

# The Woman Between Separatist and Originary Christianity

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**Abstract:** Jewish practices were reconstructed after the post-Babylonian exile period, helping to build a legalistic interpretation of their laws. From then on, women began to be seen with contempt, contributing to circumcision being seen as a ritual of male predominance over women. The Jewish patriarchal system was inserted women among minorities. The woman began to be discriminated against during the period of her menstrual cycle (pure and impure), because she was not circumcised or for the simple fact of having been born a woman. It is in this context that Christianity arises, based on the discourse of equality, promoted by the baptism ritual announced by John. This rite represents the symmetry idealized by Paul, in which all are equal in Christ Jesus (Gal 3, 28). For the construction and elaboration of this research, the bibliographic research should be used as a method of studies, developed based on published materials such as magazines, books, dissertations and Theses, which will help us in the interpretation of the place of the feminine in the period of the original Christianity and in Paulo.

**Keywords:** Christians, Jews, Separatist, Baptism, Circumcision

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## 1. Introduction

In addition to the existence of other much older codes of Laws, Jewish Law was created for the Hebrew community during its period of social construction. The text will highlight the four codes of fundamental laws of the Hebrews, such as the decalogue (Ex 20, 1-17; Dt 5, 1-21), the code of the covenant<sup>1</sup> (Ex 20, 23-26; 21-23.1-33), the code of deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 12-26) and the code of sanctity (Lv 17-26), as well as the oral tradition, which served as the only source of knowledge of its ancient practices and traditions.

This text has the characteristic of working on the interpretation process of Jewish practices, before and after the period of Babylonian exile. Circumcision expresses well the way in which the Jewish community designated itself in face of the differences promoted by the patriarchal culture, and by the reinterpretation of its Laws over the years. This contributed to the woman being triple discriminated against by her own community. For the simple fact of being a woman (patriarchal), for not being circumcised (covenant pact) and for the Purity Laws promoted during her menstrual cycle

(pure and impure).

Christianity established a new format for interpreting the Jewish Laws. Baptism aimed to promote equality, dignity and brotherhood among all. Now, both men and women, children and slaves, could be part of this new ritual that does not discriminate, nor did it separate Jew and Gentile, slave and freedman, male and female, pure and impure, circumcised and uncircumcised.

## 2. The Jewish Law

In the formation of a society, some factors must be observed for its existence. Some old communities realized the importance of codes of conduct (Laws) for the good functioning of their society. Some are dated to 2050 BC, as is the case with the Laws of *Ur Nammu*. Since then, other codes of Laws arise, such as: the Code of *Eshnunna* in 1930 BC, the Code of *Lipit-Ishtar of Isin*, from the year 1870 BC. Among these, perhaps one of the most significant is the Mesopotamian Code of *Hammurabi*, dated in 1780 BC [12].

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<sup>1</sup> The covenant code is possibly the oldest code in the Old Testament.

The oral tradition<sup>2</sup> was the only form of knowledge existing in the ancient period. It was gradually replaced by the need for writing, which started to insert in the stones the knowledge and codes of Laws of its time, establishing limits to the fulfillment of its rules and norms, in order to promote the Law and order of its communities.

The Hebrew people emerged in the midst of different religious beliefs and through the constitution of their Laws. The Law has always been something of paramount importance to the Hebrew people, [4] helping and contributing to building their society. Nevertheless, they are found in the Old Testament writings (Torah)<sup>3</sup> four codes of Laws fundamental to the Hebrew people: the decalogue (Ex 20, 1-17; Deut 5, 1-21), the code of the covenant (Ex 20-23, 33), the code of deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 12-26) and the code of sanctity (Lv 17-26) [16].

