

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 17 – Circumcision

OUTLINE OF THE ABRAHAM STORY – Genesis 12-25

Genesis 12: 1–9	God calls and blesses Abram and he moves west into Canaan.
Genesis 12: 10–20	Abraham risks his blessing in Egypt by giving up Sarai.
Genesis 13: 1–18	Abraham and Lot divide their territory and Abraham receives Palestine.
Genesis 14: 1–24	Abraham shows himself a hero and blessed in warfare.
Genesis 15: 1–21	God renews his promises and makes a covenant with Abraham, but after declaring a curse.
Genesis 16: 1–16	Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael.
Genesis 17: 1–27	God renews his covenant and promise of a son, but commands the sign of circumcision.
Genesis 18: 1–15	God renews his promise to give a son to Sarah and Abraham.
Genesis 18: 16–33	Abraham shows his blessing by interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah.
Genesis 19: 1–38	Lot proves to be the only faithful person in Sodom; it is destroyed.
Genesis 20: 1–18	Abraham risks the blessing to Sarah with the king of Gerar.
Genesis 21: 1–21	God gives the blessing of a son, Isaac, and sends Ishmael away.
Genesis 21: 22–34	Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech and his people.
Genesis 22: 1–24	Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God.
Genesis 23: 1–20	Abraham lays claim to possession of the land by buying the cave of Machpelah
Genesis 24: 1–67	Abraham arranges a wife for Isaac to continue the blessing.
Genesis 25: 1–18	Abraham's death and burial; Ishmael's descendants; the blessing passes to Isaac.

CHIASM IN THE ABRAHAM STORY

It is interesting how different parts of the Abraham story correspond with other parts; where themes introduced at the outset are resumed in reverse order in the second half. This chiasmic pattern binds many parts of the Abraham story together and puts a heightened emphasis on the sections that occur at the center.

A. Prologue (11.27–30)

B. First challenge: call for Abraham to leave family of origin (12:1–3)

C. Wife-sister story 12:10–13:1

D. Separation from Lot (13:2–18)

E. Covenant of pieces with Abraham (14–15)

F. Hagar-Ishmael story (Gen 16:1–14)

E'. Covenant of circumcision with Abraham (17)

D'. Hospitality/progeny episodes; Abraham contrasted with Lot (18–19)

C'. Wife-sister story (20)

B'. Final challenge: calls for Abraham to let go of family of future (21.8–21 and 22.1–19)

A'. Epilogue 22.20–24

CHIASM IN CHAPTER 17

This is a chiasmic structure to chapter 17 of Genesis that shows the all-important emphasis on the covenant.

A. Abram is 99 years old (17:1)

B. Abram falls on his face (17:3)

C. Father of nations (17:4)

D. Name change (17:5)

E. Individuals become nations (17:6)

F. Everlasting covenant (17:7)

G. Promise of Land "I will be your God", "I will give you the land", "I will be your God" (17:7-8)

H. "You shall keep my covenant." "This is my covenant." (17:9-10)

G'. Circumcision "You must circumcise," "It will be a sign," "You must circumcise." (17:11-12)

F'. Everlasting covenant (17:13)

E'. Individuals cut off from nations (17:14)

D'. Name change (17:15)

C'. Mother of nations (17:16)

B'. Abraham falls on his face (17:17)

A'. Abraham is 100 years old (17:17)

CHAPTER 17 – THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT: CIRCUMCISION

God changes Abram’s name and makes him cut off skin from the part of his body that he and Sarai had just used to abuse their Egyptian slave. Circumcision is the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, a reminder of both divine judgment and mercy, and a means by which anyone can take on the sign of God’s covenant with his people and enter into the family.

When Abram is 99 years old, with no sign of God coming through on the promise, God shows up with a reminder that God will do what God has promised. But now, God adds a sign to the covenant; a sign that Abram will be faithful to God: circumcision for everyone. God introduces circumcision as a sign of covenant relationship (vs. 1-14). God also announces that God’s promise of countless descendants will not be fulfilled through Hagar’s son Ishmael, but through a child to be borne by Sarah, who is now 90 years old (vs. 15-27). In a sense, the organ of procreation was being claimed by God and dedicated to God. This became a sign of their ethnic identity; a sign that they had pledged themselves to Yahweh. And other people will become known as the “uncircumcised.”

