are cited by Bendor, *The Bet-Ab*, 22.

56. Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, 57–58.

provision for my own household?" (*beti*, Gen. 30:30), later contrasting that with the years of contribution to "your [Laban's] household" (*beteka*—31:41). Upon agreeing to leave on peaceful terms, the two make a *berit* (Gen. 31:44), which should in the future regulate relations of the two, now separated, *bate-ʿabot*.⁵⁷ A similar contrast appears in Moses's blessing to Levi (Deut. 33:8–11). Levi is promised the *ʿurim and tummim* (oracular devices of the priesthood)⁵⁸ because it was he:

Who said of his mother and father, "I consider them not."
His brothers he disregarded, ignored his own children.
Your precepts alone they observed, and kept your *berit*.

Here, a *berit* stands in opposition to patrilineal loyalties (including the woman—Levi's mother—married into the father's house) in the context of the assignment of the "priesthood."⁵⁹

The tension between David and Saul is partially a rivalry between patrilineal units. When David, fearing Saul, does not appear at the feast of the New Moon, he conveys the excuse that he had obligations to be with his own lineage-mates on that occasion (*zebaḥ mišpaḥa*—1 Sam. 20:29). In order to overcome that tension, Jonathan, Saul's son, and David solemnize a *berit*. This is done through an oath between them (1 Sam. 20:42). But, once established, a *berit* continues through patrilineal descent. The covenant (of God) between Jonathan and David is "between me and between you and between my seed and your seed, forever." In this story, alliance is an alternate to descent, but also depends upon descent for its perpetuity.

The same social logic, and associated tensions, run through the story of Abraham and his relation to God. At the outset of the story, God commands Abram to sever ties with his patrilineal kin, to leave his native land and *bet-ʿab*. Alliances, or *berit*, can compensate for estrangement from kin. Thus the *berit ben ha-betarim* follows directly upon Abraham's separation from Lot. The culminating *berit* between God and Abraham, however, is that linked to circumcision. It is expressed in a form quite parallel to the oath and *berit* between Jonathan and David. The covenant between God and Abraham is "between Me and you [plural] and your seed after you"⁶⁰ (Gen. 17:10). The linguistically expected conclusion to the formula "and My seed" cannot be added. This "absence" makes sense because God has no seed, but also fits into the interpretation proffered by Fox,⁶¹ that circumcision is a "sign" *whose function is to remind God to keep his promise of posterity* (to the descendants of Abraham, italics in original). From a slightly different but complementary perspective, it is

57. This development parallels that analyzed by Steiner, "Enslavement," wherein Joseph's kin ties to Jacob were severed and the narrative is sensitive to the new social bond linking them. His analysis is strengthened by the motive Joseph gives for naming his son (Gen. 41:51): "God has made me *forget completely* (emphasis supplied) my hardship and my *bet-ʿab*."

58. W. Horowitz and V. Hurowitz, "Urim and Thummim in Light of a Psephomancy Ritual from As-sur (LKA 137)," *JANES* 21 (1992), 95–115.

59. This is another example of overlap in conceptions concerning the Levites and the priesthood. The blessing refers to the episode in Exodus (32:25–29) in which the tribe of Levi aligns itself with Moses to punish the Israelites after their worship of the calf idol.

60. My translation.

61. Fox, "The Sign," 595.

perhaps because of the absence of “descendants” on the part of God, in whom to concretize the *berit* in each succeeding generation, the covenant is “sealed” (to use the rabbinic phrasing) in the “flesh” of Abraham and his descendants.

Circumcision is thus closely linked to concerns of fertility, but this cannot be seen solely in terms of patrilineal descent; the interplay between descent and alliance continues throughout Abraham’s career. On Moriah he is tested to see if he is willing to sacrifice his “only son.” Immediately after Abraham meets this spiritual challenge, the text (Gen. 22:20–24) provides genealogical information which introduces Isaac’s future wife.⁶² Alliance, both to God and in terms of marriage to an appropriate woman is an essential part of the continuity of the “seed of Abraham.”

More generally, circumcision appears to be associated with the voluntary creation of ties which then become kin-like, whether expressed in marriage or not. Abram himself was not born an “Israelite,” and when the covenant is established he circumcises himself. The narrative of the covenant and subsequent initial circumcision emphatically stresses that not only Abraham but all the members of his household, “the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring,” be circumcised as well (Gen. 17:12–13). These non-descendant outsiders are mentioned twice when God commands Abraham to circumcise, and twice again when Abraham fulfills the command (Gen. 17:23, 27). The possibility of people moving into the covenantal community, rather than being born into it appears to have been an important principle, even though it was not the main mode of recruitment into society.

The appearance of circumcision in the context of alliance appears elsewhere in the Tanakh. In the story of Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, and Shechem ben Hamor, the feigned alliance between Jacob’s sons and the people of Shechem is marked by the circumcision of the latter (Genesis 34). One of the stories of David’s links to a problematic enemy, with whom later it is necessary to feign an alliance (1 Samuel 27), also entails a hostile “circumcision.” Saul asks David to bring “one hundred Philistine foreskins” as the price of his daughter Michal (1 Sam. 18:25–27).