Alongside the written torah there were, even before the advent of the Christian era, numerous traditions transmitted orally: it was the oral torah. This tradition of the ancients consisted of customs and practices enshrined by past generations and, therefore, considered legitimate and unrestricted observance of the law. In time, these norms were also attributed to Moses. In addition to the written law, Moses would also have received the oral law at Sinai. The Ber. 5a is able to substantiate this statement in Exodus 24: 12b: "I will give you tablets of stone, the law and the commandment which I have written to teach them." The interpretation given to this half verse is as follows: the "stone tablets" are the Decalogue; the "law" is the Pentateuch, that is, the written law; the "commandment" represents the oral law, that is, the *Mishnah*; "what I wrote" is an allusion to prophetic books and other biblical writings; and "to teach them" indicates the interpretation of the *Mishnah* (Guemará) preserved in the *Talmud* [11].

Highlights that before the Babylonian exile period (586-538 BC) the Semites did not watch over the divine Laws, and sought to follow their own instincts. It was after the reform promoted by Ezra and Nehemiah, that the new social structure of a people was consolidated, that they came to be called Jews. The observance of the Laws took on a proportion never seen before, creating a new social and religious identity. The new Jewish conceptions started to be built around legalistic practices, such as the use of circumcision, keeping the Sabbath and the Law of the pure and the impure [17].

The Jewish legalistic conception began in the period of Babylonian captivity, where the *golah*<sup>4</sup> community

(deportees, the elite of the people) separated from the *indigenous* people (the people who stayed on the land and were not taken into exile, the poor) [10]. The *golah* differed from the natives for not being contaminated by the Babylonians, helping to raise awareness of the practice of non-mixing, contributing to the construction of a pure society without the need to be contaminated with other peoples of its time.

It was at this time that the separation between Jews and Samaritans definitely took place.<sup>5</sup> The mixing of races, since Assyria's conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, has gradually distanced the inhabitants of Samaria from those of Judea (2 Kings 17). The Jews did not regard the Samaritans as true Israelites. The Persian policy of favoring Jerusalem brought disappointment to the Samaritans. Regarded as an impure race, the Samaritans did not feel comfortable participating in the worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. This provoked the desire to build his own Temple, which happened later, probably just before or at the beginning of the Greek period (333 BC). This Temple was destroyed in the period of the Hasmoneans. "In 128 BC, the Jews, under the command of John Hyrcanus, destroyed the Temple on Mount Garizim. And, although it was no longer rebuilt, the Samaritans remained faithful to their holy place" [17].

### 2.1. The Woman According to the Jewish Legalist Interpretation

After the period of the Babylonian exile, circumcision came to be respected and guarded by all Jews very strictly. Cutting the foreskin was not an exclusive Jewish practice, but also a very ancient custom used by the Egyptians. According to Asnis [1] the term in Hebrew used to describe the word "circumcision" is *brit milá*. The prefix *brit* means "covenant", and the suffix *milah* translates to "cut off a part". Therefore, the word "circumcision" can be understood as "the covenant of cutting". This ritual, later, took the place of the sacrifice of human beings (Gn 22: 2) performed through the divine punishment that forced the sacrifice of their firstborn son<sup>6</sup>, and his burial at the entrance to the house.

Martin Luther's relationship to the Jewish "legalism" of justification by works must be questioned. In Luther's conception, the Jews sought salvation through the works of their Laws, according to their own merits (meritocracy) (Rom 3: 28). Thus, it is clear that the Law does not dialogue with the proposal of salvation presented by Luther, as it has different characteristics. It helps to promote the separation of a people through the delimitation of their borders and their religious practices. In practice, and according to the Semitic

<sup>2</sup> For Judaism the oral law is necessary. Several arguments are adduced to prove this need. First, the written torah is difficult to understand, requiring explanations and clarifications.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word *Torah* primarily meant "priestly guidance", but since Deuteronomy it already indicated a book summary of obligatory traditions attributed to Moses. During the post-exilic period, the meaning that became normative of the "Torah" as an obligation of the Covenant was established, communicated, through Moses in Sinai, to Israel as an elected people (SIQUEIRA, 1996 *apud* RUBINI, 2015, p 53).

<sup>4</sup> Even today, the word *golah* is used to refer to the Judaites and Israelites who live outside the perimeter of Israel.

