

# JOSHUA 5:1–9

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## THE NEW GENERATION CIRCUMCISED

In addition to being the site of a stone monument, Gilgal was also the site where the children of Israel participated in three important ritual or covenant ceremonies before commencing the conquest of Canaan: the circumcision of all the men born in the wilderness (Joshua 5:2–9), the celebration of the Passover (verse 10), and the eating of the produce of the land (verses 11–12).

Although circumcision was a common custom in the ancient Near East (typically practiced for what were considered to be hygienic purposes), the practice had covenant significance for the children of Israel. Circumcision, of course, was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham (see Genesis 17:10–14). The circumcision of the Israelite men at Gilgal was meant to renew that covenant and demarcate a new, faithful generation of men who were about to undertake the conquest of Canaan.<sup>1</sup>

The Lord signified His approval of this action in Joshua 5:9 with His declaration, “This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you. Wherefore the name of the place is called Gilgal unto this day.” There is a pun in the Hebrew of this verse: the Lord said He “rolled away” (Hebrew *gll*, “to roll away”) the reproach of Israel at the place of *Gilgal* (which etymologically seems to be related to the word for *wheel* or *circle*). This verse, and others like it in Joshua (for example, 4:9), is one of the rare moments in the text where the narrator injected himself into the story to explain the origins of something to his readers, a feature called etiology, common in ancient storytelling. Compare Genesis 32:32,

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<sup>1</sup> This mass circumcision of the men of Israel stands in sharp narrative contrast with the mass circumcision of the men of Shechem in Genesis 34. In the case of the faithful Israelites at Gilgal, the text implies that they will prosper militarily because of their faithfulness in keeping the commandment to be circumcised, whereas the men of Shechem met their demise when Simeon and Levi exploited the Shechemites’ post-circumcision soreness to attack and defeat them.

where the narrator explains a custom practiced by the Israelites in his day as originating with Jacob's encounter with a mysterious man at the ford of Jabbok.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See the overview of biblical etiologies in David S. Farkas, "Etiologies in the Bible: Explicit, Double, and Hidden," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2017): 229–236.