At least one anthropologist has noted the connection between alliance and circumcision in the Bible. Lévi-Strauss has distanced himself from structuralist analyses of the biblical text, claiming that the mythical component of the latter has been subject to an “intellectual operation” which makes it inappropriate for that method.⁶³ Nevertheless, in an article on the baffling story of Zipporah circumcising Moses’s son while they return to Egypt from Midian (Exod. 4:24–26), Lévi-Strauss compares circumcision to the use of penis sheaths among the Bororo—the former eliminating the foreskin and the latter highlighting it.⁶⁴ In both cases, affinal relationships are crucial, but the specific form differs because biblical society is patrilineal while the Bororo are matrilineal. In the Bible, Zipporah (not Moses) circumcises, and the story stresses a phrase—*hatan damim* (a *hatan* of blood)—which, while not well understood, may imply an affinal tie. In other ancient Semitic languages the root *HTN* signifies various

62. H. E. Goldberg, “Torah and Children: Symbolic Aspects of the Reproduction of Jews and Judaism,” in idem, ed., *Judaism Viewed*, 122.

63. C. Lévi-Strauss, “Réponses à quelques questions,” *Esprit* 31 (1963), 631–32.

64. C. Lévi-Strauss, “Exode sur *Exode*,” *L’Homme* 28 (1988), 13–23.

forms of family associations or rituals, indicating protection and clientage.⁶⁵ These meanings contrast with the link between circumcision and descent emphasized by Eilberg-Schwartz.⁶⁶

Marriage as Alliance and as Influence

Before examining the topic of circumcision in greater detail, the story of Jacob's sons and Shechem (Genesis 34) provides an entrance point into a greater appreciation of alliance as perceived in the narrative. Pitt-Rivers has discussed this story at length using Lévi-Straussian perspectives on marriage exchange,⁶⁷ and his analysis, representing a social-structural point of view, will be juxtaposed to several literary contributions. Pitt-Rivers sees the story as reflecting a turning-point in the history of kinship-social structure in the Mediterranean, wherein the restricted exchange of women, based on the equality of groups, is supplanted by the strategic use of marriage in an open market of differential power and status. The three stories in Genesis (12:10–20, 20:1–18, and 26), two involving Abram-Abraham, and one concerning Isaac, in which a patriarch presents his wife as a sister, making her available to a foreign ruler, are contrasted with the Shechem story in which the Israelites decide to withhold their women in an assertion of power and honor. An overall diachronic movement in Mediterranean history receives expression in Genesis: guests in the region initially provide sexual hospitality to the local kings who take them in but later, upon waxing strong, seek to withhold the women of their kin unit. It might be noted that Mauss also portrayed the patriarchs as “pastoral princes and warriors” who were “allies or hosts of Hittite, Philistine or Egyptian kings.”⁶⁸ He stressed their aristocratic nature in all the narratives, rather than a developmental sequence such as posited by Pitt-Rivers. It is therefore quite possible to set aside Pitt-Rivers's “historical” hypothesis, while linking his comparison of the sister-wife stories with the Shechem episode to the insights of literary scholars.

In a literary analysis of the narrative in the “Jacob cycle” of stories, Fishbane points out the parallel positions, within the overall sequence, of two stories in which women, Rebekah (chap. 26) and Dinah (chap. 34) are taken to the palaces of foreigners.⁶⁹ Examining Genesis 26 from the point of view of comparative folklore, Niditch sees all three wife-sister stories as examples of underdog and trickster tales⁷⁰ (in the Shechem story, too, Jacob's sons emerge victorious through a trick). She also indicates that the trickster motif plays a different role in the literary framework of the three stories. Genesis 26 is the most theological, demonstrating that Isaac is under God's patronage.⁷¹ Her analysis thus touches upon Pitt-Rivers's point of view, derived

65. J. Lassner, “The Covenant of the Prophets: Muslim Texts, Jewish Subtexts,” *AJS Review* 15 (1990), 226.

66. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 247, n. 12; 250, n. 3, notes that this episode comes from an earlier and non-Priestly source.

67. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem*.

68. Mauss, “Critique,” 529.

69. Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, 46–48.

70. Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*.

71. *Ibid.*, 64.

by him from Leach, which sees all the stories revolving around the theme of “whom shall Israelites marry?” in the context of varying political relationships with their neighbors.⁷²

Keeping both literary parallels and alliance theory perspectives in mind, what happens to the term *berit*? The term does *not* appear, in the first two sister-wife stories, even though each story ends with some sort of positive relationship with the local society. Abram is given livestock and slaves by Pharaoh (Gen. 12:16—does the text assume that on this occasion Sarai acquired her maidservant Hagar?), and also (later as Abraham) by Abimelech (Gen. 20:14). The King of Gerar and the patriarch do not, at this point, make a *berit*, even though Abimelech invites Abraham to “settle wherever you please” in his land. Later, Abraham does make a *berit* with Abimelech (Gen. 21:32), but this takes place only after God fulfills His covenantal promise by Sarah’s giving birth and Abraham keeps his part of the covenant by circumcising Isaac (Gen. 21:1–4). There appears to be a dual message that ultimately only God provides true protection, and that it is possible to maintain good relations, and even establish an alliance, *without* giving up women. If so, this message is repeated in Genesis 26, with regard to Isaac and Abimelech, where an explicit *berit* between the two is mentioned (v. 28), even though none of the people of Gerar ever lies with Rebekah (v. 10). The “defensive” marriage strategy outlined by Pitt-Rivers, of keeping “women within the group and avoid[ing] outside involvement,”⁷³ is already evident in the two wife-sister stories connected to Abimelech.

