



# Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America

By Leonard B. Glick

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The book of Genesis tells us that God made a covenant with Abraham, promising him a glorious posterity on the condition that he and all his male descendants must be circumcised. For thousands of years thereafter, the distinctive practice of circumcision served to set the Jews apart from their neighbors. The apostle Paul rejected it as a worthless practice, emblematic of Judaism's fixation on physical matters. Christian theologians followed his lead, arguing that whereas Christians sought spiritual fulfillment, Jews remained mired in such pointless concerns as diet and circumcision. As time went on, Europeans developed folklore about malicious Jews who performed sacrificial murders of Christian children and delighted in genital mutilation. But Jews held unwaveringly to the belief that being a Jewish male meant being physically circumcised and to this day even most non-observant Jews continue to follow this practice. In this book, Leonard B. Glick offers a history of Jewish and Christian beliefs about circumcision from its ancient origins to the current controversy. By the turn of the century, more and more physicians in America and England--but not, interestingly, in continental Europe--were performing the procedure routinely. Glick shows that Jewish American physicians were and continue to be especially vocal and influential champions of the practice which, he notes, serves to erase the visible difference between Jewish and gentile males. Informed medical opinion is now unanimous that circumcision confers no benefit and the practice has declined. In Jewish circles it is virtually taboo to question circumcision, but Glick does not flinch from asking whether this procedure should continue to be the defining feature of modern Jewish identity.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Baby girls in the United States are spared such treatment, and laws are now in place to protect them. Glick provides readers with a wealth of information to question how this different treatment of patients based on gender can be acceptable, and he asks them to agree with him that it is not."--*The Historian*

"*Marked in Your Flesh* is an ambitious study of the ancient rite of circumcision, which has been central to the demarcation of Jewish identity from biblical times to the present. There have been many studies of circumcision, but Leonard Glicks is distinguished both by its impressive historical range and its sophisticated commingling of anthropological and textual methodologies. Through painstaking analysis the author has unmasked many of the socio-cultural and religious underpinnings of circumcision. *Marked in Your Flesh* should appeal to anyone interested in this practice."--Elliot R. Wolfson, Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University

"*Marked in Your Flesh* shines as the rarest of beasts-a book that is learned yet accessible, deeply serious yet profoundly entertaining. Glick writes with one eye carefully checking footnotes while the other eye compassionately keeps watch over the precious newborn babies that are his ultimate subject. This engagingly written book contains lessons applicable to all of us concerned with protecting human rights and human well-being against encroachment by cultural and social forces."--J. Steven Svoboda, Founder and Executive Director, Attorneys for the Rights of the Child

#### About the Author

Leonard B. Glick is a cultural anthropologist with a medical degree and a doctorate in anthropology. He is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Hampshire College and is the author of *Abraham's Heirs: Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe* (1999).

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