



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 20 | Number 3

Article 5

9-2019

Circumcision in the Old Testament

Ryan J. Wessel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Wessel, Ryan J. "Circumcision in the Old Testament." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 20, no. 3 (2019): 59-71. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol20/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Matt Reier, Sacrament Meetings. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

The teachings of symbolic circumcision of the heart can help an individual focus on the personal commitment to God that underlies outward religious acts.

Circumcision in the Old Testament

RYAN J WESSEL

Ryan J Wessel (wesselrj@churchofjesuschrist.org) is an instructor at the Mesa Institute of Religion.

It can be awkward to say the word *circumcision* in the gospel classroom. The problem lies in that many students (and some teachers) know just enough about the physical process of circumcision to make mentioning the topic uncomfortable but not enough of the religious history and symbolic meaning to gain much spiritual insight from classroom time dedicated to the topic. Yet the concept of circumcision is related to many chapters in the Old Testament; it is interwoven into scriptures relating to the Abrahamic covenant, the Exodus from Egypt, the promised land, and teachings of multiple Old Testament prophets.¹ An understanding of the religious significance of circumcision in the Old Testament not only teaches gospel principles directly, but also helps students more fully understand other Old and New Testament messages. Further, circumcision was important enough culturally and religiously to be practiced by Jehovah's covenant people for over two thousand years. Skipping or glossing over the topic might not be the most effective practice.

This article will explore the concept of circumcision in the Old Testament through the eye of a gospel teacher and consider how the concept can be part

of an edifying classroom discussion. While articles that explore the concept of Old Testament circumcision already exist in the literature of the Restoration, most deal with the concept as either part of an explanation of the Abrahamic covenant² or part of an exploration of the New Testament debates about the continuation of circumcision.³ This article adds to the literature in two ways. First, it seeks to be comprehensive by considering every Old Testament reference to the topic, including those related to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Jeremiah, and others. Second, it is written with a gospel classroom in mind. A thorough study of the concept of circumcision in the Old Testament reveals that current covenant concepts find compelling antecedence in circumcision. Studying how the ancients honored this rite can help those in modern times better honor their own covenants.

Beginnings

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him to establish a covenant with him. The Lord promised that Abraham would be “a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4), that the Lord would give unto him “the land wherein [he was] a stranger” (Genesis 17:8), and that his “children [would] be known among all nations” (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 17:9).⁴ As a token of this covenant, the Lord commanded, “Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you” (Genesis 17:10–11). Abraham was further commanded that whenever a male child was born in his extended household, the child should be circumcised when eight days old (Genesis 17:12). On the day he was commanded, Abraham took all the males of his household and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin. Abraham himself was also circumcised as a token of the covenant that God made with him (Genesis 17:23–26).

Why use circumcision as a token of this covenant with Abraham? One reason might be the connection between the Abrahamic covenant and posterity. When Abraham desired posterity, the Lord told him, “he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir” (Genesis 15:4). Ishmael was born soon thereafter. However, it was not until after Abraham’s circumcision that Isaac was born (Genesis 17:23–26; 21:3). While no explicit connection is made in the text, it is interesting to note that Abraham’s covenant posterity arose from his covenanted body. Isaac was quite literally born of the covenant.

Lauri Hlavaty uses this connection to posterity to suggest a possible reason why circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. She writes: “It is interesting that chapter 2 of Abraham, in which the Abrahamic covenant is again discussed, does not mention circumcision at all. It does, however, reiterate the fact that Abraham’s posterity—the seed of his body—would be partakers of this covenant. This is perhaps why circumcision, rather than a pierced ear or tattooed arm, was the emblem of the pre-Christ covenant with Abraham.”⁵

The timing of circumcision also seems to be deliberate. Text unique to the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 17:4–7, 11 reveals one reason for circumcision and its timing:

