

# The British Royal Family's Circumcision Tradition: Genesis and Evolution of a Contemporary Legend

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## Abstract

The birth of Prince William's son in July 2013 was the occasion for an outpouring of media speculation about the fate of the royal baby's foreskin. The possibility that he might be circumcised was connected to a purported tradition of circumcision within the British royal family, said to have been initiated either by Queen Victoria or by George I. In this article, we trace the origins and evolution of these stories and assess their validity. Our conclusion is that belief in a royal circumcision tradition derives from the reported circumcision of Prince Charles by the mohel Jacob Snowman in 1948, and the efforts of the British Israelite movement to concoct a "lost tribes of Israel" origin for the British race. These elements merged into a fully developed narrative that was widely disseminated from the late 1990s. The initially separate claim that the tradition was imported from Hanover by George I can be sourced precisely to 2012. We further show that these stories are inventions, and that the royal family circumcision tradition should be regarded as a classic instance of a contemporary legend or urban myth.

## Keywords

circumcision, British royal family, Queen Victoria, contemporary legend, factoid, Jacob Snowman, British Israelites

## Introduction

If blood is a special substance (as Faust and Talking Heads maintained), royal blood is in a category of its own. When the cultural heritage of royalty is combined with the rituals of an ancient religion, the result is likely to be a fertile source of gossip and stories, both factual and invented. A case in point was the media commentary on the birth of Prince William's son in July 2013 and the breathless (not to say prurient) speculations on the fate of his penis. As routine circumcision lost favor in Britain during the 1950s, one's natural assumption was that the baby would be treated like any other British-born boy; but according to London's Daily Telegraph there is something "odd" about the British royal family that placed a question mark over his foreskin (Wallop, 2013). That something is the family's alleged "tradition of circumcision." The tradition is usually stated to have begun with Queen Victoria, but in the media free-for-all inspired by Prince George's birth, some news outlets and commentators pushed it right back to the beginning of the 18th century and the first of the Hanoverians. What is striking about the media and the online commentary is that nobody seems to have questioned the veracity or even the likelihood of these claims—a deficiency that we aim to correct in this article.

## Three Versions of the Legend

In their contemporary presentation, accounts of the royal family's circumcision tradition take three forms:

1. Queen Victoria believed the British royal family, and thus herself, to be descended from King David, and accordingly circumcised all her male children, beginning with Albert Edward (later Edward VII). This story was retold in countless media features, websites and blogs at the time of Prince George's birth, and can also be found in several academic publications, such as Shalom Goldman's *God's Sacred Tongue* (2004), which states,

As late as the mid-nineteenth century influential British aristocrats . . . adopted a "British Israelite" ideology. . . . Though this group later discredited itself with its reactionary politics and thinly veiled anti-Semitism, certain of its ideas still persist in the upper reaches of British society. . . . some insist on a biological connection between English royalty and the ancient Davidic kingship. Queen Victoria seems to have subscribed to this Davidic theory and had her male children circumcised by a Jewish ritual circumciser, a mohel. Both Edward VII, the duke of Windsor, and Charles, the current Prince of Wales [sic],

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were circumcised by a well-known London physician and mohel, Dr. Jacob Snowman. (p. 21)

Goldman's source for these claims is an article in a popular Jewish magazine by Edgar Schoen (1997), a retired American MD with strong pro-circumcision sympathies, a point to which we shall return. Brian Morris, a professor of molecular biology at the University of Sydney, similarly states on his website *Circumcision: An Evidence-Based Appraisal*,

The British Royal Family and the upper classes are circumcised and the lower classes and those who left school before 17 much less so. Queen Victoria believed her family descended from King David (of the Biblical Old Testament) and sanctioned circumcision. (Morris, 2013a)

## 2. A version of Queen Victoria story in a recent American pregnancy manual takes a slightly different angle:

Circumcision was unheard of by Christians in Europe or America until after 1841, when Queen Victoria's doctor (who had travelled through Africa and the Middle East) advised her to circumcise baby Prince Albert [i.e., Edward]. Victoria did, was happy with the results, and the British royal family has kept the tradition ever since. (No source given; Jones & Jones, 2004, p. 403)

Here it is not Victoria's belief about her ancestry that determined her decision, but a recommendation from her medical advisor. On the face of it, this story has greater plausibility, though it is by far the least commonly heard, and surfaced only briefly on Twitter at the time of Prince George's birth (Jones, 2013).