Names Changed: Abram’s name is changed to Abraham. Abram means “father” or “exalted ancestor,” while Abraham means “father of a multitude” or “ancestor of a multitude.” Sarai means “she that strives” and Sarah means “princess”. Notice how similar the name Sarai is to Israel. They come from the same root. Israel means “to struggle.” There is no mention of these name changes in the other sources, but the Redactor has most probably made the change consistent for the rest of the narrative. From here on, all sources will use Abraham and Sarah, not Abram and Sarai.

Circumcision: The rite of circumcision involves removing the flap of skin that covers the tip of a male’s penis. This is done on the eighth day of a Jewish boy’s life. Circumcision was the physical mark of participation in the covenant which God made with Abraham and his descendants. One who did not consider covenant relationship with God important enough to identify himself or his children with the covenant people and thus did not practice circumcision, “will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant (vs. 14). In Deuteronomy 10:16 we see the symbolism of circumcision as a readiness to respond to God: ¹⁶ *Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.*

GENESIS 17 (NRSV)

17 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. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³Then 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. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I 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. ⁸And 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.”

⁹God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²Throughout 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. ¹³Both 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. ¹⁴Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

¹⁵God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I 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.” ¹⁷Then 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?” ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” ¹⁹God 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. ²⁰As 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. ²¹But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” ²²And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

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.

Source Theory: This entire passage is from the Priestly Source.

Genesis 17:1–27: An everlasting covenant with Abraham and a promise about Sarah.

The covenant with Abraham is the second of the great covenants in the P source, after the covenant with Noah (9.8–17). Here the covenantal focus narrows from all creatures to the patriarchal line from which Israel will come. The Abrahamic covenant includes the promises of land, abundant offspring, and a great nation, and its visible sign is circumcision (cf. the rainbow; see note on 9.8–17). In some respects, the P covenant with Abraham is parallel to the J promises to Abram (12.1–3, 7) and to the covenant with Abram in ch. 15 (source unknown). Source critics identify ch 17 as the P(riestly) version of the covenant with Abraham (of which the J version appears in ch 15). Nothing in ch 17 indicates any awareness that a covenant has, in fact, already been established two chapters earlier. In our chapter, the two chief innovations are that the covenant acquires a sign (circumcision, v. 10) and that it is Sarah who, despite her advanced age, shall bear the promised son (vv. 15–16, 19). The closest parallel to ch 17 in style and diction is 9.1–17, the account of the covenant with Noah.

Genesis 17:1: The phrase translated as God Almighty (Heb “El Shaddai”) is variously understood as “God [or “El”], the one of the mountains,” “God of the Shaddai [deities],” or even “fertile God” (literally, “God with breasts,” see 49.25). The words אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי (El Shaddai), usually translated as “God Almighty” are of uncertain origin. It is possible that the root of Shaddai is the same as of שָׁד (shad) “breast.” If so, the origin of this name of God might have to do with provision and sustenance. The female breast does symbolize sustenance and life-provision, fertility and offspring. So we can see how El Shaddai can also be translated as “God my provider.” Whatever its original meaning, the Priestly tradition understands this epithet to be what the early ancestors of Israel called God before they learned the name Yahweh (Ex 6.2–8). El Shaddai is believed to have originally meant “God, the One of the Mountain” and thus to have expressed the association of a deity with his mountain abode well known in Canaanite literature (cf. the “Lord, Him of Sinai” in Judg. 5.5). In the Priestly conception, the four-letter name translated as Lord was disclosed only in the time of Moses (Exod. 6.2–3), and El Shaddai was the name by which God revealed God's self to the patriarchs. Abram's advanced age provides a backdrop for his incredulous reaction to God's promise of a son to him and Sarah in v. 17. El Shaddai probably means “God, the Mountain One,” referring to his dwelling place on a holy mountain (for Horeb/Sinai, see Ex 3.1; 19; for Zion, see Ps 48). God's revelation of this name to Abraham will be superseded by his revelation of the name Yahweh to Moses in the next covenant (Ex 6.3; see note on 6.18). Walk before me, and be blameless. The Abrahamic covenant is conditioned on Abraham's virtue. The term “blameless” (*tamim*) is the same term the Torah used to describe Noah (Genesis 6:9). It's most accurate translation is “without blemish” (Leviticus 1:3 and 1:10).