And God talked with him [Abraham], saying, My people have gone astray from my precepts, and have not kept mine ordinances, which I gave unto their fathers; and they have not observed mine anointing, and the burial, or baptism wherewith I commanded them; but have turned from the commandment, and taken unto themselves the washing of children, and the blood of sprinkling; and have said that the blood of the righteous Abel was shed for sins; and have not known wherein they are accountable before me. . . . And I will establish a covenant of circumcision with thee, and it shall be my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations; that thou mayest know for ever that children are not accountable before me until they are eight years old.⁶

Thus, Restoration scripture reveals that circumcision was intended, at least in part, to supplant false rituals and incorrect concepts regarding infant culpability that had apparently gained acceptance in Abraham’s time. Circumcision at the age of eight days was a reminder that for the first eight years of life “little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in [Christ]” (Moroni 8:8; see Mosiah 3:16). It seems that circumcision helped Abraham and his family understand their relationship with their children. When viewed through a Restoration lens, circumcision was a reminder, held in the place of the body most closely related to having children, that eight precious years were gifted to parents to prepare their next generation to be God’s covenant people.

The Words of Circumcision

An understanding of the words used to command circumcision can provide insight into what Jehovah was requiring of his people when he commanded circumcision. In Hebrew, the words used to command circumcision speak

of irreversibly removing something forbidden from the most intimate part of the body. This type of complete, intimate, and irreversible commitment becomes an inspiring example for the depth of commitment possible in all covenants God offers his people.

As recorded in Genesis 17:11, Jehovah commanded Abraham to “circumcise the flesh of your foreskin” or, in transliterated Hebrew, to *unemaltem et basar orlatkem*. Ignoring conjugations and prepositions, there are three Hebrew words in this command that are immediately relevant: *mul* (“to cut,” “to circumcise”), *basar* (“flesh,” “man”), and *orlah* (“foreskin”).

Mul is translated as “to circumcise” or “to cut off.” *Mul* and the possibly related verb *namal* (both are used in Genesis 17:10–12 and translated as “circumcise” in the KJV) occur forty-one times in the Hebrew Old Testament.⁷ The Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Joshua usages refer to a physical circumcision. The Deuteronomy and Jeremiah references speak of a symbolic circumcision of the heart. Other possibly related usages in Psalms speak of cutting something in pieces or destroying it.

Basar can be rendered in English as “flesh” or “man.” It is a common word, with 270 appearances in the Old Testament.⁸ It refers to meat, or the corporeal part of a living thing. This is the word used in the description of Noah’s time when Jehovah laments that all flesh (*basar*) had become corrupted and is to be destroyed (Genesis 6:12–13). It is also used in the descriptions of cutting and burning the flesh of the bullock or ram during ritualistic sacrifice (Exodus 29:14, 32).

Orlah is most often translated as “foreskin,” but is also translated as “uncircumcised” or “forbidden.” Of the sixteen times this Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament,⁹ thirteen instances are translated in the KJV as “foreskin.” In two places, Genesis 34:14 and Jeremiah 9:25, it is translated as “uncircumcised,” describing a group of people that is unworthy or noncovenantal. Finally, in Leviticus 19:23 *orlah* is also translated as “uncircumcised” but is not a reference to the covenantal rite or to noncovenantal people. It is part of a prohibition on eating fruit from a young tree. Eating *orlah*-fruit, or uncircumcised fruit as the KJV calls it, is forbidden for the first three years of a tree’s growth. Other English translations, such as the New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version, clarify this by using instead the English word “forbidden.” In addition to these sixteen occurrences of the word *orlah*, the closely related noun *arel* occurs thirty-five times in the Old Testament, all of which are translated as “uncircumcised” in the KJV.¹⁰

Without delving into a philological discussion of Hebraic nuances, the basic linguistic understanding presented here is perhaps enough to help students begin to draw symbolic gospel principles from Jehovah’s original command. In one interpretation, Jehovah is asking Abraham, and all the covenant people of his family, to symbolically cut off the forbidden from the most private part of their flesh in a way that is complete, intimate, and irreversible. The foreskin is cut off and destroyed. Those who take this cut cannot turn back and become what they were before, and the foreskin is completely, intimately, and irreversibly abandoned.