## 3. A third version of the story seems to have been newly minted in response to the birth of Prince William's baby in July 2013, namely, that the circumcision tradition was introduced by George I on his arrival from Hanover in 1714. According to an article in the *Jerusalem Post*, widely copied in other (especially the United States) media,

Since the time of King George I (1660-1727), new-born male-members of the Royal House of England have been ritually circumcised. . . . Queen Victoria, known for her more prudish sentiment, was certainly not amused by foreskin and had all her male offspring circumcised. (Weiniger, 2013)

Not surprisingly, the article gives no source for these claims, and does not tell us whether the Hanoverian dynasty were already practicing circumcision back in Germany, or whether "the tradition" started only on their arrival in England.

## Royal Circumcision Tradition: Birth of a Contemporary Legend

It is not clear when the Queen Victoria story first emerged; like all urban legends its origins are obscure and perhaps

impossible to pin down. An early sighting is the article by Edgar Schoen cited by Professor Goldman, "The circumcision decision," in which Schoen laments the decline of routine circumcision in the United States, stresses the medical benefits supposedly associated with it, and hopes/predicts that the trend away from circumcision will reverse. Along the way he adds historical tidbits on the connection between circumcision and royalty:

Queen Victoria, convinced that the British royal family was descended from King David, had her male offspring circumcised. This tradition continued through Edward VII, the Duke of Windsor, and Charles, the current Prince of Wales, who was circumcised by a well-known physician and mohel, Dr. Jacob Snowman. (Schoen, 1997)

He also states—mistakenly (Androutsos, 2002)—that Louis XVI of France was circumcised because of a tight foreskin, and regrets that the British tradition came to an end with Princes William and Harry, neither of whom he believes were circumcised. Schoen repeats this story, minus the Davidic lineage, in a later booklet advocating widespread routine infant circumcision:

It seems that since the time of Queen Victoria all males of the British Royal Family were circumcised shortly after birth. In keeping with this tradition, the circumcision of the infant Prince Charles was carried out at Buckingham Palace by Dr Jacob Snowman, a well known London physician, who was not only a surgeon, but an Orthodox Jew and a Mohel, a religious circumciser. But the new Royal young couple decided to end this traditional circumcision practice, and both of their sons, the Princes William and Harry, were left "intact," the word used by the opponents of circumcision to describe the uncircumcised state. (Schoen, 2005, pp. 80-81)

Schoen introduces this information in the context of an attack on NOCIRC, a community-based American organization campaigning against nontherapeutic (routine) circumcision of infants, as is common in the United States (Owings, Uddin, & Williams, 2013). He goes on to deplore the disappearance of routine circumcision in Britain, and to make various guesses as to the reasons for this development, among which are a fashion (favored by Princess Diana) "to try avoiding all discomfort to newborns," and a feeling that "the uncircumcised penis was . . . considered 'genital chic.'" Schoen—a medical practitioner with no expertise in medical or cultural history—gives no references for his own claims, and one questions the propriety of a scholar such as Goldman citing such an unreliable source in an academic publication. When we asked him about his own source, however, Schoen was very forthcoming:

I got the info regarding Queen Victoria indirectly from Dr Jacob Snowman, the London physician and Mohel, who, as you noted, performed Prince Charles' circumcision. . . . I didn't get the information directly from Dr Snowman, who was already dead when I found about his royal role. Rather I found out about it

from Dr Morris Sifman, who was also a London physician and Mohel. In 1996 Dr Sifman wrote me to say that he had read some of my work and asked if I had suggestions as to how he could deal with an active anti-circumcision group, which included some secular Jews, that was harassing him and getting a good deal of media attention in England. As you may be aware the British medical establishment has long been outspoken against circumcision, so he couldn't get help from them. Over the next couple of years I communicated with Dr Sifman and actually met with him on a trip my wife and I took to London.

Dr. Sifman was probably the most active Mohel among the Orthodox Jewish community in London at the time. Snowman had died and he seemed to be his successor. Although Sifman didn't mention being called upon by royalty, he knew Snowman well. He mentioned that Snowman had told him that before Prince Charles he had circumcised other less prominent royal family members and other nobility males, and that he was aware of Mohels before him who had also circumcised royal family members. It was Snowman's understanding that the practice went back to Queen Victoria's era, which was about the time that newborn circumcision started to become the practice in the US as well, mainly among the upper classes. (E. Schoen, personal communication, August 16, 2013)

This account is fascinating as an archetypal instance of how an urban (or contemporary) legend emerges and spreads. First there is an oral tradition within a defined community; then there is hearsay as the story is passed on to others (Dr. Sifman heard it from Dr. Snowman; he told me; Snowman believed that . . .); next the story is put into print by somebody with sufficient intellectual authority to get away with not giving a source; and finally the information is cited as a fact by others. All the elements of a classic urban legend are present, including absence of a definite source; *prima facie* plausibility; and deep significance for those circulating it—in this case, prominent members of the Anglo-American Jewish communities who would appear to feel that a royal tradition validates their own commitment to circumcision and confirms their status as respected insiders (Pfeffer, 2012). There is even an implicit moral: If circumcision is good enough for the royal family, it is good enough for everyone. Indeed, in a subsequent book Schoen suggests that “universal newborn circumcision is becoming an achievable goal,” because the Chinese could simply order everyone to be circumcised, and it would happen:

