

Joshua 5:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

At that time the LORD said unto Joshua, Make thee sharp knives, and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time.

Analysis

At that time the LORD said unto Joshua, Make thee sharp knives, and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time.

The command to renew circumcision marks a crucial moment of covenant renewal before military engagement. The phrase "at that time" (ba'et hahi, בְּעֵת הַהִיא) specifically refers to the period after crossing Jordan but before conquering Jericho—a time when Canaanite demoralization (verse 1) created a strategic window. The Hebrew charavot tsurim (חרבות צרים, "sharp knives") literally means "flint knives," indicating use of stone tools for this ceremonial act even though bronze and iron were available.

The phrase "circumcise again" (shub mul, שׁוב מֹלֵך literally means "return circumcise" or "circumcise a second time." This doesn't mean re-circumcising previously circumcised individuals but renewing the practice that had lapsed during wilderness wandering (explained in verses 4-7). The entire generation born in the wilderness—those who would conquer Canaan—remained uncircumcised, outside the covenant sign God established with Abraham (Genesis 17:9-14).

Theologically, this demonstrates that covenant privileges require covenant obedience. Military victory would come through divine power, but God's people must first return to covenant faithfulness symbolized in circumcision. The timing is significant—circumcision would temporarily incapacitate the warriors (compare

Genesis 34:25), making Israel vulnerable to attack. Yet God commanded it, testing whether they would trust Him or prioritize military pragmatism. This illustrates that obedience to God's commands must precede reliance on His promises—faith without works is dead (James 2:26).

Historical Context

Circumcision originated with Abraham's covenant (Genesis 17:10-14), serving as the physical sign of covenant membership for males. Egyptian records and mummies confirm that circumcision was practiced by various ancient peoples, but its covenantal significance in Israel was unique. For Israel, circumcision symbolized not merely ethnic identity but covenant relationship with Yahweh, marking the male organ of generation to signify that covenant blessing passed through family lines.

During the forty years of wilderness wandering, circumcision ceased—possibly due to logistical challenges of moving camp, divine judgment on the rebellious generation (Numbers 14:26-35), or both. This generation born in the wilderness had not experienced the Passover in Egypt, the Red Sea crossing as children, or received the covenant sign. Now, before entering Canaan, they needed covenant incorporation.

The use of flint knives rather than metal implements probably reflects ancient tradition. Zipporah used a flint knife to circumcise Moses' son (Exodus 4:25), suggesting this material held ceremonial significance. Archaeological sites from this period confirm continued use of flint tools for ritual purposes even after metal technology became common. The conservative nature of religious ritual often preserves ancient practices long after technological advancement.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What does God's insistence on covenant circumcision before military conquest teach about the priority of spiritual obedience over practical concerns?
2. How does the temporary vulnerability that circumcision created test Israel's faith, and what parallel 'vulnerabilities' does obedience sometimes create for believers today?
3. In what ways does New Testament 'circumcision of the heart' (Romans 2:28-29; Colossians 2:11-12) fulfill and transcend the Old Testament physical rite?
4. What spiritual disciplines or markers of covenant faithfulness might contemporary believers be neglecting for the sake of pragmatic concerns?
5. How does baptism function similarly to circumcision as a covenant sign marking believers and their children as members of God's people?

Interlinear Text

לֹךְ	עֲשֵׂה	הַיּוֹשֵׁב	עַל	אֶל	יְהוָה	בְּהָאָמָן	תְּבַעַת
At that time	H1931	said	the LORD	H413	unto Joshua	Make	H0
H6256		H559	H3068		H3091	H6213	
knives	thee sharp	again	and circumcise	H853	the children	of Israel	
H2719	H6697	H7725	H4135		H1121	H3478	
שְׁנִית:							
the second time							
H8145							

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 30:6 (References Lord): And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.

Deuteronomy 10:16 (Parallel theme): Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.

Exodus 4:25 (Parallel theme): Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.

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