Complete, intimate, and irreversible abandonment of wickedness, symbolized graphically yet effectively by circumcision, is part of the requirements of discipleship. In Luke 9:62, the Savior says, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” In Doctrine and Covenants 38:42 the Lord invites the Saints to “go ye out from among the wicked. Save yourselves. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord,” a verse reminiscent of the Lord’s command through Isaiah to “touch no unclean thing” (Isaiah 52:11). The Book of Mormon prophet Benjamin taught, “The natural man is an enemy to God, . . . and will be, forever and ever, unless he . . . putteth off the natural man” (Mosiah 3:19). In each of these cases, God’s people are invited to permanently cut the ungodly out of their lives as an act of religious devotion.

Ideally, the modern person’s choice to abandon wickedness and commit to God, symbolized in today’s rites such as baptism, is made as completely, intimately, and irreversibly as the ancient man’s circumcision cut. Modern religious commitments find conceptual antecedence in circumcision’s linguistic message.

Continuity

Following its biblical beginnings with Abraham, the practice of religious circumcision in the Old Testament was passed down from generation to generation, almost continuously, for two thousand years. That continuity is an inspiring example of multigenerational religious observance.

After Isaac was born, Abraham circumcised him at the age of eight days (see Genesis 21:4). While not specifically mentioned in the scriptures, we can easily assume that Jacob was circumcised, as were each of his twelve sons. Simeon and Levi’s own circumcisions are implied by their mention of the

necessity of circumcision to Sechem and his people (see Genesis 34:14–15). Joseph brought a circumcised people into Egypt (Genesis 46).

Joshua reveals that during the Israelites' bondage in Egypt the practice of circumcision continued (Joshua 5:4–5). When Moses was born in Egypt, his mother hid him three months (Exodus 2:2). It is arguable whether Moses was circumcised during this time, but he is certainly aware of the practice, as evidenced by his own son's circumcision at the hands of his wife (see Exodus 4:25). Under the law of Moses, newborn males were circumcised at the age of eight days (Leviticus 12:3), and strangers who desired to keep the Passover were circumcised (Exodus 12:48). Joshua states that he brought a circumcised people into the promised land (Joshua 5:7).

After Joshua, the practice of circumcision is given little textual attention throughout the rest of the Old Testament. In the KJV the English word *circumcise* appears only twice after that time when Jeremiah makes symbolic reference to circumcision of the heart (see Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25). The English word *uncircumcised* is used more frequently but is still scarce in the rest of the Old Testament. The word appears eight times in the history chapters as a derogatory reference to people not of the covenant (see Judges 14:3; 15:8; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:26; 36; 31:4; 2 Samuel 1:20; 1 Chronicles 10:4). Isaiah uses it once, equating being uncircumcised with being unclean (Isaiah 52:1). Jeremiah uses the word on two occasions, speaking of having uncircumcised ears and hearts (see Jeremiah 6:10; 9:25–26). Finally, Ezekiel uses the word sixteen times in four different chapters, speaking of dying uncircumcised or dying with the uncircumcised and of bringing the uncircumcised into the sanctuary (see Ezekiel 28:10; 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24–30, 32; 44:7, 9).

The lack of textual attention paid to the practice of circumcision, however, does not mean it was not happening. In fact, these references are chronologically spaced such that they create a continuous chain throughout Old Testament times. Abraham was circumcised in approximately 2000 BC, Samson mentions circumcision around 1150 BC, Jonathan around 1050 BC, Isaiah approximately 700 BC, and Jeremiah around 600 BC. The conjecture that the practice continued to the end of the Old Testament (Malachi prophecies around 400 BC) and through the intertestamental period is substantiated by New Testament statements on circumcision (see Luke 1:59, for example).