In China there is a powerful and increasingly prosperous central government ruling 1.2 billion people, and once a decision is made there is the will and the wherewithal to quickly and decisively implement any circumcision program, whether targeting high risk men or involving the entire population. (Schoen, 2009, pp. 158, 154)

What is also interesting is that Schoen describes his source as oral transmission and does not seem to be aware of another printed source—a compendium of Jewish religious/lifestyle practice compiled by Alfred Kolatch, published in 1981: “In

England, the Royal House has a long tradition requiring that all royal male children be circumcised by the Jewish mohel of London” (Kolatch, 1981, p. 16). In the second edition of the book, published 14 years later, the passage is repeated with significant additions:

In England, the Royal House has a long tradition, dating back to Queen Victoria (1837-1901), requiring that all male children be circumcised by the Jewish mohel of London. The tradition has not been followed in recent decades, and the younger members of the British royalty have not been circumcised. (Kolatch, 1995, p. 16)

Kolatch has now added the specification to Victoria, and the qualification that the tradition has been abandoned “in recent decades.” There is no mention of any belief in Davidic lineage or specifically of Diana and Princes William and Harry—though that is what is presumably meant by the reference to the tradition having been abandoned. Again we can observe the process by which a legend grows, as details aiming to create verisimilitude are added: If a firm origin for the tradition can be cited, it adds to the credibility of the claim. The question now becomes the source of Rabbi Kolatch's information. It may be that earlier published sources will turn up, but since this is (so far) the earliest sighting of the story in print, we may provisionally conclude that he heard the story or was informed of it by letter, possibly by Sifman, or by others with whom he had been in contact. Whatever the source, the appearance of the story in a widely distributed book facilitated its spread.

In this context, it is perhaps significant that the reference to Queen Victoria was not always on Professor Morris's website, but was added some time after March 3, 1999 (Morris, 1999). It might be thought that Morris's source was either Kolatch's book or Schoen's article, but since the former does not mention the Davidic lineage and it is our impression that Morris had not seen Schoen's article until we drew it to his attention, it is more likely that it was an internet source, such as the British page on Circlist.com, a prominent pro-circumcision site. Although the current iteration of the site (August 2013) does not mention this version of the tradition, it did so in considerable detail as early as 2004, as evidenced by a full text transcription of Circlist's then British page, published by the magazine of Brit-Am, a Zionist splinter group of the British-Israelite movement (Brit-Am Now, 2004b). Among other novel details, the then Circlist page asserted that Prince William had recently been circumcised “at his request at a private surgical clinic” and that Charles's younger brothers had been circumcised by Snowman (a matter to which we shall return). The same magazine had two issues earlier provided a link to the 1997 Schoen article (Brit-Am Now, 2004a) as republished on the website of a well-known New York mohel (Shoulson, n.d.). It is thus evident that Schoen's original article diffused rapidly among interested parties, further mutating as it spread.

As for Morris, he now states that he believes the story to be no more than folklore, but that he is impressed by recent media reports that the tradition was initiated by George I. He has foreshadowed further changes to the wording on his website, confirming the malleability of these stories (B. Morris, personal communication, August 5, 2013b).

## Queen Victoria and Her Medical Adviser

The second version of the myth, recounted in the American pregnancy manual, is most likely a garbled version of the first or a piece of creative reinvention on the part of the authors, and thus not in need of any refutation. But let us take it seriously for a moment and see where it leads us. The doctor in question was presumably (Sir) James Clark (1788–1870), appointed as physician to the Duchess of Kent in 1835, and who became Victoria's personal physician on her accession to the throne. He had indeed traveled, but according to his entry in the Oxford Dictionary of Biography, only to France, Italy (where he practiced for several years in Rome, and treated the dying poet Keats), and later in Germany. There is no mention of any trips to Africa or the Middle East, and no suggestion that he had any interest in, or had even heard of, circumcision. In reply to our request for a source on the book's Facebook page, one of the authors replied: "I read about six books on circumcision history for that little part (ugh!), likely it is from one of them" (Jones, 2013). Uncertainty over sources did not stop the same author joining the feeding frenzy that followed George's birth with this July 23 tweet: "Fun fact: British heirs to the throne have all been circumcised starting with Queen Victoria's sons, but Diana refused to circumcise William or Harry" (Jones, 2013).