Genesis 17:3-8: The name “Abram” אַבְרָם (Avram) is composed of two words, Av and Ram, and means something like “father is lofty.” “Abraham” אַבְרָהָם (Avraham), on the other hand, contains the words אַב (av) and הַמּוֹן (hamon) within it. This refers to the phrase כִּי אֲבִי־הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם נָתַתִּיךָ לָּהֶם “because I have made you a father of a many nations” (Gen. 17:5). The change is very minor; only one letter – ה (hey). But this letter inserted into the middle of the word רַם (ram), essentially turns “lofty” into “multitude” or “many.” The change is minor but the impact is major. The emphasis is no longer on the individual distinction of one leader, but on the collective greatness of the entire multitude of his descendants. Abram's name change to Abraham is part of his passage to a new covenantal identity, as is Sarai's name change in v. 15. God explains that Abraham means ancestor (lit. “father”) of a multitude, which creatively links Abraham (a dialectal variant of Abram) to the Hebrew words for “father” (‘ab), and “multitude” (hamon). The promise to make Abraham exceedingly fruitful (v. 6) recalls the blessing to Noah (9.1, 7) and the first humans (1.28). The nations and kings descended from Abraham include the dynasties of Israel, Ishmael, and Edom (for the kings of Edom, see 36.31–39). Although the Abrahamic covenant is conditioned on Abraham's virtue, it is an everlasting covenant (v. 7), and the promised land will be a perpetual holding (v. 8). In the historical context of the P source, which may have included the Babylonian exile, this is an expression of great trust and hope. A new name signifies a new relationship or status (see 32.28). This anticipates nations whose ancestry will be traced to Abraham (v. 16; 28.3; 35.11; 48.4), such as Edomites and Ishmaelites. The

promise to make Abraham “exceedingly numerous” (v. 2) and exceedingly fruitful (v. 6) echoes the broader fertility blessing given animals (1.22; 8.17) and humanity (1.28; 9.1,7) in the primeval history, suggesting that Abraham’s line is now the recipient of the blessing originally intended for all humanity.

Every few years, God returns to Abram and makes the same promise. God, it seems, delays the fulfillment of God’s promise as a test of Abram’s faith, specifically as part of what will constitute the final and greatest test of Abram’s faith. By making him wait so long for a son with Sarai, it will be all the more difficult for Abram to offer up this long-awaited child on an altar to God (Genesis 22). What “multitude of nations” will Abram be the father of? The Israelite nation through Isaac, nations that emanate from Ishmael, and nations descending from his second wife, Keturah (Genesis 25:1-4). Abram’s name change serves as a sign that something major is about to happen.

Genesis 17:7: Within the Priestly tradition, the promise to be God to Abraham and his offspring leads to the divine provision of religious laws and a tabernacle sanctuary into which God comes to dwell in Israel’s midst (Ex 25–31; 35–40). Like the covenant with Noah (9.8–17), this covenant to be bound to Israel is an everlasting covenant (vv. 13,19) because it is grounded in the will of God, not human behavior.

