

Comments on Genesis 17

Some 24 years after the first encounter with the Lord (cf. ch. 12, or see Abr. 2:14 where the difference would be 37 years) Abram has another encounter with Him. The context is Sarai's continuing bareness and Abram's taking Hagar to wife with her bearing Ishmael (cf. 16:1-2). Despite the promises in ch. 12, Sarai remains childless. This accounts for Abraham's assumption they will remain childless and his appeal in v. 18 for the Lord to accept Ishmael as the heir of the covenant.

The Lord rejects Abraham's suggestion and instead insists Sarai will bear a son for him. It is not surprising after her being barren for so long, and 24 years of it under a covenant promise to bear many children, Abraham is operating under the assumption the Lord had other things in mind when He made that promise. It is also not surprising Sarai has difficulty believing it as well, cf. 18:12.

The Lord is rejecting Sarai's attempt at using a worldly means of addressing the lack of an heir. To her, this is an entirely practical means of addressing her own barrenness, where she is subjecting herself to the shame of her own present difficult situation by giving her handmaid to her husband. But, this is not the Lord's plan. What the Lord is suggesting is something impossible to believe from the practical standpoint of their present reality. Regardless, this is the Lord's plan. The Lord communicates this by changing their names, when He does not change Hagar's name. The covenant the Lord makes excludes their practical worldly point of view.

Noteworthy in this chapter's promises are the eternal types of covenants are made (cf. v. 7), as opposed to the more temporal ones made in ch. 12. Also, requirements are imposed (v. 1) where previously in ch. 12 there were no explicit requirements.

Chapter 17 is arranged in an interesting pattern, as follows (taken from the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis):

A - (v. 1-8) Abraham is progenitor of nations and kings, his name is changed

B - (v. 9-14) Law of Circumcision set forth

A - (v. 15-22) Sarai is to be progenitrix of nations and kings, her name is changed

B - (v. 23-27) Law of Circumcision carried out

The combination of covenant making, requirements of righteousness, promises of offspring, new names, unity of husband and wife, and dispensing of literal physical tokens with implications of physical and sexual purity all occur together. We are informed in the Pearl of Great Price Abraham 1 account the covenant making was under the mantle of the Patriarchal Order of the Priesthood. Here are the final set of covenants under that mantle. Note the similarity between the present covenants and requirements and those of contemporary Temple liturgy.

From a theological perspective, the covenant of circumcision is the symbolic division between Semitic religion and the religions of their Gentile neighbors. Various Gentile religions explicitly incorporate sexuality into their worship, ranging from mythology to iconography to ritual cult prostitution. Semitic religion eliminates all of this.

The symbolic act of circumcision is the deliberate removal of overt sexuality from Semitic religion. The Lord promises them if they observe Abraham's covenant of circumcision, then they will be blessed with many children over endless generations.

Aside from blessings of divine providence, the clear implication is societal sexual restraint and personal sexual discipline will result in greater fecundity and increased social stability across generations. A society that exercises restraint in these matters clearly avoids the social ills associated with promiscuity. This is the kind of society the Lord intends to build with Israel.

1 AND when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I [am] the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. 3 And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, 4 As for me, behold, my covenant [is] with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. 5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. 6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

7 And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. 8

And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

v1-8 The Lord appears to Abram and tells him to be perfect (v. 1) and reiterates the previously made promise (v. 2, cp. 12:1-3). Abram bows down low before the Lord as a sign of his humility before Him (v. 3). The Lord continues with the promise of great posterity (v. 4), so great that his name will be known as the father of multitudes (v. 5) because of the great number of children he will have (v. 6). This covenant is not only with him, but with all his children, the Lord will be their God (v. 7) and the land of Canaan will be their inheritance (v. 8).

Contrast this passage with the original of 12:1-3 and note the heavy emphasis on the future children and the eternal and everlasting nature of the promise.

v5 "Abram", the name translates literally to "exalted father".

"Abraham", in Hebrew "ab" means "father", however the meaning of "raham" is unclear. It is generally taken to mean "to be populous" given the etymology subsequent to the application of the name.

9 And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. 10 This [is] my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. 11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. 12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which [is] not of thy seed. 13 He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

v9-14 The sign of the Lord's covenant among Abraham's children is to be circumcision (v. 9-11). Anyone born into the family or even those who are not family but who live among Abraham's children must be circumcised (v. 12-13). No uncircumcised men are permitted to live among Israel (v. 14).

The Law of Circumcision is presented as a symbol worn by males which is to be indicative of sexual purity (i.e., the removal of the uncleanness), in return for which they will receive blessings in offspring. Circumcision became a means of differentiating between Israelite and Gentile, cf. 34:14-17, Exod. 12:48, Judges 14:3. Also, the JST/IV on v. 11 states circumcision on the eighth day is to represent baptism on the eighth year.

v14 The strictness of this command is manifested in Exod. 4:24-26 where Moses failed to circumcise his own sons and the Lord nearly killed him over it.

The implicit message here is even those who are not Israelites but who live among the Israelites must observe the sexual moralities of the Israelites. The Israelites are not to permit or tolerate any kind of sexual immorality among them.

15 And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah [shall] her name [be]. 16 And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be [a mother] of nations; kings of people shall be of her. 17 Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall [a child] be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? 18 And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! 19 And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, [and] with his seed after him. 20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. 21 But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year. 22 And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

v15-21 The Lord states the "princess" will now be known as a nobelwoman (v. 15) because she will bear a son and will be the mother of many nations and kings (v. 16). Abraham hears the Lord's statement and laughs within himself because both he and Sarah are so old (v. 17). Abraham instead suggests the Lord accept Ishmael as the heir to the covenant (v. 18). The Lord rejects this and says Sarah will bear the child of the covenant and he shall be named "Isaac", to ironically remind Abraham he doubted the Lord could do this thing (v. 19). While the Lord

rejects Ishmael as the heir to the covenant, he will not be forgotten, but will be blessed and prospered as well (v. 20), but the covenant will go through Isaac who will be born of Sarah a year from this point (v. 21). With this statement the conversation ends and the Lord leaves Abraham (v. 22).

v15 "Sarai", the Hebrew literally translates to "princess".

"Sarah", the Hebrew literally translates to "nobelwoman". The name indicates a shift from petty royalty to the more substantive matriarchy. Childbearing is extremely important in the Semitic culture, and her bearing a child denotes a shift from her being the wife of an affluent man to the mother of the Lord's covenant people.

v19 "Isaac", a wordplay on the Hebrew "sahaq" which means "to laugh". The Lord is prodding Abraham for his skepticism.

v22 The Lord's already emphatic statement that Sarah was to be the mother of the covenant child is made even more emphatic with the Lord terminating the conversation and precluding any further attempt to negotiation over Ishmael.

Note the imagery used in this verse. It suggests the Lord is speaking face to face with Abraham and then the conversation ends when the Lord ascends back into heaven. The text clearly suggests this was not a vision. Compare 35:13 where Israel has a similar conversation.

23 And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him. 24 And Abraham [was] ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 25 And Ishmael his son [was] thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 26 In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son. 27 And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him.

v23-27 Abraham obeys the command to circumcise himself and his son and all his household (v. 23-25) the very same day the Lord commanded it (v. 27). All of the men were circumcised, none were exempt (v. 27).

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