## George I and the Hanoverians

Unlike the stories about Queen Victoria having initiated a circumcision tradition, recent assertions that the practice originated with the Hanoverians can be documented quite exactly. The first appearance of the claim was on June 1, 2012, when the Israeli newspaper Haaretz carried a feature on the relationship between the royal family and British Jewry that led off with the statement that Prince Charles had been circumcised by Snowman, and then continued:

the fact that the delicate act was performed upon the royal princes by a Jewish practitioner, a custom dating back to George I, who brought it over from his native Hanover, has long been a source of pride within the local community. (Pfeffer, 2012)

The apparent source for this claim was British historian and journalist Professor Geoffrey Alderman who, the article reveals, was also circumcised by Snowman.

This quite novel claim of Hanoverian origin for a royal circumcision tradition would probably have slipped back

into well-deserved obscurity in the normal course of events; what brought it into prominence was the announcement of the pregnancy of the Duchess of Cambridge some 6 months later. Searching for a new angle on this momentous event, the London Evening Standard dug up the Hanoverian origin and the Queen Victoria—Davidic lineage claims, and related them sequentially as if they were seamlessly part of the same story.

The so-called "tradition" only dates back to George I, who imported the custom from his native Hanover. Queen Victoria, convinced that the British royal family was descended from King David, had all her male offspring circumcised. The tradition continued through Edward VII, the Duke of Windsor and Prince Charles, who was circumcised by Rabbi Jacob Snowman at Buckingham Palace in 1948. His brothers Andrew and Edward were also circumcised. (Anonymous, 2012)

The toothpaste was now well and truly out of the tube: When the baby did in fact turn out to be a boy, there ensued a tsunami of speculation about the fate of his foreskin, all asserting the existence of a "tradition" whose supposed origin was either the Queen Victoria's beliefs about her ancestry, or the Electors of Hanover or, in many cases, both.

Professor Alderman himself wrote an opinion piece for Haaretz on the occasion of the birth in which he asserted quite confidently: "It was also thanks to the Hanoverians that the custom arose of having royal sons circumcised by Jewish mohelim" (Alderman, 2013c), though in subsequent correspondence with us he adopted a more guarded tone: "This practice may have been introduced by George I, as I believe the Electors of Hanover so practised" (G. Alderman, personal communication, August 4, 2013a; emphases added). When asked for the source of this belief, he did not refer to scholarly works or historical documents but to a private conversation: "I was told of the Hanoverians by the late Dr. Cecil Roth (Bearsted Reader in Post-Biblical Jewish History at Oxford), who taught me there (Oxford) in the early 1960s. I will try and track down a reference for you" (G. Alderman, personal communication, August 5, 2013b).

Roth (who died in 1970) was a distinguished scholar and author of numerous books on the history of the Jewish people, especially in England, but his publications do not suggest that he had any special knowledge of the Hanoverians. As editor of the *Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* (Roth, 1959), he was in a position to ensure that this information was included in the entries for circumcision, or England, or Hanover, but neither of the first two mention Snowman, Victoria or Prince Charles, and the last merely gives a brief account of Jewish fortunes in that region (Roth, 1959). Nor is there any mention of either the Queen Victoria or the George I stories in the vast *Encyclopedia Judaica* of which Roth was editor-in-chief, and for which he wrote the entry on Jewish life in England (Roth, 1972). These silences could have several explanations: Roth not believing such details to be



important enough to include, not feeling that they were sufficiently documented, or lack of space; but the most likely explanation is that the legend of a royal circumcision tradition had not yet coalesced and that the Hanoverians did not circumcise their sons.

Even if Roth had told the young Geoffrey Alderman that the Hanoverians did observe such a practice, a little reflection would have brought out the improbability of the suggestion. The future George I was born in 1660; his father, the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, was not elevated to the coveted position of prince-elector until 1698 but died before the appointment became official. George I therefore became the first installed Elector of Hanover 15 years after the birth of his first and only son, born in Hanover in 1683, the future George II (Weir, 1996, pp. 272-276). On the question of circumcision, therefore, it is difficult to see how the "Electors of Hanover so practiced," and on whom, before their arrival in England. As of this writing (September 15, 2013), despite a considerable exchange of emails, Professor Alderman has not produced any references for this improbable belief. Given the marginal and often despised status of the Jews in central Europe until the emancipation of the 19th century, it appears incredible that a mohel or Jewish physician would have been permitted to impose the distinctive mark of Jewish identity on any Christian, let alone the members of a princely house; and if it was a practice among the Hanoverians we would expect the fact to be better documented than a hazy recollection of what an elderly don said in conversation some 50 years ago. It seems extraordinary that a tenured professor of history should make such a specific and unambiguous empirical claim in public debate without having firm documentary proof.