<sup>5</sup> The reasons for the separation of the Samaritans, although they had a religious dimension, were mainly political. The split with the religious practice of Jews, especially in relation to the Temple in Jerusalem, was a consequence of the political separation of the provinces of Samaria and Judea (RUBINI, 2015, p. 48).

<sup>6</sup> Sacrifices to the god Molech was a constant practice among the Amorite peoples. In the rites of worship, parents threw their children alive to be burned in the womb of a statue of the god Molech that burned in flames, in addition to sexual practices. This practice was prohibited, and such offender would suffer due punishment (Lv 20: 2-5).

understanding, the Law granted privileges, placing the Jews above other peoples and nations. States that there was a consensus built enmity between Israel and the other surrounding peoples (Eph 2: 14), as recognized as "brothers", only circumcised, and foreign (uncircumcised). They are granted the title of "dogs" (Phil 3.2; Mc 7.27). They also said that one should not eat or sit at table with a Gentile (1 Cor 5, 11), nor enter his house (Heb 10, 28) nor marry one of them (Ed 10, 14, 17, 18) [4].

Circumcision is biblically appointed as the symbol of the link between the Jews and their God (Yahweh), an expression of the covenant with the divine that each Jewish man carried in his own body. However, it is worth remembering that this practice did not allow any person to enter the covenant of the covenant, but that it guaranteed the individual the possibility of becoming a Jew [8]. They separated "them" and "us". What was supposed to be an alliance, a pact between Yahweh and his people through the *praxis* of circumcision, came to be understood as a legalistic movement that separated peoples. The practice of circumcision, the pure and impure of the Jews and the Jewish Laws, acquired over time anthropocentric interpretations that helped to promote the separation between Jews and Gentiles.

The good news of the *praxis* of circumcision, promoted Jewish social integration, in the period when children and slaves were seen as material goods "*res*" (things, objects) of their patriarch (Gn 17: 12-13). Slaves, not knowing the Laws, were considered "cursed" (Jn 7, 49). Justifies that the father had the power of life and death over his family members (children, wife and slaves), to define their destinies and to punish them in case there was disobedience. Their daughters could be sold as sex slaves or even concubines [9]. The enslavement of a circumcised (Jew)<sup>7</sup> it was not well regarded among the Jewish community, which accepted it as long as it was practiced by people of other ethnicities [7]. The covenant of the covenant gave children and slaves the right to equality through circumcision promoted by the Jewish community in the period of biblical antiquity. Circumcision placed the marginalized (children and slaves) on an equal footing with others.

In the covenant of the covenant there was no place for inequality. In a period when patriarchy was the predominant system, it was *right* that the interpretation of the circumcision ritual was directed to the male community, holder of the power relations of that ancient period. The interpretation of the Jewish Laws stated that God (Yahweh) did not address only Abraham, but the entire male community, forgetting the female: "The eight-day-old son will then be 'circumcised', every 'man' in your generations [...]" (Gn 17, 12).

The divine Laws served as a guide to a newly created nation, so that they could discern its precepts. The biggest problem with the enactment of a Law was the capacity for its interpretation. This problem was no less onerous among the

new community of Hebrews (1400 BC), nor among the Jews of the post-Babylonian exile (538 BC) and the Jewish Christians of the first century (30 AD) who interpreted their Laws in accordance with their needs and understandings.

Crüsemann (1987) emphasizes that not only the Bible, but also the holy book of the Jews (Torah) needs to be discovered and interpreted, given the historical and social situation in which it arose. The author also suggests that the Old Testament Laws do not resemble Jewish legalism [3]. Kolatch (1981) on the other hand, attests that the Jewish Law was never static, it continued to change and grow with each generation". For him, today's Jews agree that the Mosaic Law is configured as the only source of Jewish customs, and not as a structure [5].

The great problem to be highlighted by Israel in the construction of its Laws was not based on their observance, but on their process of understanding. In the first century of the Christian era, there were two main schools of interpretation of the Jewish Laws that differed from each other: the Hillel school (very open) and the Shammai school (very strict). There was fear that both schools could end up becoming two *Torot* [5]. There was no consensus regarding Israel's interpretation of the Torah texts.