The desire for peaceful relationships with neighbors is obvious, but this can be in tension with the reluctance to take in foreign wives. The most obvious reason for the latter, according to Pitt-Rivers, is “the danger to the faith resulting from the introduction of women who do not belong to it by birth.”⁷⁴ One does not have to focus on Solomon⁷⁵ to sense this concern of the biblical writers. Ishmael (Gen. 21:21) who is given an Egyptian wife by his Egyptian mother, contrasts with Isaac who, in accordance with Abraham’s wish that he not marry the daughters of Canaan (Gen. 24:3), marries his father’s brother’s son’s daughter, who is brought to Canaan from Mesopotamia. The elaborate story of Abraham’s servant discovering Rebekah (Genesis 24), after she exhibits exemplary behavior,⁷⁶ emphasizes how appropriate she is to continue the tradition of Abraham. Isaac, after marrying Rebekah, manages to keep up good relations with Abimelech without exchanging women, but, at the end of that episode, their first-born son Esau marries local Hittite women who were a “source of bitterness” to his parents (Gen. 26:34–35). The contrast between Esau’s local marriages and the decision to send Jacob to Rebekah’s family in Mesopotamia is counterposed in the text (Gen. 27:46–28:2).⁷⁷

72. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem*, 139; E. Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London, 1969), 25–83.

73. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem*, 166.

74. Loc. cit.

75. Leach, *Genesis*, 46.

76. Sternberg, *The Poetics* (see n. 15 above), 138.

77. After the selection of Jacob, Esau moves closer to the central line of Abraham, taking a daughter of Ishmael as an additional wife (Gen. 28:9). See also Wander, “Structure, Contradiction,” 89.

It is precisely the delicate balance achieved by Abraham and Isaac, of having peaceful relations with neighbors, but maintaining sufficient autonomy to cultivate their special tradition, which is disrupted in the Shechem story. The story is prefaced with the statement that Jacob came *šalem*—safe, in one piece—to Shechem (Gen. 33:18).⁷⁸ He peacefully buys a parcel of land, reminiscent of Abraham's purchase from the Hittites (Genesis 23), and worships the "God of Israel" upon it. Shechem's violent act, and the subsequent revenge of Jacob's sons, upset this carefully managed situation of wholeness. While the people of Shechem seem to offer all the signs of alliance, including the exchange of daughters, it is suggestive that, correlative to the feigned agreement, nowhere is the term *berit* used.⁷⁹

With the sack of Shechem, Jacob's sons take the wives of the city captive. Following that (Gen. 35:1–4), God commands Jacob to build an altar in Bethel, and Jacob orders the members of his household to remove the foreign gods from their midst prior to this act of worship. There is a clear implication that the women selected for marriage, or even brought into the household with lesser status, have an influence on the continuity of tradition. This may be a "most unoriginal" observation,⁸⁰ but it is not trivial for two reasons. First, it underlines that these "patriarchal" stories directly recognized the influence of women in the religious life of their society.⁸¹ Secondly, it shows the biblical writers placing their concern with continuity right at the beginning of Israelite history. The political implications of marriage *cum* alliance is obvious to them, but they are not only opposed to idol worship imported by aristocratic in-marriage women. They also are sensitive to the impact of marriage on the socialization of the next generation.⁸² These considerations allow us to explore further aspects of the alliance-circumcision nexus.

Meanings of Circumcision

In Eilberg-Schwartz's debate with those who ignore or play down the maleness and sexuality associated with circumcision, he maintains that it is a "natural" sym-

78. On the term *šalem* and the associated *šalom*, 'peace,' in the context of kin relations and covenants, see Pedersen, *Israel*, 286, 314 and *passim*. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 51–53, cites Pedersen (but he does not appear in her bibliography!) when discussing "wholeness and completeness" in her interpretation of Leviticus, without noting that his analysis of these concepts, which leads to a discussion of the wholeness of the body, begins with a consideration of covenants.

79. While stressing the deception of Jacob's sons, the text also pictures the Shechemites as less than totally innocent actors, hoping to make the property of the Israelites theirs by agreeing to circumcision (v. 22). For an analysis of the narrative's portrayal of a variety of perspectives, while subtly conveying its own evaluation of Israelite exogamy and of the behavior of the various protagonists, see Sternberg, *The Poetics*, chap. 12.

80. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem*, 164.

81. Wander, "Structure, Contradiction," 96.

82. A major thrust of research for understanding the covenantal conception in ancient Israel, as expressed in the notion of the covenant at Sinai, has been to examine treaties in ancient Near Eastern societies. E. Gerstenberger, "Covenant and Commandment," *JBL* 84 (1965), 38–51, criticizes this approach, advocating that the covenant has to be understood against the background of ordinary social life, in particular the "family ethos." The present analysis accords with Gerstenberger's suggestion, which has remained a minority voice.

bol, inherently linked to the male reproductive organ, and not just arbitrarily selected as a sign of the covenant.⁸³ Without denying these associations, it should also be stressed that circumcision is an *act* which *changes* a fact of birth and thus may carry associations other than biological descent and continuity of the male line. The results of circumcision are birth-like, in that it creates an almost indelible impression upon the human body from an early age, but the act itself is an act of will. When performed at eight days, it must involve other people and easily becomes an indication of submission to another's (the group's and God's) will. Equally, it may be argued that the penis serves well as a sign of alliance—a symbol of connection par excellence⁸⁴—and thereby just as “naturally” can serve as a sign of a covenantal relationship as it can indicate male descent. Furthermore, depending on how one grasps the intention of the biblical authors, the understanding that circumcision is related to masculinity and fertility may be incorporated into views, such as those of the scholars with whom Eilberg-Schwartz debates, that the story of the covenant with Abraham is meant to carry a religious message. The biblical account assumes the common association between circumcision and fertility but, according to Fox, is worked into a framework of priestly etiologies of “signs.”⁸⁵ The shift to the time of birth from puberty, Fox suggests, may be a way of eliminating a magical grasp of circumcision and defining it as a “sign” of a covenant with God, without obliterating the notion that it is linked to fertility. While this particular linkage may characterize the priestly strand of the biblical text, the perception that human fertility is dependent on God is shared with other strands (e.g., Gen. 30:2; Ruth 4:13). The narrative thus works within the framework of existing cultural assumptions, but is engaged in an implied polemic with other world views.⁸⁶

According to this interpretation the account in Genesis 17, which implies that even though circumcision is moved to the age of eight days fertility will result if God wills it, may be complemented in the following chapter (Gen. 18:11–15) where the narrative stresses that Isaac is born despite Abraham's advanced age and the fact that Sarah is past menopause. Fruitfulness, the overall text seeks to teach us, ultimately is in the hands of God.⁸⁷

83. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 144.