## The Lost Tribes and Prophecy

Given their evident falsity, why are these stories so readily believed and so widely circulated? The answer lies partly in their *prima facie* plausibility; partly in the glamour of royalty and the popular obsession with celebrity; and partly in the controversial status of circumcision—a hot topic in contemporary society. The factors giving the stories credibility were (a) the reported circumcision of Prince Charles in 1948 and, lying behind this, (b) the efforts of the British Israelites to concoct an Israelite ancestry for the British race and a Davidic lineage for the royal family.

To take the second point first, the Queen Victoria story grew out of the efforts of an assortment of unstable "prophets," culminating in the rise of the British Israelites as an organized religious-political movement, to prove that the British race was descended from the 10 lost tribes of Israel. There is no detailed history of the British-Israel delusion, but the major scholarly study by Tudor Parfitt traces the origins of the movement to the misery that accompanied the early Industrial Revolution, the breakdown of traditional agrarian society, and the Napoleonic wars (Parfitt, 2002).

The consequent rise of millenarian protest movements spawned many self-proclaimed prophets, including Richard Brothers (1754-1824), a discharged soldier, disappointed by life and love; in his compensatory tract *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* (Brothers, 1794), he asserted that the lost tribes of Israel had found their way to Britain, and that he himself was a direct descendant of the biblical King David, via James I. (This treasonous assertion landed him in a lunatic asylum for the next 20 years.)

Brothers was followed by numerous imitators and would-be cult leaders, such as Joanna Southcott, whose claim that she was about to give birth to the Messiah drove the London press into a fever of excitement nearly as great in 1814 as the recent obsession with the fate of Prince George's penis. Bitter was the disappointment when she died without having given birth to anything. Then there was her disciple John Wroe, a fanatical hunchback with pedophile tendencies (according to Parfitt), who founded an ascetic cult that adopted many Old Testament ritual practices, including obligatory circumcision of converts and children. In 1824, one of his followers was charged with manslaughter after a boy whom he had circumcised in Bedford died from the wound (Harrison, 1979, pp. 138-152). English Protestantism had always shown a strong Old Testament consciousness, and the Puritan sects, in particular, were fond of comparing themselves with the Israelites held captive in Egypt. This does not mean that there was any widespread adoption of practices such as circumcision, but that biblical literalism, especially in relation to the more apocalyptic passages of the Old Testament, was common currency.

## The British Israelites and Queen Victoria

The text that the British Israelites came to regard as their founding document was *Our Israelitish Origin*, by John Wilson, the unemployed son of an Irish weaver. This made no mention of ritual observances such as circumcision, but sought to show that the Saxons were descended from the lost tribes of Israel via certain Scythian peoples who had found their way to north-west Europe (Wilson, 1840). *Our Israelitish Origin* went through four editions in Wilson's lifetime and was quite widely read among the less educated sectors of the public, and with variations and additions it became canonical, but it made no mention of any Davidic origin of the British monarchy. This notion—that the British monarchy was somehow descended directly from King David—was not introduced until the 1860s, in England, the *Remnant of Judah and the Israel of Ephraim: The Two Families Under One Head* (Glover, 1861, 1881), by a former "chaplain to the consulate in Cologne," Frederick Glover, and it was not until the 1870s that the myth took its final, elaborated form in J. C. Stevens' *Genealogical Chart Showing the Connection between the House of David and the Royal Family of Britain* (1877). Together with the wildly popular *Twenty-Seven*

Identifications of the British Nation With Lost Israel by Richard Hines (1871), these texts spurred the formation of the British Israelites as an organized movement, with newsletters, offices, meetings, and branches in other Anglo countries, including the United States.

Although British-Israelism (BI) had quite a large following in the late 19th and early 20th century, the movement was always a fringe preoccupation, rather less respectable than scientology or belief in alien abductions today. The Establishment held it in contempt, and the Church of England (of which the English monarch is Supreme Governor) published several condemnations of it as erroneous and even heretical (Goudge, 1934). None of this has prevented the most popular form of the circumcision myth having as its central plank the claim that Queen Victoria was a convert to BI, and particularly to belief in the direct Davidic lineage of the English monarchy; and further that she therefore circumcised all her sons, starting with the future Edward VII (born 1841).