It is inspiring to realize that from generation to generation, with very few documented exceptions, the covenantal rite of circumcision had

multigenerational staying power. One can imagine the personal commitments, family traditions, religious continuity, and societal mores that were required to keep this rite alive for two thousand years.

This is perhaps an example of the goal Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles mentioned in the October 2015 general conference when he said: “Like Nephi of old, I was born of goodly parents in the gospel and they of goodly parents back six generations. . . . I am so grateful for a multigenerational Latter-day Saint family, and I know this is a worthy goal for all of us to strive for.”¹¹ While six generations of faithfulness are a good start, one can imagine the personal commitments, family traditions, church teachings, and societal mores that *will be* required to keep the modern covenantal rites of baptism, priesthood ordination, and temple ordinances alive for two thousand years and beyond. The example of the ancients with circumcision shows us that such longevity is possible.

The Second Circumcision: A Collective Rededication

There are two recorded times where the rite of circumcision was not performed by covenant people of the Old Testament. First, it seems that Moses neglected the ordinance of circumcision while in Midian. Exodus 4 contains a somewhat cryptic story in which the Lord seeks to kill Moses, and then Moses's wife, Zipporah, circumcises their son (Exodus 4:24–26). The Joseph Smith Translation of these verses clarifies the impetus of these events: “The Lord was angry with Moses, and his hand was about to fall upon him, to kill him; for he had not circumcised his son.”¹² In Joseph Smith's reading of the story, Zipporah saves Moses by attending to the previously neglected circumcision of their son.

Second, there is an intriguing break in the practice of circumcision during the Israelite's forty years in the wilderness. As Israel wandered, they did not circumcise. Speaking of Egypt, Joshua records, “Now all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, *them they had not circumcised*” (Joshua 5:5; emphasis added).

Commentators have suggested various reasons why Israel did not circumcise while wandering in the wilderness. There seems to be some consensus around the explanation that circumcision was temporarily discontinued as a mark of divine disfavor precipitated by their disbelief in God's promise that they could oust the inhabitants of the promised land.¹³ Other explanations for

not circumcising while wandering include nonnecessity (there was no need to distinguish between Israel and other nations) and divine favor (circumcision would have been difficult while traveling). Ultimately the scriptures do not state directly why the practice was discontinued.

The practice, however, was not discontinued forever. After arriving at the promised land and crossing the Jordan, the Lord commanded Joshua to reinstate circumcision among the children of the generation that had come out of Egypt. “Make thee sharp knives,” Jehovah commanded, “and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time” (Joshua 5:2).

Why did the Lord call this circumcision the second time? It is certainly not the second time religious circumcision had happened in the Old Testament. Clearly, many young boys had been circumcised on many occasions between this episode and the beginnings in Abraham’s time. The text of Joshua 5:7 makes clear that this second circumcision is also not a reference to another cut on the already circumcised but is a first circumcision of those born in the wilderness. It states, “And their children, whom he raised up in their stead, them Joshua circumcised: for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them by the way” (Joshua 5:7). These are the children that had been explicitly exempted from the reproach of Egypt because of their young age (see Numbers 14:29), as well as the children born while wandering.¹⁴

It seems that this second circumcision is the second time God’s chosen people had been circumcised *as a group*, the first being when the rite was instituted with Abraham and his family. This episode is an example of collective rededication. In Joshua 5:9, when God “rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you,” the “you” is plural in Hebrew. It seems that at Gilgal, God not only reaccepted the persons, he reaccepted the people and symbolized this group rededication by reinstating circumcision.

The idea of collective rededication is intriguing, and many other examples exist. When King Josiah realized the wicked ways of his people, “all the people stood to the covenant” and burned the idolatrous vessels in the temple (2 Kings 23:1–4). When King Anti-Nephi-Lehi spoke to his people, “all the people were assembled together” and buried their weapons of war (Alma 24:16–17). King Benjamin’s people “all cried with one voice” to attest to their repentance (Mosiah 5:2). In modern Church history, the communal rededication and rebaptisms of the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57 have this same flavor.¹⁵



Abraham Taking Isaac to be Sacrificed, Del Parson, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

As a token of the covenant, the Lord commanded, “Every man child among you shall be circumcised.” After Abraham’s circumcision Isaac was born, which meant Isaac was quite literally born of the covenant.