84. Eilberg-Schwartz, *ibid.*, 149, also takes issue with S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes* (New York, 1904), 191, who points out the usages of *ʿorla* in reference to ears and the heart, seeing these metaphors as a tendency to “spiritualize” the meanings of body-based rituals. It should be noted that uncircumcised ears, and lips (Exod. 6:12) are impediments to *communication*. Fox, “The Sign,” 592, n. 69, too, discusses other biblical associations of non-circumcision.

85. Fox, “The Sign,” 589–90.

86. U. Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1975), 2:101–9, argues that biblical writers, while drawing on the literary traditions of Canaanite epics and mythology, are cautious not to utilize these materials in ways suggesting that they accept their religious world view. Recently, M. A. Friedman, “Tamar, a Symbol of Life: The “Killer Wife” Superstition in the Bible and Jewish Tradition,” *AJS Review* 15 (1990), 23–62, interprets the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) as directed against commonly accepted “superstitious” notions concerning women.

87. God's remembering Sarah—that she give birth (Gen. 21:1–2)—is preceded by the explanation that God “had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech.” Although the cultural context is very different, the message of the narrative might be compared with Schneider's view of the Yapese not acknowledging the role of fathers in procreation; see Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, 72–73.

In general, the fullest appreciation of the various meanings linked to circumcision may be achieved by moving beyond the stilted dichotomy of scholars who are open to comparative research and those who are not. Moreover, in carrying out comparison on the topic of circumcision, it would be useful to attend to the whole bundle of features in African initiation ceremonies which, Eilberg-Schwartz asserts, can shed light on biblical circumcision.⁸⁸ Such ceremonies typically instruct young men in the lore and law of a society. This raises the question as to whether biblical circumcision also has an educative function.

Circumcision and Education

The importance of education is indirectly suggested by one of Eilberg-Schwartz's cultural inferences: the parallel between pruning trees and the act of circumcision.⁸⁹ In addition to the connection with fertility which he sees in both instances, pruning imagery may imply cultural transmission and instruction. Pruning appears in Isaiah's (5:1–8) parable of God tending his vineyard—the house of Israel. According to Bendor, the types of agricultural work enumerated there all point to the care and investment of work necessary to cultivate a *kerem*.⁹⁰ Pruning is not so much an act which produces a one-time transition, but is part of a process of *careful and patient cultivation*. If the parallel between pruning and circumcision is valid, then the latter may be seen as one aspect, or perhaps the initial step, of a socialization process.

The link between circumcision and cultural transmission receives textual support in the narrative. After Abraham obeys the commandment to circumcise himself, Ishmael, and the members of his household, three men visit him and Sarah promising them a son to be called Isaac. God then decides to share with Abraham his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah, for He has “singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him” (Gen. 18:19). The singling out of Isaac, who shortly thereafter is the first person to be circumcised on the eighth day according to the commandment, suggests that the ritual not only marks membership in a group but also points to the perpetuation of a tradition.

In doing so, they underline that the relationship between individuals whose statuses *might* be glossed “father” and “son” is based on behavior rather than being. My view of Abrahamic procreation is somewhat different from that portrayed by C. Delaney, “The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate,” *Man* 21 (1986), 494–513. She states (p. 496), that people’s “belief about procreation are consistent with their cosmology,” seeing monotheism as reinforcing a monogenetic understanding of procreation in which women only provide the nurturant “field” for fetuses. See also Wander’s “Structure, Contradiction” analysis in terms of Middle Eastern patrilineal ideology and the practice of lineage endogamy. Following J. P. Fokkelman, “Genesis,” in Alter and Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide* (see n. 15 above), 43, the patriarchal stories contrast with the genealogies in the “primal history” section of Genesis (1:1–11:26). There, procreation is conveyed by the term *holid*, indicating male action (begot, sired). By contrast, in the patriarchal stories, “birth achieves the status of a miracle.” Again, as in the previous note, the stories may reflect *tension between* what Delaney (p. 510) calls “ultimate” concerns and generally accepted “intimate” understandings.

88. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 144.

89. *Ibid.*, 151.

90. Bendor, *The Bet-Ab*, 65.

The association of circumcision with cultural transmission is also reinforced by the connection between circumcision and the passover offering. That offering and accompanying rituals are explicitly linked to the duty of retelling the story of the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 12:24–27). Because only those males who are circumcised may participate in the passover offering (Exod. 12:43–49), a connection between circumcision and instruction in the tradition is indirectly established. It also should be noted that the passover offering explicitly is limited to a domestic setting (Exod. 12:3–4, 46).