Genesis 17:9– 14: Circumcision was an ancient rite practiced among some Semitic groups, perhaps originally connected to marriage and fertility (see 34.14–17), elsewhere connected with warding off demons (see Ex 4.24–26). Here, however, it is moved to early childhood and reinterpreted as a sign of God’s everlasting covenant with Israel, a mark of membership in the covenant community. Unlike the covenant with Noah (9.1–17), this one pertains only to the household and heirs of Abraham. Just as the rainbow is the sign of the Noahide covenant (9.12– 17), so circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic. It thus becomes a matter of the highest importance in Judaism. A Second Temple source reports that when the Seleucid King Antiochus IV prohibited circumcision (a favorite target of anti-Semites), Jewish mothers chose martyrdom over neglect of the commandment (1 Macc. 1.60– 61). Rabbinic law requires that a (healthy) Jewish boy be circumcised on the eighth day of his life (v. 12), even if it is the Sabbath. Although arguments for the hygienic value of circumcision have been made since the mid-19th century, the Torah knows nothing of these and sees circumcision (“berit milah,” the “covenant of circumcision,” or in shorthand, “berit” or “beris,” “covenant”) as a religious duty incumbent only on Jews. The procedure of medical circumcision is not identical to that performed by a “mohel” (ritual circumciser) in a “berit milah.” Circumcision is the sign of the covenant (v. 11; cf. the rainbow in 9.12, 17 and the sabbath in Ex 31.12–17). This symbolic mark of the male member is probably related to the blessing to be exceedingly fruitful in v. 6 and functions as a male rite of passage into the covenant. In a patriarchal and patrilineal society such as ancient Israel, this sign covers each household, including women. Eight days old. The timing of the ceremony allows for the mother’s presence, for she is now ritually clean (Lev 12.2–3).

Genesis 17:15–22: Unlike its parallel in ch 15 (J), the P account of the Abrahamic covenant specifies Sarah as the mother of the promised son, and thus makes her indispensable to the fulfillment of the promise to her husband. The natural impossibility of her giving birth at 90 (not to mention her lifelong infertility) only highlights the supernatural origin of Isaac and the nation descended from him (v. 17). Ishmael, however, is not dispossessed. Whereas only Isaac inherits the covenant (and its attendant promise of land), Ishmael inherits a large measure of the Abrahamic promise (vv. 20– 21; 12.2). Like his nephew Jacob (35.22b– 26), he will become the patriarch of a twelve-tribe confederation and thus the father of a great nation (v. 20; cf. 25.12– 18; 12.2). In the text’s final form, Abraham’s laughter here in the Priestly tradition anticipates Sarah’s laughter in the non-Priestly account (18.9–15n.). Sarai’s name change signals her new destiny as the mother of the promised child and as the mother of kings. Sarah, a dialectal variant of Sarai, means “princess.” Ninety years old (v. 17). Her advanced age highlights the miracle of this promise. Abraham uncharacteristically laughed at this promise, which provides the motive for the child’s name, Isaac, which means “he laughed.” In the J version of the promise of the child, it is Sarah who laughs (18.12). Abraham understandably assumes that God is referring to Ishmael as his heir, but God clarifies that Isaac will be the heir of the covenant. Because of Abraham’s concern, God grants Ishmael his own patriarchal blessing: abundant offspring, twelve princes (v. 20; see 25.12–16), and a great nation.

It is clear that when Abram heard God’s promise of fertility, he did not understand what was to come – a son through the womb of Sarah, who was now well past child-bearing age. The Torah goes on to speak of the nature of this very interesting communication between God and Abraham (Gen. 17:15-22). God now tells Abraham that he is not the only one in the family to change names. Sarai, his wife, would now be known as Sarah. God further promised that she would also bear Abraham a son; indeed a multiplicity of people groups and nations will descend from her. When Abraham

laughed at God's promise, he made his own proposal to God: "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" God responded in the negative, saying that it would be through the son of his wife Sarah that the covenant blessing would flow.

His name will be called "Isaac" יִצְחָק (Yitschak), which in Hebrew means "he laughs" or "he will laugh" (Gen. 17:19, 21-22). God's choice of Isaac did not discount his love and care for "Ishmael" יִשְׁמָעֵאל (Yishmael), whose name means "God will hear" or "God hears." God stated that because of Abraham's request the blessings on Ishmael would also come into effect. He too will become a great nation and father twelve princes. (Gen. 17:20). That very day, in radical Noah-like obedience, Abraham circumcised Ishmael and every male in his household (Gen. 17:23-27).

