



Genesis - Chapter Seventeen

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)

Summary of Chapter Seventeen

The story now moves forward by more than a decade, recounting another appearance by God to Abram in order to establish a further covenant. This covenant is not just with Abraham, the new name given to him by God, but also with his promised descendants throughout all ages. The sign of the covenant would be male circumcision.

Sarai is also given a new name by God; she will now be known as Sarah. The promise was that she would now bear Abraham a son, through whom the promise would come. However, God also promised to bless Ishmael and his descendants. In order to ratify the covenant, Abraham and all the male members of his household were circumcised as ordained by the Lord.

II.a.ix Genesis 17:1-27 - The Sign of the Covenant

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, the Lord appears to Abram. In a series of speeches God announces that he will establish an eternal covenant with Abram and his offspring. This covenant will involve Abram as the father of many nations; consequently, his name is changed to Abraham. The sign of the covenant is circumcision. In the future this covenant will be established with Isaac but not Ishmael, although the latter, by being circumcised, will enjoy some of the benefits of the covenant.

Most of the chapter consists of a divine speech that focuses on the part to be played by God (vv.4-8), Abraham (vv.9-14), and Sarah (vv.15-16). The nature and contents of the covenant distinguish it from the covenant of Chapter Fifteen, which is solely about future nationhood.

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.'

Genesis 17:1-2

When Abram was ninety-nine years old. Abram had now been in Canaan for twenty four years and Ishmael would have been about thirteen years old.

The LORD appeared to Abram. The text does not reveal how this appearance was manifested. Some commentators believe this to be another theophany of Christ, while others believe it to have been another dream or vision.

God Almighty is Hebrew 'El Shadday. Like many other divine names in Genesis, the common Semitic word for God, 'El, is followed by a term that highlights a particular attribute of God; refer to the comment made on 14:18. 'El Shadday emphasises God's power, which in this context will enable Sarai to bear Abram a son. Two closely related instructions are given to Abram, challenging him:

1. To maintain an ongoing relationship with God.
2. To be faultless or perfect.

Walk before me. A distinctive verbal form in Hebrew is used here to underline the ongoing nature of this activity; refer to the comment on 5:22-24.

Be blameless. The Hebrew term for 'blameless', i.e. *tamim*, is also used of sacrificial animals, which were to be without blemish. Noah, with whom God also made a covenant, is also described in 6:9 as a blameless man who walked with God. This was a call made to all Israelites: <<**You must be blameless before the LORD your God**>> (Deuteronomy 18:13 NIV), and one that was exemplified through the life of Job: <<**There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil**>> (Job 1:1).

I will make my covenant between me and you. The manner in which God introduces this covenant distinguishes it from the formally unconditional covenant already made in Chapter Fifteen. Of course, there is an implied condition in Chapter Fifteen: Abram must continue to believe God's promises, and he must father offspring. Here, however, a conditional dimension is explicit, indicating that this covenant will benefit only those who walk before God and are blameless before him; refer also to the comment made on v.19.

³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of

nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

Genesis 17:3-5

Abram fell on his face. This is a normal posture for one to take in the presence of God: <<He replied, 'Neither; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.' And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped, and he said to him, 'What do you command your servant, my lord?'">> (Joshua 5:14), <<Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking">> (Ezekiel 1:28), <<And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want'">> (Matthew 26:39).

The ancestor of a multitude of nations. These words summarise the covenant being established by God. Everything else that God says in the rest of the chapter expands on this core affirmation. To underline their importance, these words are repeated at the end of v.5.

Your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. The transformation of Abram's name (father of many) to Abraham (father of many nations) encapsulates the purpose of the covenant. Although the term ancestor or father normally denotes a biological relationship, the Bible contains examples of its being used metaphorically. Joseph describes himself as 'father to Pharaoh' (45:8); and is confirmed in Judges 17:10, where Micah invites a young Levite to be his 'father'. The concept of Abraham's being the ancestor of a multitude of nations is probably related to the earlier divine promise that <<*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*>> (12:3b). As a father figure, Abraham will have a profound influence on others, including those who are not his biological children. Paul encapsulates his understanding of this by relating Abraham as the spiritual father of all Christians: <<*For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations') – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist*>> (Romans 4:16-17).

⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

Genesis 17:6

I will make you exceedingly fruitful. This promise echoes the divine blessing given at creation (1:28) and later repeated to Noah after the flood (9:1). It was also repeated to the Hebrew nation: <<*I will look with favour upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you*>> (Leviticus 26:9).

Kings shall come from you. Fruitfulness is associated with human beings' exercising dominion over the earth on God's behalf. God's covenant with Abraham anticipates the reestablishment of the creation mandate, i.e. Abraham is 'another Adam,' a covenant representative. Through this covenant the negative effects of the fall will ultimately be reversed. The kings of Israel, including David, were direct descendants of Abraham and Sarah, and thus the line of David through to Jesus as the ultimate King is established in the promise.

⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.'

Genesis 17:7-8

For an everlasting covenant. The covenant will be ongoing in nature, extending from one generation to the next. And the promise of the gift is greater than any human being could ever expect, that is, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. The further promise is the gift of all the land of Canaan. That it was given as a perpetual holding provides legitimate claims that the land belongs to those who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, i.e. those who believe in and follow God Almighty. Any other claims to the land have no legitimacy.

⁹ God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Genesis 17:9-10

Every male child among you shall be circumcised. For the first time, God gave Abraham something to do in regard to the covenant. He told them to take upon themselves a sign of the covenant, showing they received the covenant by faith. This was confirmed in a retelling by Stephen: <<*Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised*>>

him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs>> (Acts 7:8)

Circumcision is not a Hebrew invention. For example, it was used in Egypt from very early periods as an act of ritual purity, apparently a requirement for men who would work in an Egyptian temple. Some tomb scenes from as early as the Old Kingdom (circa 2575-2134 BC) depict the practice.