If circumcision does carry with it notions of the transmission of group culture, and if it became widespread in ancient Israel to circumcise on the eighth day rather than close to the time of puberty (as Ishmael was circumcised at the age of thirteen; Gen. 17:25), then this may entail viewing the family, including the women in it, as central in perpetuating societal traditions. This stands in contrast to many tribal societies in which initiation ceremonies, including the transmission of tribal culture, entail the breaking away from the immediate family and the world of women. In the above-mentioned passages in Genesis (21:1–8), circumcision *does not* remove Isaac from the world of women. The weaning of Isaac is celebrated subsequent to his circumcision.⁹¹ The shift to eight days, therefore, is not only a numerical matter, and not only a matter of orientation toward sexuality and fertility, but also a cultural stand as regards ideal socialization.

These associations and the implied contrast with other societies may be relevant to the story of circumcision found in the book of Joshua (5:2–9). There, it is recounted that the Israelites who were born in the desert were not circumcised, but after crossing the Jordan into the plains of Jericho, God commanded Joshua to circumcise them after which they partook of the passover offering. No details are provided as to how all the males of a whole people were circumcised, but it seems reasonable that the assumption of the narrative is that each *bet-ʿab* circumcised its own members with the “flint swords” that Joshua was commanded to prepare. A link among these events is evidenced by the repeated use of the phrase *be-ʿešem ha-yom ha-zeh*, ‘the very day’ in reference to the first circumcision (Gen. 17:23), leaving Egypt and the passover offering (Exod. 12:17, 41, 51), and the circumcision upon entering Canaan (Josh. 5:11). Another link is found in the mention of the passover offering, depicted immediately afterwards. As stated, that sacrifice entails the recital of history. While there is no mention of education in the precise passages dealing with the mass circumcision organized by Joshua, much of the first part of the book of Joshua (1:1–5:1), which precedes this episode, is suffused with historical consciousness. It stresses how Moses’s leadership under God is being continued by Joshua, and describes the

91. A brief section of Isaiah (28:9–13) which is not well understood appears to associate those “weaned from the breast” with learning the alphabet. See W. W. Hallo, “Isaiah 28:9–13 and the Ugaritic Abecedaries,” *JBL* 77 (1958), 324–38. A. Demsky, “The Education of Canaanite Scribes in the Mesopotamian Cuneiform Tradition” in J. Klein and A. Skaist, eds., *Bar-Ilan Assyriological Studies* (Jerusalem), 157–70, notes that a scribal teacher was likened to a “father and mother” in relation to his students. It may be assumed that education within the family primarily entailed oral transmission while instruction based on written traditions took place in extra-familial contexts, but these sources suggest a recognition of the family as a site of learning. The story of Samuel’s early childhood cites weaning as marking his readiness for training outside the family circle (1 Sam. 1:22–24).

setting up of stones in order that the crossing of the Jordan be commemorated in future generations. When Joshua (4:21) addresses the Israelites: "When future sons ask their fathers: 'What are these stones?,'" he uses language directly reminiscent of the educatory function of the passover offering (Exod. 12:26, 13:8, 13:14—with the similarity particularly close in the last verse). Thus, the account of how the history of the Israelites was recapitulated and celebrated in Joshua's day is culminated by the mass circumcision (presumably in the context of the *bet-ʿab*), and the passover offering, on the eve of undertaking the new challenges of conquering Jericho.

Various commentators have been puzzled by the episode involving circumcision in Joshua, and the text there is felt by many to reflect a not too subtle redaction attempting to harmonize different traditions. Fox cites several views on that narrative, and sees Josh. 5:2–9 as evidence of an earlier form of puberty or adult circumcision among the Israelites.⁹² Whatever conjectures are made concerning practices at an earlier time period, the norm that emerged in Israel was to circumcise at the age of eight days, a principle that we suggest entailed placing important responsibilities for cultural training on the family.

Perhaps it is only coincidental that enigmatic acts of circumcision (subsequent to omitting the performance of the ritual operation) occur at the outset of the missions of both Moses and Joshua, but attributing an instructional function to circumcision may be related, albeit in an associative manner, to the episode in which Moses's wife Zipporah circumcises their son on the background of Moses having neglected to do so (Exod. 4:24–26). This episode may point to Moses's own ambiguous, and even failed, role as a transmitter of culture. Literary characteristics of this brief story clearly distinguish it from P; it is generally considered to be an earlier strand. Precisely because it stands out so blatantly in the narrative flow, the question of its surrounding context may be crucial in deciphering its meanings in the Tanakh as eventually constituted.⁹³

Just before the Zipporah episode (Exod. 4:22–23), God prepares Moses for his meeting with Pharaoh, commanding him to use confrontational language: "Thus says the Lord: Israel is my first-born son. I have said to you, 'Let My son go, that he may worship Me,' yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son." Right after the episode (Exod. 4:27), God commands Aaron, who is still in Egypt: "'Go to meet Moses in the wilderness.' He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him." Before the circumcision episode, the special role of first-born is highlighted, and right thereafter, Moses meets his elder brother Aaron, whom he now surpasses in a position of leadership. We are reminded here of the tension which pervades the stories in Genesis (and indeed other narratives) in which younger sons replace first-born and elder sons, becoming the transmitters of the heritage of Abraham and Jacob.⁹⁴

92. Fox, "The Sign," 593.

93. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 3–22.