Isaiah aptly described this possibility of collective rededication, “For a small moment have I forsaken *thee*; but with great mercies will I gather *thee*” (Isaiah 54:7; emphasis added). Note that in this text, the pronoun *thee* references a symbolically personified group Israel, and the verse’s popular application to an individual applies by extension of the principle.

What if today's covenant people sought for not only individual repentance but also collective rededication in, say, a sacrament meeting? Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, "The purpose of partaking of the sacrament is, of course, to renew the covenants we have made with the Lord."¹⁶ Certainly this refers to the experience of an individual, but can it also refer to the group? The history of Joshua's second circumcision implies that this is possible.

A communal rededictory experience, like that experienced by Joshua's people, might include a realization that unfaithful actions taken individually, such as Sabbath breaking or violation of the Word of Wisdom, have spill-over group effects. The group might commit to each other and to God to more fully create a safe space where individuals can seek to overcome personal problems in a nurturing environment. A ward might together acknowledge that many in the group suffer from similar spiritual maladies and communally seek God's forgiveness. As wards or families collectively rededicate themselves to God, collectively repent, collectively forgive, and collectively cut out the forbidden, the Lord can "[roll] away [their] reproach" as they covenant anew with God (Joshua 5:9).

The names of the locations where this second circumcision took place encapsulate the promise of God's mercy to the group. The rite of circumcision is refreshed at *Gibeath-haaraloth* in a place called *Gilgal* (Joshua 5:3, 8). While some Bible translations use the Hebrew transliteration of both terms, the KJV translates *Gibeath-haaraloth* as "hill of the foreskins." *Gilgal* means "circle of stones" or "rolling." The significance of these names is given in Joshua 5. It reads, "And it came to pass, when they had done circumcising all the people, that they abode in their places in the camp, till they were whole. And the Lord said unto Joshua, 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" (Joshua 5:8–9; emphasis added). These names become reminders of what was left behind (*Gibeath-haaraloth*, or a "hill of the foreskins") and what was gained (*Gilgal*, or "reproach rolled away") during this second circumcision.

An Everlasting Covenant

The Lord told Abraham, "my covenant shall be in your flesh for an *everlasting covenant*" (Genesis 17:13; emphasis added). If circumcision is referred to as an everlasting covenant, why does the modern Church not practice it religiously today? While this is a question possibly better answered in an essay

dedicated to understanding the arguments surrounding circumcision in the New Testament, two Old Testament books, Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, give clues.

Addressing a numerous people who were a living fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, the writer of Deuteronomy uses the concept of circumcision to invite them to internalize their commitment to God. "The Lord had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day," he records. "*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked*" (Deuteronomy 10:15–16; emphasis added). Later in Deuteronomy, scattered Israel is promised that they will be gathered to "the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers" (Deuteronomy 30:5). "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 30:6; emphasis added). This reference to circumcision of the heart is clearly not a physical act but a symbolic invitation to internalize the commitments associated with circumcision.

Later, Jeremiah laments that Israel did not internalize these commitments. "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart," Jeremiah says (Jeremiah 4:4). And later, "Their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hear; . . . for all these [other] nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart" (Jeremiah 6:10; 9:26).

Deuteronomy and Jeremiah seem to imply that the physical act of circumcision is wasted when unaccompanied by an internal commitment to God and his covenants. In this symbolic sense, God's covenant people today still circumcise their hearts as an act of religious devotion. It seems, then, that when the Lord told Abraham, "my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant" (Genesis 17:13), the covenant was everlasting, but the sign was not.

