

Genesis 17:1 – 27

¹ Now 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 I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly.’ ³ Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, ⁴ ‘As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. ⁷ I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. ⁸ I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.’ ⁹ God said further to Abraham, ‘Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. ¹³ A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.’ ¹⁵ Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’ ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’ ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before You!’ ¹⁹ But God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰ As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.’ ²² When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. ²³ Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old 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 very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. ²⁷ All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Historical and Cultural Background

- Abram ('exalted father') → Abraham ('father of many nations'); Sarai and Sarah both mean 'princess'

Structure of the Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar Story¹

- A. God calls Abram to trust His word, leave his homeland, gives promise of seed (11:27 – 12:3)
- B. Abram builds an altar, calls on the name of the Lord (12:4 – 9)
- C. Abram and Sarai sojourn in Egypt, Abram lies about Sarai (12:10 – 20)
 - Separation of Lot (13:1 – 13)
 - Blessing: God reiterates promise of seed and many descendants (13:14 – 18)
- D. Abram wars on Sodom and Gomorrah, rescues Lot (14:1 – 24)
- E. God again promises Abram seed despite Abram's old age (15:1 – 6)
 - God promises birth of Israel from a hopeless situation: bondage (15:7 – 21)
- F. Sarai relies on herself and fails (16:1 – 6)
 - God hears Hagar (who names God) and promises blessing on Ishmael (16:7 – 16)
- G. God marks Abram with circumcision, symbol of purification back to Eden
 - God says, 'I will multiply you exceedingly.' (17:1 – 6)
 - God renames Abram to Abraham (17:5)
 - God again promises land to their descendants (17:8)
 - God gives Abraham the sign of circumcision (17:9 – 14)
- F'. God renames Sarai to Sarah; Sarah receives God's promise of Isaac (17:15 – 17)
 - God promises blessing on Ishmael (17:18 – 27)
- E'. God again promises Sarah seed despite Sarah's old age (18:1 – 15)
 - God promises birth of son from a hopeless situation: Sarah's womb
- D'. God wars on Sodom and Gomorrah, rescues Lot (18:16 – 19:38)
- C'. Abraham and Sarah sojourn in Gerar, Abraham lies about Sarah (20:1 – 18)
 - Blessing: Isaac is born (21:1 – 7)
 - Separation of Ishmael; promised blessing on Ishmael and many descendants (21:8 – 21)
- B'. Abraham plants a tree and calls on the name of the Lord (21:22 – 34)
- A'. God calls Abraham to trust His word, sacrifice his son, gives blessing on the seed (22:1 – 19)

Structure of Genesis 17:1 – 25

- A. Abram's age (17:1a)
- B. The LORD appears to Abram (17:1b)
- C. God's first speech (17:1c – 2)
- D. Abram falls on his face (17:3)
 - E. God's second speech (emphasizing "names/ kings/nations") (17:4 – 8)
 - F. God's third speech (emphasizing "the covenant" and circumcision) (17:9 – 14)
 - E'. God's fourth speech (emphasizing "names/kings/ nations") (17:15 – 16)
- D'. Abraham falls on his face (17:17 – 18)
- C'. God's fifth speech (17:19 – 21)
- B'. The LORD goes up from Abram (17:22 – 23)
- A'. Abraham's age (17:24 – 25)

Genesis 17:19 – 21; God's Fifth Speech²

- A. Sarah will bear a son...Isaac (17:19a)
 - B. I shall confirm my covenant with him (17:19b)
 - C. Ishmael (17:20)
- B'. I shall confirm my covenant with him (17:21)
- A'. Sarah will bear next year (17:22)

¹ Modified by Mako Nagasawa from Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (2nd publishing Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishing, 2000), p.114

² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* (Waco, Texas; Word, 1994), p.26