94. On this theme in various narratives, see E. L. Greenstein, "Deconstruction and Biblical Narrative," *Prooftexts* 9 (1989), 61. There may be an echo of (and contrast with) the meeting of Jacob with Esau in the brief account of Aaron's meeting Moses. In both cases, the younger but "chosen" brother returns after a long absence. Aaron kisses Moses, just as Esau kissed Jacob, but without all the tension that precedes

Moses's place regarding the instruction of his own sons is problematic. The Tanakh recognizes rights of primogeniture (Deut. 21:15–17), and the story of the Exodus stresses the centrality of the first-born (Exod. 11:4–8, 12:29, 13:11–15). In Numbers (3:40–51, 8:16–19), however, it explicitly states that the special position given to the Levites replaces the status of the first-born in each family. Both Moses and Aaron are Levites, but it is Aaron who is granted the priesthood, a position associated with preserving and transmitting tradition. The area of education, in fact, is one in which Moses appears to be relatively inept.

Moses's first son, born in Midian, is named Gershom, which the Tanakh links to the term *ger* (stranger, foreigner), having Moses state: “I have been a stranger in a foreign land” (Exod. 2:22). Many commentators assume that it was Gershom who was circumcised by Zipporah (4:25), although the text does not make this explicit. Gershom *may* resurface in the Tanakh in the book of Judges (chap. 17), in the story of idol worship established by Micah of the Ephraim tribe, which the Danites transported to the North of the country. The text (v. 30) describes “Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Menasheh, he and his sons” serving as priests for the Danites in this idolatrous situation. One rabbinic commentator remarks that these priests, who accepted pagan forms of worship, were in fact descended from Moses, suggesting that the rabbis also had a sense that an area in which Moses failed was the instruction of his children.⁹⁵

Later, after the Exodus, we learn of a second son whom Moses named Eliezer, because “The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh” (Exod. 18:4). While not related to the manifest reason for the selection of the name, it is not coincidental that the name Eliezer also appears in Genesis as a man in charge of Abram's household who would inherit Abraham, were he not to give birth to his own son (Gen. 15:2–3). Both Eliezers have an uncertain status with regard to the transmission of wealth and of the Abrahamic tradition. The earlier Eliezer is not a kinsman (although he became a member of Abram's household), but could inherit under certain conditions. The latter Eliezer was born to an Israelite father, but had a Midianite mother (Zipporah) and remained with her after she was sent home by Moses (Exod. 18:2).⁹⁶ In any event, Moses appears as having limited impact in

that meeting. F. E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York, 1994), maintains that the term *bekor*, generally, translated as “first-born,” does not refer to primogeniture in a strictly technical sense but to any son chosen for a special inheritance. Parallel to this, he argues that the biblical stories featuring the preeminence of younger siblings are not so much about material inheritance as they are concerned with the transmission of the blessing linked to the special relationship with God. While finding merit in these claims and also considering them relevant to a general discussion of the links between ongoing social practice and ideal cultural values, I use the common translation of *bekor*, as this does not affect the thrust of the following discussion.

95. Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 109b. Menasheh appears in the Hebrew text with a raised letter *nun* (“n”). In Hebrew orthography, which omits vowel markers, Menasheh without a “n” can also be read MoSheH, or Moses. Another commentator claims that the text, out of deference to the lawgiver, hid this fact by “changing” Moshe to Menasheh, but still hinted at the connection by marking the “n” of Menasheh.

96. The similar names may hint to a more complex set of parallels. Genesis mentions Eliezer only once. It is widely assumed, from rabbinic tradition through “The Little Golden Book of the Bible,” that Abraham's senior servant of Genesis 24, who helped find Isaac a wife, was Eliezer. However, the servant

inculcating, within his own family, the tradition with which he was identified. The certainty, cited above, expressed by God with regard to Abraham, “that he will instruct his children,” does not apply to the leader who rescued the Israelites from Egypt. The episode recording Moses’s neglect of circumcision and Zipporah’s compensatory initiative, whatever its textual history, takes on meaning in relation to Moses’s equivocal record, echoed elsewhere in the Tanakh, in educating his children. Zipporah, like several of the wives in Genesis (Sarah, Rebekah, Tamar), seems to have a better sense than the menfolk of carrying out tradition within the family and a more profound understanding of what is necessary in order to preserve, intergenerationally, the special relationship with God. That biblical heroines are portrayed as ensuring survival and biological continuity in face of mortal danger⁹⁷ is an aspect of their “spiritual” sensitivity.

At the most general level, the link between circumcision and cultural reproduction is entailed in the mutual implication of alliance and patrilineal descent. Just as a *berit* between individuals from distinct *bate-ʿabot* is perpetuated in their descendants, so the meanings of the “sign” of alliance, circumcision, must become incorporated into collective memory (as God knew that Abraham would “instruct his children”). The *bet-ʿab*, including its female members, is central in this process of education.

These themes are highlighted in the patriarchal stories but continue, transformed, into the narrative milieu which features Moses. Moses marks a paradoxical turning-point in Israelite history: a disjuncture replete with elements of continuity. He falls short by not fulfilling the covenant with regard to his own family, but under his leadership the notion of *berit* becomes linked to the written tablets received on Sinai, and more generally to the laws and instructions that are, in the course of the Torah, passed on to all Israelites.⁹⁸ This does not replace the importance of oral transmission within the family, but enlarges the circle of contexts and means, within and through which, communal tradition is transmitted.

Some Comparative Perspectives

Asad criticizes anthropological theory for stressing only the “symbolic” side of ritual, as if ritual-borne messages were divorced from the settings in which they im-

is *not named* in a long narrative that conveys considerable detail (Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 169–70, for example, uncritically accepts the rabbinic assumption). Is the inference to be made that the servant is obviously Eliezer, but that once Abraham has a direct heir, the servant will not inherit so therefore “Eliezer” is not named? The biblical term for name, *šem*, carries connotations of ownership and inheritance (Bendor, *Bet-Ab*, 61–62). Moving to Exodus, we have the following episodes: a) Gershom (named) is born to Zipporah and Moses (2:22); b) Moses’s life is threatened by God, and Zipporah circumcises an unnamed son, saving Moses (4:24–26); and c) Zipporah, after having been sent home, returns to meet Moses with her father (Jethro) and two sons: Gershom and Eliezer (18:2–6). Both sets of episodes deal with the problem of outside alliances, marriage, and continuity of tradition. Ironically, “Eliezer” helps find a wife for Isaac, abetting his own disinheritance. Ironically, too, Zipporah saves Moses’s own life, by performing an act of continuity, but the circumcision of an unnamed son portends the withering of tradition within Moses’s family.