There are two immediate problems with these propositions:

1. There is a conspicuous lack of evidence that Queen Victoria ever adhered to any form of British-Israelism. Although she wrote about 2,500 words a day in her diaries throughout her adult life, purveyors of the story have been unable to come up with a single sentence in support of their claims. The fact that one of her many granddaughters, Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, agreed to be a patron of the main BI organization when it consolidated in 1920 tells us nothing about Victoria's own views. By that time British-Israelism was associated with a range of Empire unity movements, including Imperial Federation and efforts at closer ties between Britain and the United States—many of which had a White supremacist and increasingly anti-Semitic flavor (Parfitt, 2002).
2. There is no evidence that Edward VII or his younger brothers were circumcised as infants or at any time in later life.

But we can go further than the mere absence of evidence. Although Wilson's founding text was published suggestively close to Edward's birth, there are three fatal objections to making a link between these two events:

- Wilson's "theory" rested on the proposition that "people of Israel" now inhabiting northern Europe were not Jews (whom he identified as the "people of Judah"), but Gentiles—who did not, therefore, follow Jewish ritual observances. It was a racial, not a cultural, theory. Accordingly, it would have been as nonsensical for Europeans to adopt circumcision as it would be for them to stop eating bacon or to refrain from work on Saturdays.

- Wilson did not expound, or even mention, anything about the Davidic lineage of the monarchy until the fifth edition, published posthumously in 1876. This idea was introduced in Glover's book, not published until 20 years after Edward's birth, and only became a BI tenet in subsequent decades. In other words, even if Victoria had fallen for the claim that she was descended from King David, it could not have been until long after her child-bearing years, when all her male children were grown up and beyond her reach.
- Finally, there is the hemophilia factor—a rather important medico-scientific fact that the mythmakers entirely ignore. Victoria was a carrier of the fatal gene (Potts & Potts, 1995), and her fourth and last son (Leopold, born 1853) was hemophiliac. But since this was not discovered until 1858 or 59, when he was 5 or 6, he clearly could not have been circumcised as an infant; if he had been, the hemophilia would have been discovered then. But if Leopold was not circumcised it is highly unlikely that any of his brothers were.

The inescapable conclusion is that Victoria did not subscribe to the myth of the royal family's descent from the House of David, and did not have her sons circumcised. That tenured professors at leading universities should repeat such stories without verification is unfortunate, but is perhaps evidence of how readily the admixture of blood rites and blood royal can generate narrative. Although Morris presents the story as an established fact, when first asked for a source he replied, "I am sorry to say I have no reliable publication on this" (B. Morris, personal communication, August 2, 2013c). It is well known that Morris is a leading promoter of routine infant circumcision as a "biomedical imperative for the 21st century," and thus would be expected to have a certain interest in maximizing the extent of the practice (Frisch, 2012; Morris, 2007). Goldman's claims show all the signs of extreme carelessness: A mohel who could circumcise Edward VII (born 1841), the Duke of Windsor (i.e., his grandson, Edward the abdicated, born 1894), and Prince Charles (born 1948) must have enjoyed remarkable longevity. Even so fervent a believer as Professor Morris has never suggested that the benefits of circumcision include a biblical life span.

## The Prince and the Snowman

The other factor giving the Victoria and the George I stories credibility was the reported circumcision of Prince Charles by Dr. Jacob Snowman in December 1948. Although the best-known evidence for this is an unsourced statement in Anthony Holden's biography (Holden, 1979), it has not been seriously questioned, and may be taken as fact.<sup>1</sup> Charles thus remains the only Royal for whom we have reliable evidence of circumcision,<sup>2</sup> but if he was circumcised it is possible that his grandfather and great uncles (George VI, Edward VIII, and the other sons of George V) were also done, and

conceivably some lesser royals and aristocrats, as reported by Dr. Sifman. Although it did not reach its peak of popularity until the 1920s, circumcision was coming into vogue among the middle classes and those aspiring to middle class respectability during the Edwardian period, and it is possible that the royal doctors recommended the operation as the latest medical advance available to the rich, assuring the anxious parents that it was a sure preventive of such feared problems as masturbation, phimosis, syphilis, and cancer. But British doctors were not, on the whole, strongly in favor of routine circumcision, often lacked confidence in their ability to perform the surgery, and sometimes recommended the traditional Jewish method as safer and neater than anything a GP or surgeon could manage (Darby, 2005). In such circumstances, an experienced mohel might well have been seen as the first choice of a rich and well-connected parent. If these operations were performed by mohelim who were also leading physicians, that might explain why the palace called upon Snowman in 1948.