Circumcision made Jewish patriarchy much more severe with women, turning the symbol of covenant (union) into an act of separation between men and women. According to Maldonado (2003) there was a space for women inside the Temple that limited them to the atrium of the Gentiles. Another form of social exclusion of women within the Jewish family culture established that they should not be taught the *Torah* (holy book of the Jews). Going to school was a privilege given only to boys, except for a few high-ranking families. There was a separation between men and women inside the synagogues, who had to remain silent and could not teach (1 Cor 14, 34-36).<sup>8</sup> Circumcision separated women from the Jewish religion, making circumcision a purely religious and legalistic [12].

Genesis 17: 3 describes that the woman did not have the mark on her flesh: "[...] and my covenant will be in your 'flesh' for a perpetual covenant", and that is why she should be excluded from Jewish religious practices. The circumcision ritual was supported by the Jewish patriarchal conception, which literally "swallowed" the woman socially. By not participating in public life, she isolated herself in her household chores. A justification for female socio-religious exclusion was the fact that she was not circumcised,<sup>9</sup> for being impure (menstrual blood) or simply for being born a

<sup>7</sup> There are different concepts of slavery among the Hebrews. The discussions revolve around the narrative of the existence or not of Jewish slaves in the ancient Near East period.

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars admit that this pericope was irresponsibly inserted into the text, perhaps by sympathizers of Jewish patriarchy. Paulo, according to his letters, would never try against the female community.

<sup>9</sup> In Muslim circles where female circumcision is practiced, two terms are used in canonical sources: *khitan al-sunnah*, or *al-sunnah*, which means "circumcision according to the tradition of Muhammad", the cut of the prepuce of the clitoris, without the total amputation of it. Some experts in Islamic law say that the clitoris must remain, others claim that this name qualifies the elimination of the clitoris and labia minora, thus there is no consensus on eliminating only the hood, glans or the entire organ, whose lexicon is also used to contrast it with the practice of infibulation (VENCHI, 2008, p. 5).

woman..<sup>10</sup> It so happens that the restriction of the ritual of circumcision practiced by the opposite sex (men), was already used in the Jewish patriarchal society as a “sign of the justice of the Mosaic faith” [18]. Female circumcision was already performed by other peoples, but the Jewish woman, for not being part of this custom, was not counted in the statistics of the people: “not counting women and children” (Ex 12, 37).

The exclusion of women from cults is procedural, slow and definitive. During the Second Temple period, a differentiated female space was created to witness the ritual sacrifices of animals in the sanctuary courtyard. There are disagreements among thinkers: some believe that this space has always existed; others consider that it was created in the renovation of the Temple made by Herod, at a very late time [9].

The Jews had a big problem with a woman's menstrual blood, further helping her exclusion from the Jewish socio-religious context. In the book of Leviticus 12: 1-7 there are Laws on impurity during a woman's childbirth, and chapters 17: 19-30 describe the Laws on impurity during her menstruation. Jewish tradition also excluded part of their community for considering them impure, and contact with them should be avoided, as in the case of tax collectors and tax collectors, shepherds, butchers, etc. The Jewish community went beyond the limits of the purity rituals required by the Levitical Laws, which should express the holiness of God and his people, but it became a type of "collar". It was during the intertestamentary period that some norms became more demanding, trying to impose on the people the rigor of certain practical observances [15].

## 2.2. *Originary Christianity and the Christian Message*

Christianity aimed to promote social interaction among ancient peoples, stating that the separatist model promoted by circumcision was inconsistent with the Christian message. The baptism used by John the Baptist helped to build social equality between Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, even women who were once excluded by members of their own community for not being circumcised now enjoy the right to equality promoted by the ritual of baptism. De La Cerna (2014) warns that for Paul, the spirit received at baptism replaces the old covenant (2 Cor 3, 6) and transforms us into “true circumcised” (Phil 3, 3). Baptism sought to replace circumcision, the “faith that works in charity”, the Law. It is in Galatians (Gal 3: 26-28) that Paul makes the most extraordinary proclamation on the richness of baptism and unity in Jesus Christ [4].