97. G. Feeley-Harnik, “Naomi and Ruth: Building Up the House of David,” in S. Niditch, ed., *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Atlanta, 1990), 163–84.

98. Gillian Feeley-Harnik (personal communication) points out the parallel paradox that Moses has “uncircumcised lips” (Exod. 6:12), yet becomes the communicator of the written law. See also n. 84 above.

pact upon people. He discusses the disciplinary consequences of rituals in medieval Christian monasticism, stressing the variety of ways in which texts are related to performances.⁹⁹ With reference to Islam, Eickelman, too, has argued for focusing on the specific settings in which a text is imparted to its adherents.¹⁰⁰ The Bible and later Judaism also created a ritual-instruction nexus, tightly attached to transmission within a family context.¹⁰¹ Rabbinic tradition placed the following refrain, regarding a male child, at the conclusion of a circumcision: "Just as he has entered the covenant, so may he enter Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds." The link between circumcision, "alliance," and education is made apparent. A recent study of Paul, who did not require physical circumcision, focuses on the term *huiothesia* ("adoption") in his letters, which both entailed a new form of communal inclusion and carried theological connotations.¹⁰² This contrast with Tanakhic and Jewish tradition also shows the importance of seeing rituals and theology in their social setting.

Broadening the comparative perspective, Bloch considers "different ways of being in history."¹⁰³ In several of his examples, the transmission of collective memory is tied to notions of kinship. He develops a contrast, formulated by J. Fox, between a classic view of African life in which a person's identity is fixed by descent, and an Austronesian pattern in which "kinship is created little by little . . . not through birth but through a continual becoming. . . ."¹⁰⁴ Perhaps biblical kinship, with its balancing of descent and alliance, may reflect a search for finding an optimal combination of being and becoming in transmitting collective memory and patterns of behavior. Principles of birth and behavior may be in tension, or they may reinforce one another. One of the purposes of education is to encourage the latter situation.

Conclusion

This essay, through an interpretation of circumcision in the Tanakh, raises some general issues with regard to the anthropological study of the Bible. It cautions that new approaches should not neglect older insights while showing that biblical associations with circumcision point in a variety of directions. Meanings embedded in social structure, in particular the distinction between descent and alliance, are relevant to understanding circumcision. Perhaps the symbolic power of circumcision stems from its expressing concerns both of patrilineality *and* alliance. Furthermore, the connection between alliance and circumcision provided the commonsense ground, in the world of ancient Israel, for religious notions envisioning a covenant between a people and its God. Circumcision also fits into the emphasis on transmitting religiously structured collective memory and commitments.

99. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 140.

100. D. Eickelman, "The Art of Memory: Islamic Education and Social Reproduction," *Comparative Studies in Social History* 20 (1978), 485–516.

101. Goldberg, "Torah and Children."

102. Atkins, *Egalitarian Community*, 169–90.

103. M. Bloch, "Internal and External Memory: Different Ways of Being in History," *Suomen Antropologi* 92/1 (1992), 3–15.

104. J. Fox, "The House as a Type of Social Organisation on the Island of Roti, Indonesia," in C. MacDonald, ed., *De la hutte au palais* (Paris, 1987), 174; Bloch, "Internal and External," 10. Schneider's understanding of "kin" relations on Yap, cited above (n. 87), appears to fit this pattern.

The suggested interpretations stem from an overall “bridging” or integrative approach to the study of Bible, as contrasted to the drawing of distinctions: the separation of elite from folk literature, or the differentiation between the sources of the Torah. Both sets of distinctions imply separation between segments of the population in ancient Israel, and while such distinctions and divisions characterized that society, “revealing” them is only a first stage of analysis. Further challenges lie in grasping how these various expressions of cultural creativity, and sectors of the population, impacted on one another.

Some scholars caution that the Tanakh, as it exists today, is the product of a cultural elite, exhibiting signs of selection and careful construction. This is the reason implied by Lévi-Strauss for *not* applying structuralist methods to its text. It is now eminently clear that the Tanakh is an intricately worked out literary creation.¹⁰⁵ Despite Lévi-Strauss’s caution, however, judicious application of structuralist methods to biblical material has produced results, one indication of which is a systematic exposition of the characteristics of structuralism in relation to various facets of biblical research.¹⁰⁶ Another point of view is concerned about citing material reflecting an elite way of life as representative of the wider society.¹⁰⁷ Neither of these objections contradicts viewing the biblical text through the eyes of folklore as it is currently conceived. While stemming from elite milieus, biblical authors are “composers practicing their art in accordance with a set of cultural expectations for those who share in that culture,”¹⁰⁸ which includes non-elite members of the society. Furthermore, it is not essential to define folklore as oral: “. . . characteristics that identify biblical narrative as traditional do not necessarily indicate oral traditional composition.”¹⁰⁹

In fact, one of the factors accounting for the enduring appeal of the Bible may be its commanding combination of immediacy and rootedness in local reality with the grand conceptions and commitments of the biblical *Weltanschauung*. Frazer sensed this tension, as underlined by Strathern: “The annals of savagery and superstition unhappily compose a large part of human literature; but in what other volume [than the Old Testament] shall we find *side by side* [Strathern’s emphasis] with that melancholy record, psalmists who poured forth their sweet and solemn strains. . . .”¹¹⁰ We no longer are surprised to find “side by side” both the “advanced” and the “primitive.” It is precisely the challenge of linking sophisticated cultural creations to quotidian social life and conceptions which now faces anthropologists approaching the biblical text.