Genesis 17:20: It is a bit strange that here in Genesis 17, God promises to Abraham that he and Sarah will have not only descendants, but specifically kings (or princes) as their descendants. Many biblical scholars believe that this is one of the clues that tells us that the story was written at a time when Israelite kingship was a thing. If so, then perhaps God's famous, miraculous intervention in Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age was a story told to produce a line of kings. It's strange that this would be mentioned so early here because the Israelites don't get kings until much later in their story. Now, it could be understood as a prediction of the future monarchy. And that's okay if you believe that. But the story seems to be curiously king-centric; which makes you wonder where this is coming from. Why mention it here?

ISRAEL is the name conferred on Jacob after the great struggle at Peniel (Genesis 32:28). It's the common name given to Jacob's descendants. The whole people of the twelve tribes are called "Israelites", the "children of Israel" (Joshua 3:17; 7:25; Judges 8:27; Jeremiah 3:21), and the "house of Israel" (Exodus 16:31; 40:38). After the death of Saul, the ten tribes claimed for themselves this name, as if they were the whole nation (2 Samuel 2:9-28; 3:10-17; 19:40-43), and the kings of the ten tribes were called the "kings of Israel" while the kings of the two tribes were called "kings of Judah." After the Exile, the name Israel was assumed as designating the entire nation.

HEBREW is the name applied to the Israelites only by one who is a foreigner (Genesis 39:14, 17; 41:12) or by the Israelites when they speak of themselves to foreigners (Genesis 40:15; Exodus 1:19), or when spoken of and contrasted with other peoples (Genesis 43:32; Exodus 1:3, 7, 15; Deuteronomy 15:12). In the new Testament there is the same contrast between Hebrews and foreigners (Acts 6:1; Philippians 3:5). The name is possibly derived from Eber (Genesis 10:24), the ancestor of Abraham; the Hebrews are "sons of Eber" (10:21). But the name could also come from the Hebrew word "abhar" which means "to pass over" in the sense of a "sojourner" or "someone who passes through" as distinct from a "settler" in the land.

JEW is the name derived from the patriarch Judah, at first given to one belonging to the tribe of Judah or to the separate kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 16:6; 25:25; Jeremiah 32:12; 38:19; 40:11; 41:3) in contradistinction from those belonging to the kingdom of the ten tribes, who were called Israelites. During the captivity and after the restoration, the name was extended to all the Hebrew national without distinction (Esther 3:6-10; Daniel 3:8-12; Ezra 4:12; 5:1, 5). Originally the people were called Hebrews (Genesis 39:14; 40:15; Exodus 2:7; 3:18; 5:3; 1 Samuel 4:6-9) but after the Exile, this name fell into disuse.

Pete Enns Comments on Genesis 17

when Abraham is ninety-nine years old, God shows up with a reminder: "'Our deal is still on. Land and people still coming your way.'" But something new is added to the former agreement. Now Abraham has to do something to show his faithfulness to God: circumcise himself, every one of his sons, and every one of his slaves. No exceptions. And this command has no end date. It is an "'everlasting covenant'" to be observed from here on out when the male is eight days old (see 17:9-14). The penalty for non-compliance is to be "'cut off'" from the Israelites—a striking pun that probably means something like "'excommunicated.'" Circumcision. Where in the world does this come from? Sort of takes the reader off guard. But it wasn't a new idea in those days. Circumcision was an ancient ritual practiced by cultures other than just Israel, dating back more than 1,000 years before the time of Abraham. But still, we get no explanation for what this ritual signified specifically for Israel. In some cultures, males were circumcised at puberty as an initiation rite. But Israelite males were circumcised at 8 days old. Perhaps the organ of procreation was being "claimed" by God to indicate that Abraham's offspring were his and that Abraham and Sarah's future lay solely in God hands. Circumcision served a clear purpose as a sign of ethnic and religious identity, a physical sign that Abraham and all his descendants were pledged to Yahweh and belonged to him. It would be the mark of God's people, of who was in and who was out. Other people the Israelites would encounter (especially the perennial pain-in-the-side Philistines) would be known by the derogatory term "uncircumcised."