Baptism was already a known ritual by the Jewish community, as no one seems to have been scandalized by the fact that John the Baptist baptized both proselytes and Jews (Mt 3: 5-6; Lk 3: 10-14). The Essenes had in their communities several baptismal tanks, while the Jews washed themselves several times a day. In Matthew 15: 2 Jesus is warned by the Pharisees why his disciples without washing

their hands. After healing a leper, Jesus invites him to immerse himself in water so that he can stay clean (Lv 14, 8) [13]. The author continues:

The second type of immersion was required of the convert to the Jewish religion. A proselyte to Judaism should perform three acts as an indication that he had become a Jew: “receive circumcision”, “subject to a ritual bath” and “offer sacrifices”. With regard to the ritual immersion bath, the rabbis considered the act itself as the same experience that the Israelite ancestors went through at Mount Sinai [13].

Baptism promoted by John, as well as being a ritual of purification of the outer parts of the body and his garments, and was intended to promote “repentance” *metanoia* μετανοεῖν of the baptized. This meant “born again” *anōthen* (John 3: 3-5), a new conception, a new spirit, a new understanding. In consent to circumcision which was the sign of the covenant made with the people of Israel, baptism had become a sign of the new covenant for those who believe in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 4: 11; Gal 6: 14; Col 2, 13). For this reason, baptism is called “the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2: 11).

Paul harshly criticizes the Jews for the use of false circumcision: “Beware of dogs, beware of those who do evil, beware of false circumcision [...]” (Phil 3: 2-3), and states that the true circumcision was practiced in the heart: “No! He is a Jew inwardly, and circumcision is done in the heart” (Rom 2: 29). In Deuteronomy 10: 16 it says: “Circumcise, therefore, your spiritual heart; remove all carnal obstruction, and cease to be unyielding and stubborn”. Baptism takes on a contrary proportion to the legalistic religious practices promoted from the perspective of circumcision. This ritual gave voice to women who came to be respected, welcomed and placed on the same level of equality as slaves and free; of Jews and Gentiles; of men and women (Gal 3, 28). Baptism placed peoples, ethnicities and nations on the same level of equality. There were no longer any spaces for discrimination.

For those who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female; for all are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3: 26-28).

The original Christianity helped in the interpretation of the Mosaic Laws against the legalism practiced by the Jewish community, established rules of social interaction through the inclusion of the excluded and inserted the feminine within a new Christian conception based on equality and solidarity of all.

## 3. Conclusion

This text helps us understand that the interpretation of Torah throughout the entire period of history has never been static, nor will it be. In each era and in each period of history, one can see the existence of a different Judaism. Interpretations arise, methods capable of analyzing texts and contexts are adopted that will help us in the responsible interpretation of sacred texts. Today's understandings are varied, as they use models that are supported by cultural

<sup>10</sup> In Jewish morning prayers, many Orthodox Jews thanked God that they were not born a Gentile, slave, and woman.

changes that continue to take place.

Judaism turned circumcision into a purely legalistic ritual, rejecting not only Gentiles but also those of its own community. The woman started to be triple discriminated, for being a woman, for her menstrual impurity and for not being circumcised. Christianity, is the counterpoint of Judaism, and must be interpreted not as an antinomian religion, but an inclusive one.

There is, therefore, a need for precise norms in all areas of life so that the will of God can be carried out on a daily basis and, in this way, sanctify life. Here there is, of course, the danger of casuistry. But it is born out of a legitimate concern to spend a lifetime with the divine will. Second, it is understood that God has already manifested everything we need to know in order to carry out his will; everything is already expressed in the Scriptures. There is no need to create new laws, but to properly interpret existing ones [11].

Christianity served as a counterpoint to Jewish legalistic practices and the development of its interpretation, which aimed to promote the separation of one people (Jews) at the expense of the others (Gentiles).

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