An obituary of Snowman (1871-1959) states that his reputation extended beyond the Jewish community and reports, as a matter of pride, that “he was called upon for the circumcision of members of the Royal Family and performed the operation on Prince Charles” (Anonymous, 1959). But the fact that Charles was circumcised tells us nothing about the fate of his own sons, and most commentators agree (either sadly or gleefully, depending on their perspective) that William and Harry were spared. It is often stated (e.g., by the *Evening Standard* article referenced above) that Charles’s brothers (Andrew, born 1960, and Edward, born 1964) were also circumcised; if so, it was not by Snowman, who died in 1959.

## Urban Legends, Myths, and Factoids

Although the myth of the royal family’s circumcision tradition is of recent invention, the process by which the narratives developed will be better understood if we briefly consider the differing shades of meaning conveyed by the terms urban myth, urban legend, contemporary legend and factoid. Following Jan Brunvand (1981), Wikipedia usefully summarizes an urban legend, urban myth, urban tale, or contemporary legend as

a form of modern folklore consisting of stories that may or may not have been believed by their tellers to be true. As with all folklore and mythology, the designation suggests nothing about the story’s veracity, but merely that it is in circulation, exhibits variation over time, and carries some significance that motivates the community in preserving and propagating it. (Wikipedia, 2013)

Such stories usually emerge through oral transmission and can rarely be traced to an original source. Brunvand notes that such items of folklore retain a central core yet

constantly change as they are transmitted, thus creating numerous variants that differ in length, detail, and style. He prefers to call modern stories of this type legends rather than myth so as to indicate that they involve real people rather than gods or monsters, are widely believed (or are at least believable), and that they thus represent a kind of “quasi-history.” Tales with relatively recent or modern origins now tend to be referred to as contemporary legends (Dégh, 1991; Simpson, 1998). Significantly for our purposes, Brunvand (1981) points out that in order to flourish, such stories “must fill some genuine need,” such as “an entertaining escape from reality, or a desire to validate by anecdotal examples some of the culture’s ideals and institutions” (pp. 3-12). Both these needs were met by the story of the royal family’s circumcision habit.

A factoid is a questionable or spurious (unverified, false, or fabricated) statement presented as a fact, but without supporting evidence. The Oxford English Dictionary defines factoid as “something that becomes accepted as a fact, although it is not (or may not be) true; spec. an assumption or speculation reported and repeated so often that it is popularly considered true; a simulated or imagined fact,” and refers to Norman Mailer’s definition in his biography of Marilyn Monroe: “facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper, creations which are not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion in the Silent Majority.” A number of such factoids have been collected by medical historian Lesley Hall, such as the Victorian mother’s advice on her daughter’s wedding night: “Just lie back, dear, and think of England (or Britain),” variously attributed to a (nonexistent) Lady Hillingham or to Queen Victoria herself, and supposedly emblematic of Victorian attitudes to sex (Hall, n.d.). An even more relevant example is the story that a style of penis piercing/infibulation known as a Prince Albert was so named because Prince Albert had one, either because he wanted to hide the bulge in his trousers or (even less plausibly) because Queen Victoria did not like his penis and (by some twisted logic) imagined that such an installation would make it less noticeable. It is now accepted that the term was invented by Doug Molloy, a Californian body arts practitioner, in the 1970s (Ferguson, 1999).

It may now be seen that the royal family’s “circumcision tradition” exhibits all the characteristics of a classic urban myth or legend: absence of evidence, uncertain origin, variation on a set of basic themes, change over time and significance to those who circulate it. Not being anchored in evidence or any factual base, the story is free to grow and mutate as the fancy of its numerous re-tellers dictates; in the age of social media and the blogosphere, their capacity for rapid evolution is vastly enhanced. The discrete elements (such as Queen Victoria believing herself to be descended from King David; or that the Electors of Hanover circumcised their sons) may be regarded as factoids, while the mutating narrative as a whole may be seen as a contemporary legend. A perfect example is provided in the explanation for

the sudden surge of interest in Prince George's penis given in an interview by royal watcher and editor of the *Kensington & Chelsea Review*, Coco Khan, to an enthralled American audience:

It's actually a little bit of a sort of a falsity that's going around. I mean they haven't been circumcising very long, it's only been, it's a tradition that's about 150 years old, and by British standards 150 years old isn't a tradition. It started with George I, who, well, he started it off, and then it was carried on by Victoria, who was obviously one of our most influential monarchs, and she basically got it into her head that her children were the sons of David. So, I'm not entirely sure she made that decision in, you know, out of a sense of science, but that was carried on and then Diana put a stop to it. So it's very unlikely we're going to be seeing it [a circumcision] this time around. (Khan, 2013)

The key elements of the story are here, embedded in the usual anecdotal style (well, you know, basically, etc.), and combined with a striking absence of evidence and a very hazy sense of history: 150 years would take us back to the 1860s and the middle of Victoria's long reign (but well after the birth of her last male child, Prince Leopold, in 1853). As for George I, he was born in 1660 and ascended to the English throne in 1714—all of 300 years ago. The Americans' evident fascination with the story expresses their obsession with circumcision and the glamour that the English monarchy holds for their ritual-hungry public and their increasingly dynastic political elite (Kelley, 1997).