What can the modern covenant keeper learn from this example? While it is true that circumcision is not a religious rite that outwardly defines the Latter-day Saints, many other outward actions are visible signs of one's devotion to God. Signs such as Sabbath observance, adherence to the strictures of the Word of Wisdom, or payment of tithes and offerings can be outward signs of religious devotion. History has demonstrated that the nature of these outward signs can be changed by modern prophets.¹⁷ What is everlasting

is the commitment to God that these signs represent. If these outward acts, whatever their prophet-defined contemporary flavor, are not accompanied by a “circumcision of the heart,” they fail to qualify the individual for God’s favor.

Conclusion

Much can be learned about modern covenants by studying the Old Testament rite of circumcision. First, the language used to command circumcision can be a model for the complete, intimate, and irreversible way in which modern people can “cut off” the “forbidden” from their lives. Second, the long history of near-continuous circumcision is a rousing example of what is possible when covenants are taught from generation to generation. Third, the episode of Joshua’s second circumcision is a testament to God’s redemptive nature, both to the individual and to the group. And finally, the teachings of symbolic circumcision of the heart can help an individual focus on the personal commitment to God that underlies outward religious acts. Perhaps discussing circumcision in a classroom will always be a bit awkward by the nature of the topic and the customs of current culture. However, when connected to the concepts of deep commitment, collective redemption, and internal devotion, the concept of circumcision in the Old Testament can become a powerful tool for teaching those in modern times how to better honor their own covenants. **RE**

Notes

1. See Genesis 17, Exodus 12, Joshua 5, and Jeremiah 4 for examples.
2. See Monte S. Nyman, “The Covenant of Abraham,” in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 155–70; and Jared T. Parker, “Cutting Covenants,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009).
3. See Gaye Strathearn, “Fallible but Faithful: How Simon the Fisherman Became Peter the Rock,” in *The Ministry of Peter, the Chief Apostle*, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr., Eric D. Huntsman, and Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 226–46.
4. Joseph Smith Translation Genesis 17:9, in Community of Christ, *Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible* (Independence, MO: Herald House Publishing, 1970), 83.
5. Lauri Hlavaty, “The Religion of Moses in the Book of Mormon,” in *The Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 103–24.
6. Joseph Smith Translation Genesis 17:4–7, 11, in *Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible*, 82–83.

7. James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1890). Strong’s Hebrew #4135 (*mul*) and #5243 (*namal*).
8. Strong’s Hebrew #1320.
9. Strong’s Hebrew #6190.
10. Strong’s Hebrew #6189.
11. Ronald A. Rasband, “I Stand All Amazed,” *Ensign*, November 2015, 89; emphasis added.
12. Joseph Smith Translation Exodus 4:24–26, in *Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible*, 117–18.
13. For a summary of arguments, see G. W. Blaikie, “Why Was Circumcision Suspended in the Wilderness?,” *Biblical Illustrator*, electronic database. See also Numbers 14:11–34.
14. If one takes as definite cutoffs the ages described in Numbers 14:29–33, men under forty years of age would have been circumcised during this second circumcision. This raises the possibility that there may have been a group of men present at the second circumcision who were already circumcised. Men forty to fifty-nine years old at the time of the second circumcision were considered too young to be barred from the promised land under the condemnation of wandering imposed forty years earlier (Numbers 14:29; 32:11). They would have been circumcised as babies in Egypt (see Numbers 26). If one assumes that this group was present for the second circumcision, there is no evidence suggesting that these people were somehow circumcised a second time.
15. For information on this period, see Paul H. Peterson, “Reformation (LDS) of 1856–1857,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1197.
16. L. Tom Perry, “As Now We Take the Sacrament,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 41.
17. Examples of changes include the duration of Church meetings on the Sabbath day, the interpretation of the phrase “not by commandment or constraint” in the Word of Wisdom (Doctrine and Covenants 89:2), or the definition of “surplus property” in calculating a full tithing (Doctrine and Covenants 119:1–4).