¹¹ You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

Genesis 17:11

You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins. Circumcision, which involves cutting off the foreskin of the penis, creates a mark that would not normally be visible to others. The nature of the sign suggests that it was intended to focus attention on the importance of Abraham's offspring, the royal line through which blessing would come. It would later become a requirement for all men who would wish to participate in the Passover Feast: *<<If an alien who resides with you wants to celebrate the passover to the LORD, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it>> (Exodus 12:48).*

¹² Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. ¹³ Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.

Genesis 17:12-13

All the male members of Abraham's household are to be circumcised. The covenant is not about establishing racial purity, since males who are not Abraham's offspring are included. Nor is it about social status; no distinction is drawn between those born in Abraham's house and those bought with his money, that is, those purchased to serve as his slaves.

You shall be circumcised when he is eight days old. To ensure that the covenant extends to the next generation, all newborn male children are to be circumcised when they are eight days old. This practice was followed in following generations: *<<And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him>> (Genesis 21:4), <<On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised>> (Leviticus 12:3), <<On the eighth day they*

came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John'>> (Luke 1:59-60), and: <<After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb>> (Luke 2:21).

¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'

Genesis 17:14

Shall be cut off from his people. Every uncircumcised male was excluded from the benefits of belonging to the covenant because, as God makes clear: he has broken my covenant. Circumcision distinguished those who believed in the importance of the divine promises to Abraham from those who did not. This created a major theological problem for the early church as more and more Gentiles believed in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. While some Jewish believers argued that circumcision was necessary for salvation, Paul contended that righteousness comes through faith and that circumcision of the heart is what matters, not circumcision of the foreskin; refer to Romans 2:25-29, 1 Corinthians 7:18-19 and Galatians 6:15.

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

Genesis 17:15-16

The name Sarai is changed to an alternative form, Sarah; both forms mean princess. However, there is a subtle difference. Sarai means 'my princess' and indicates that she belongs to one family; Sarah means 'a princess', and is therefore without restriction: *the princess of a multitude*. Thus she shall give rise to nations: *<<Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.' So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman>> (Galatians 4:28-31).*

I will give you a son by her. God Almighty will overcome Sarah's barrenness and provide a son for Abraham with her.

Kings of peoples. Refer back to the comments made on v.6.

¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’ ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, ‘O that Ishmael might live in your sight!’

Genesis 17:17-18

Laughed and said to himself. Abraham’s reaction indicates that he considers God’s promise that Sarah will bear a son as, to say the least, highly improbable. They are too old to have children by natural means. However, he fell on his face, which is an attitude of reverential respect for God.

Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? He knew both he and Sarah were well past the time people normally have children. Yet: <<*in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations’, according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*>> (Romans 4:17b-21).

O that Ishmael might live in your sight! Despite the promise of a longed-for son with Sarah, Abraham still loved his firstborn son and wished only that he too would walk before God.

¹⁹ God said, ‘No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.’

Genesis 17:19

You shall name him Isaac: God gives instructions as to what some key children are to be named: <<*But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John*>> (Luke 1:13), <<*And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus*>> (Luke 1:31).

Isaac means ‘he laughs.’ The motif of laughter occurs in a number of passages associated with the birth of Isaac. In v.17 and 18:12-15, Abraham and Sarah respectively laugh out of unbelief that a son will be born to them, but there may

be an element of incredulous joy in these instances as well. The joy of giving birth to Isaac causes Sarah to laugh (21:6).

I will establish my covenant with him. Echoing what has been said in v.7, this verse clarifies that the eternal covenant will be established with Isaac, but not Ishmael, refer also to vv.20-21. Here an important distinction is drawn between those with whom the covenant is established, and those who may receive particular benefits of the covenant. While Ishmael and the other male members of Abraham's household are circumcised, the continuation of the covenant is linked to a unique line of Abraham's descendants that continues through Isaac. Refer to the chart Four Kinds of Abrahams Offspring in the Supplementary Material on the web site. This line eventually leads to Jesus Christ, through whom God's blessing is mediated in a saving way to others.

²⁰ As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

Genesis 17:20

As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous. Just as Jacob would father twelve sons who would become the patriarchs of the Israeli nation, the twelve princes who would come from Ishmael would become the patriarchs of Arabic nations. Historically, it is believed that the prophet Mohammed descended from Ishmael and through him the Islamic faith was established.

Although God favours the yet unborn Isaac over Ishmael, the latter is still blessed by God with the promise that he will become a great nation, refer to 25:12-18.

²¹ But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.' ²² And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Genesis 17:21-22

But my covenant I will establish with Isaac. Although God had promised that Ishmael would be the father of a great nation also, the seed of promise would come through Isaac and his line, not through Ishmael or indeed through all the sons of Jacob, as Paul understands: *<<It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants>>* (Romans 9:6-8).

²³ Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Genesis 17:23-27

Through repeated references to circumcision, these verses underline the fact that Abraham conscientiously fulfilled God's instructions to him.

He circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham's belief in the covenant was proved by his obedience to the command through the immediacy of his actions. Paul also notes faith preceded circumcision and that the order is important: <<*He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised*>> (Romans 4:11). Therefore, faith in God does not require circumcision, it requires obedience to God's will.

That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. Abraham's obedience was complete, for every male among the men of Abraham's house were circumcised was prompt, for it was performed that very day; and was daring as he virtually incapacitated all his fighting men at the same time. Abraham did not need to pray about this. He did not need to grow or transition into this. God said it and he did it. This is a wonderful example of obedience from a great man of faith.