## Evolution of a Contemporary Legend

We are now in a position to see how the Queen Victoria legend emerged and grew. The core of fact around which it accreted was Snowman's circumcision of Prince Charles and possibly some other members of the royal family, identities unknown; the rest is creative inflation, deriving largely from stories told and transmitted informally among elite members of the Jewish community, beginning with Snowman himself. As Alderman commented, the Jewish community in England has always taken considerable pride in Snowman's royal role, and it is natural that some might wish to give it a deeper historical pedigree. It is perhaps significant that Alderman and Harry Wallop, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* (Wallop, 2013), felt moved to mention, and were evidently proud of, the fact that they, too, were circumcised by the same operator who had done the future Prince of Wales. In the immediate aftermath of this notable procedure, however, there was nothing in print and probably nothing in writing about a "tradition." Yet Snowman must have been pleased about the royal patronage and did not keep it secret; he told his friends and associates, they told their friends, and as the information passed by word of mouth or personal letter, the message became distorted, details were added, and exaggeration occurred. After Snowman's death in 1959, the story

circulated for about 20 years within the Anglo-American Jewish communities before emerging in print, in Kolatch's book of 1981—ample gestation time for one mohel's circumcision of a few royals to become "a long tradition requiring that all royal male children be circumcised by the Jewish mohel of London." A few years later, following the birth of Princes William and Harry, but without any explanation, the tradition is sourced to Queen Victoria—possibly because the author has a dim awareness of the British Israelite contribution, or perhaps for no reason other than a desire to give the story more depth and thus credibility. By the 1980s, it was received wisdom that the Victorian age was antisex, and well known that late 19th century doctors favored circumcision as a means of discouraging masturbation (Darby, 2005, chap. 9). That being the case, it might be thought natural that Victoria had also favored it back in the 1840s.

Yet even by 1995, circulation of the story is still fairly limited, largely confined to Jewish circles; the bridge from there to the wider society is provided by Edgar Schoen, first in his 1997 article, and for a broader audience in his book on circumcision published in 2005. Once Schoen had put the new amalgam into print, the stories spread fast, for he was a prolific contributor to medical and other journals, and prominent as America's most determined advocate of routine infant circumcision. In addition, we had arrived at the age of the internet, meaning that information was now disseminated more rapidly and more widely than ever before. As soon as the story appeared on websites, it was there for journalists, op-ed writers, and anybody else using search engines to find, and without anyone taking the trouble to investigate, it became accepted as a historical truth. It is unclear who first conjured up the motivation for Victoria's "decision" in the form of an illusory belief in her Davidic lineage, except that the first published sighting is Schoen's 1997 article and, as he said in his correspondence with us, "it makes sense to me."

## Conclusion

It is thus clear that there is no tradition of circumcision among the British royal family. If Prince Charles and the sons of George V were circumcised, it was not because Victoria believed herself descended from King David, and certainly not because a family circumcision tradition was introduced by George I. If Snowman or another practitioner performed the operation on them it was because circumcision was a common practice among the British middle and wealthy classes from the 1890s to the 1940s, widely recommended as a sensible hygienic precaution, and the monarchy was following middle class fashion and the prevailing medical wisdom. That the palace doctors were able to call upon the services of so distinguished a surgeon is not evidence of any tradition, but simply another instance of the royal family's privileged status.



## Notes

1. In support of Holden's account, there is a press report from 1948 reproduced on several websites, which reads as follows: "London (JTA)—Crown Prince Charles, son of Princess Elizabeth and heir to the British throne, was circumcised in Buckingham Palace by Rev. Jacob Snowman, official Mohel of the London Jewish community, the Mizrahi News Bureau reported. Rev. Snowman, who is a noted Jewish scholar specializing in the poetry of Bialik, has been ritual circumciser in London for many years" (I. J. Barzak, personal communication, n.d.). The Jewish Telegraphic Agency is unable to ascertain in which newspapers this dispatch appeared, but the consensus is that it appears to be authentic (A. Soclof, personal communication, August 27, 2013).
2. A partial exception is Alfonso, first son of Alfonso III, King of Spain and Victoria's grand daughter, Victoria Eugenia. But since he proved to be hemophiliac and nearly died when he was circumcised, it seems unlikely that his younger brothers were so treated (Potts & Potts, 1995, p. 144 et seq.).

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