105. See the references in n. 15. Leach’s basic claim (*Genesis*, 8–11), deriving from Lévi-Strauss, that themes are reiterated (even when transformed) in various biblical stories, is supported by many of these studies, but a gross structuralism, innocent of the language of the text, misses subtle shifts built into the narratives. In Niditch’s *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 11, she remarks that many of those who have applied structural analysis focus on one story, overlooking Lévi-Strauss’s original emphasis on comparing various versions.

106. R. M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (Philadelphia, 1977).

107. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 11–14.

108. Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 12.

109. *Ibid.*, 11.

110. Frazer, *Folklore*, xi; M. Strathern, “Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 28 (1987), 251–81.

A somewhat parallel set of considerations arises in relation to the division of the biblical text into diverse sources. One need not totally follow Leach, and disregard “the unscrambling of omelettes,”¹¹¹ by ignoring research which has isolated distinct traditions within the Tanakh. On the other hand, many anthropologists normally will be attracted to interpretations which tend to integrate, rather than separate: redaction criticism instead of source criticism, in the terminology of biblical scholarship. Many scholars attribute the redaction of Torah literature, and eventually the Tanakh as we know it today, to priestly circles. This very general claim, however, only begins to approach the issue, with many questions outstanding concerning the stages of a long process which currently are only barely anchored in time or social context.

Above, a study by Knohl was cited, which examines differences between the Holiness Code (designated by H) and other priestly literature. It shows that the school of H represents a consistent effort at linking P traditions with popular religious sources. Knohl further suggests that the priests of the H school, whom he places in the second half of the 8th century B.C.E., played a central role in beginning to edit diverse sources which ultimately formed the Torah.¹¹² One result of this thrust was the formulation of rules for the ordinary Israelite which were parallel to the regulated life of the priests in the Temple.¹¹³ This religious process assumes that priests and laity did not live in completely separate worlds, as some source criticism seems to assume. Rather, some cultural features of everyday life, in the cities and in the countryside, were shared, even on the background of social divisions and competing conceptions.

The attempt made here, which interprets the circumcision story found in the parts of Genesis generally designated P on the background of society-wide concepts, is consonant with such a historical conception.¹¹⁴ It also sees itself allied with other “bridging” approaches. It might be noted that viewing Genesis as a unit is highlighted both by those who stress its intricate narrative construction *and* by those who look at it as folk literature. Some of these authors are prepared to call into question the usefulness of the established division into sources as a basis for understanding Genesis.¹¹⁵ Research seeking to understand the notions embedded in ancient Israelite social structure, too, need fit in with source criticism only when this proves productive.

More than 80 years have passed since the appearance of Frazer’s *Folklore in the Old Testament*. By now, there exist scores of studies (if not hundreds), by anthropologists alone, which relate to biblical materials. The list grows immensely if one

111. Leach, *Genesis*, 80–81.

112. Knohl, *The Sanctuary*, 96–98, 183–208; see also Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 26–27.

113. Knohl, *The Sanctuary*, 169–75.

114. I also feel that there is a consonance between Fox’s analysis of circumcision and Knohl’s approach, even though Knohl does not cite Fox and Fox does not distinguish between P and H in his discussion. Fox assumes that P is earlier than Deuteronomy, although he does not present his analysis as dependent on that assumption (“The Sign,” 559), while Knohl, *The Sanctuary*, 96–97, n. 148, sees the circumcision account in Genesis 17 as the work of P, except for slight redactive additions on the part of H in vss. 7–8 and 14.

115. Rendsburg, *The Redaction*, 100–106; Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 39. D. A. Knight, “The Pentateuch,” in D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker, eds., *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia, 1985), 272, notes that “Pentateuchal research has, largely . . . reconstruct[ed] a history of the literature. . . . There has been, in comparison, remarkably little synchronic study of pericopes.” This situation has recently changed with regard to biblical narrative, as noted in Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 15–16, but began to gather momentum only in the 1970s (see n. 15).

includes students of folklore. Still, some scholars seeking to apply anthropology to the Bible begin their discussions by justifying the enterprise, as if they were starting at the beginning. Anthropologists would do well to relate their work, in a fine-tuned manner, to the results of other disciplines in understanding the biblical world. Bringing to bear the insights of sociological analysis, while staying sensitive to the highly nuanced associations of the biblical text, is one possible direction. With regard to biblical scholars, it would do well for them to realize that anthropological work no longer is limited to “tribal societies” and “primitive religions,” concepts which themselves have long been called into question. Anthropologists do not today view their subject matter as constituted by pristine and isolated cultural worlds. Both contemporary and historical state-organized societies, and cultures based on literacy, are grist for the anthropological mill as much as kinship units and “folk religion.” Anthropology has contributed, more than other disciplines, to the interpretation of sociocultural forms in small face-to-face settings, but is also fully aware that what transpires in local settings reflects more comprehensive social structures and more general cultural processes. Analyzing “local” aspects of the world implied by the biblical text, *in relation to* the broader social and religious fabric of which they were a part, may be a productive area for further work combining the strengths of anthropology and established biblical scholarship.