Questions

1. What are the most repeated words, phrases, and ideas?
 - a. Covenant
 - b. Circumcise
 - c. 'Me and you'
 - d. Bless, be fruitful, make nations of you:
2. What do you think Abram felt like?
3. Why circumcision? What about a funny haircut? An earring?
 - a. For one thing, it's permanent.
 - b. For another, circumcision relates to the penis which relates to childbearing. This symbolizes Abram's journey of learning to trust God for the descendants and blessing on the future.
 - c. Why does God pick this time to do this? What has He taught Abram and Sarai so far about childbearing and marriage and trusting Him?
 - i. Don't lie to Pharaoh about Sarai (Gen.12)
 - ii. Don't name anyone else (e.g. Eliezer) as the heir (Gen.15)
 - iii. Don't have children through Hagar or some other woman (Gen.16)
 - iv. Your marriage has to be in the way Adam and Eve's marriage should have been and would have been. Your childbearing and marriage has to fit the creation order pattern!
 - v. Your trust needs to be in God Himself, and God alone. Now that you're old and way past menopause (Sarai), there is no option for childbearing but to trust God. Now that God has cut off all the other options, you have no option for having an heir but to trust God.
 - vi. What has God taken away from them? Control, power, despair, manipulation, etc.
 - vii. It's like God is saying, 'I have cut off your ability to lie about your marriage to save your life. I have cut off your ability to name someone else like Eliezer as your heir. I have cut off Sarai's ability to manipulate the promise by putting Hagar forward as a surrogate mother. I have cut off Abram's ability to father a child with another woman and just celebrate his own virility. I have cut off all natural ways and cultural ways you have of doing this for yourselves. Now I am cutting off a part of your penis. Can the message be any more clear???'
 - viii. God is saying to all descendants of Abraham and Sarah afterwards, you are my children. I have marked your human parents Abraham and Sarah.
 1. If God had selected Ishmael as the bearer of the covenant promise, our theology might very well be, 'God helps those who help themselves.' And our ethics might very well be, 'We can do whatever our culture tells us.'
 2. Instead, by selecting Isaac as the child and Sarah as the mother, our theology is, 'God brings life out of death.' And our ethics are, 'God is restoring His creation vision of human relationships.'
 - d. This is about purification of attitude that represents a deeper purification of being. Later, Moses, Jeremiah, and Paul will all speak of God circumcising our hearts (Dt.10:16; 30:6; Jer.4:4; Rom.2:28 – 29) to cleanse us of unclean attitudes internally. Paul will speak of the circumcision of Christ (Col.2:11 – 14) to speak of how Christ cut off sinfulness in himself and make a new humanity in his own physical body, so that he can share himself with us by his Spirit.
 - e. Application: So God desires to cleanse us as well. How is He doing that?
4. What about those who don't want to get circumcised? They get cut off from the people (Gen.17:14). They are symbolically unclean because their uncleanness is not symbolically dealt with.
5. What's the significance of God's renaming Abraham and Sarah?
 - a. Abram → Abraham: fulfill his original name 'exalted father' and expand it to 'father of many'
 - b. Sarai → Sarah: no change in meaning, but there is a change in who is naming her; she is now named directly by God and that does make a difference
 - c. Recall the people at the Tower of Babel trying to name themselves (Gen.11:1 – 9). Abram and Sarai wanted God to name them, to involve their name in God's blessing of the world. This is what it took.
 - d. Application: What would it mean for you to let God name you, to not care about what adjectives or nouns or titles or degrees the world gives you?

Here is a great summary of this passage by Bruce Feiler:

‘God appears thirteen years later and commands that Abraham circumcise the foreskin of his penis. Further, every male throughout the generation shall also be circumcised at the age of eight days. The struggle over fertility has now reached the level of flesh and blood. God demands a piece of human creation for himself; he leaves a sign of himself on every male. God thus becomes integral to every act of creation.

But he can’t do it alone, so God asks Abraham to perform the first cuts. The Creator needs help from his human partner, who, now that he’s a father, as proven that *he’s* a creator.

And Abraham does as he’s asked – immediately. He circumcises himself at ninety-nine, Ishmael at thirteen, then *every male in his household*, including slaves. The significance of this order is often overlooked. Abraham is the first to receive the new compact, but Ishmael is the second. Isaac is not yet a gleam. Further, Abraham engraves this marker on everyone in his orbit, regardless of lineage. God’s blessing is not limited to those among Abraham’s descendants who will inherit the land; it goes to anyone associated with his household. Circumcision, later one of the most contentious features of Abraham’s life, shows Abraham at his most inclusive.

As proof of this new expansive stature, it is circumcision that earns Abraham his new name. ‘And you shall no longer be called Abram,’ God announces, ‘but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.’ (The word *Abraham* actually means ‘father of many nations.’) Abram, the son of Terah, has now been re-created as the son of God. Now that he has God in his life (as well as on his body), he is ready to fulfill God’s promise and become father of the world.’³

³ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p.68 – 9