

## Genesis 17

Outline (my thanks to *The Outline Bible*):

- I. God and Abram (Genesis 17:1-14)
  - a. Abram's new title (Genesis 17:1-8): *God changes Abram's name from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of many").*<sup>1</sup>
  - b. Abram's new task (Genesis 17:9-13): As a sign of the covenant, he is to circumcise himself, all makes in his camp, and all boys eight days after birth.
  - c. The penalty (Genesis 17:14): Those who refuse to be circumcised are to be cut off from the Israelites.
- II. God and Sarai (Genesis 17:15-19)
  - a. The renaming of Sarai (Genesis 17:15): *God changes her name from Sarai to Sarah ("princess").*<sup>2</sup>
  - b. The reassuring of Sarah (Genesis 17:16-19): God promises that this barren woman will indeed become the mother of nations.
- III. God and Ishmael (Genesis 17:20-27)
  - a. Revealing the future of Ishmael (Genesis 17:20-22): *God tells Abraham that Ishmael will become the ancestor of twelve princes and a great nation.*<sup>3</sup>
  - b. Removing the flesh of Ishmael (Genesis 17:23-27): *At age ninety-nine, Abraham circumcises himself, the thirteen-year-old Ishmael, and all the men in his camp.*<sup>4</sup>

Moody Bible Commentary:

*In this chapter, wherein Abram still struggled with believing God's promise of an heir from him and Sarai, God affirmed His unconditional covenant yet again, at the same time also underscoring its eternity (see vv. 7–8). He also decreed circumcision as the "sign" of this covenant, as an outward marker of those to whom the covenant is applied, and a symbol of the submission to God for which they are to strive.*<sup>5</sup>

Extra information:

### **Evidence that Demands a Verdict:**

Genesis 17:1 with Exodus 6:3

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<sup>1</sup> H. L. Willmington, [\*The Outline Bible\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:1–8.

<sup>2</sup> H. L. Willmington, [\*The Outline Bible\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:15.

<sup>3</sup> H. L. Willmington, [\*The Outline Bible\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:20–22.

<sup>4</sup> H. L. Willmington, [\*The Outline Bible\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:23–27.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael A. Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, eds., [\*"Genesis,"\*](#) in *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 74.

*Alleged Contradiction Genesis 17:1 says, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless’ ” (NIV). In this passage, God conspicuously identified his name to Abram, but Exodus 6:3 indicates that he did not make himself known to the patriarchs.*

*Scholarly Diagnosis In his tome *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, K. A. Kitchen provides one possible response, that in Exodus, the words permit reading the grammar as a question—in fact, a rhetorical question that implies its own answer:*

*[T]he final narrator in Genesis commonly speaks of the deity of the patriarchs as YHWH (proper name) or as Elohim (“God”). Both terms also occur in words ostensibly spoken by the patriarchs and their contemporaries. **Often Exod. 6:3 is understood to signify the opposite; namely, that the name YHWH was unknown to the patriarchs. If that were so, then it is very strange that it should ever have been introduced at all into the text of Genesis; the supposed contradiction would have been just as obvious to the ancients as to any modern reader of these books. However, there is very good reason to translate Exod. 6:3 understanding a rhetorical negative that implies a positive, as “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El-Shaddai (“God Almighty”)—and by my name YHWH did I not declare myself to them?”***

*This would find support from two angles. First, the “name” or character of a deity in the ancient Near East was by no means a rigidly fixed entity right from the beginning and forever after; more came to be known about, or attributed to, deities as time passed. Second, YHWH served as the proper name of the “God of the fathers,” precisely as with other deities in the early second millennium, and (as with these) was not used all the time. . . . [F]or his part, YHWH revealed himself to Moses in new roles for the Israelites, not known by the patriarchs even if his name was. . . .*

*And now the second angle of support for reading Exod. 6:3 as a rhetorical negative. . . . From Exod. 6:2–3 we would learn . . . that YHWH was known to the patriarchs both as El-Shaddai (“God Almighty” in many English versions) and as YHWH; the former is an epithet, just as are “God of Abraham,” “God of Isaac,” “God of Jacob,” the latter being his proper name. This is no different to other examples in the biblical world. . . . El-Shaddai also appears to be of ancient format and origin. (Kitchen, OROT, 329–330)<sup>6</sup>*

- i. God and Abram (Genesis 17:1-14)
  - a. Abram’s new title (Genesis 17:1-8): *God changes Abram’s name from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of many”).*<sup>7</sup>
  - b. Verses 1-2: *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, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”*

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<sup>6</sup> McDowell, Josh; McDowell, Sean. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (p. 597). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> H. L. Willmington, [The Outline Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:1–8.

- c. Now, Abram is 99 years old. In one year, at the age of 100, Isaac will be born.
- d. The previous verse, Genesis 16:16 says that he was 86 when Ishmael was born.
- e. The Lord is appearing to him.
- f. That is huge that the Lord is appearing to him, but we should also take note that it appears to have been 13 years since the Lord appeared to him before.
- g. Ishmael is now 13 years old.
- h. God give Abram the name “El Shaddai” meaning that God is “God almighty.”
- i. God tells Abram to walk before him and be blameless.
- j. Walk before God and be blameless and that is connected to the covenant.
- k. Walk before God and be blameless that God will multiply him.
- l. CSB SB: *As Abram obeyed the Lord, God promised him two things: first, he would **set up his covenant** with Abram and second, God would **multiply the patriarch greatly**. Proof that the Lord kept the latter promise is found in Ex 1:7, which speaks of the Israelites’ fruitfulness and repeats the phrase found elsewhere in the Torah only here.<sup>8</sup>*
- m. We have seen God establish a covenant with Abram in Genesis 12; and 15. This could be translated “uphold my covenant.” See below:
- n. *God stated, **I will establish My covenant between Me and you** (v. 2). This translation in v. 2 (as again in v. 7) in the future tense implies a sequential relationship to His previous command (**walk before Me**, etc.). This, in turn, leads to the deduction that establishment of the covenant depended on obedience to the previous command. Yet this future-tense translation in both vv. 2 and 7 is not the only grammatical one possible. In Hebrew this verbal form can be used to denote either present or future tenses. In light of the context, a future-tense translation clearly contradicts God’s statement in v. 4 that **My covenant is with you** (italics added). A future-tense translation also contradicts previous passages in Genesis that indicate that the covenant was already established, active, and ratified. In fact it was ratified and then sealed, for once a covenant “has been ratified, no one ... adds conditions to it” (Gl 3:15). **Furthermore, the verb rendered establish may also be translated “uphold” or “maintain.”** Thus, God’s statement in vv. 2 and 7 would be better translated, “I am upholding My covenant.” Hence God’s previous command to **walk before Me, and***

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<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Bergen, [“Genesis,”](#) in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 35.

v. verse

v. verse

v. verse

etc. and so forth

vv. verses

v. verse

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- be blameless* (v. 1) should not be viewed a condition to ensure that the covenant will be made, but rather as a response to the covenant having already been made.<sup>9</sup>
- o. The covenant is not new, but the Lord is re-affirming the covenant as it is almost time to fulfill one part of the covenant.
  - p. *There are three types of signs in the Old Testament. Some signs were proofs that convinced observers of something (e.g., the Egyptian plagues). Others were certain acts that resembled an announced situation (e.g., acted prophecies). Still others were reminders of something (e.g., the rainbow, circumcision).*<sup>10</sup>
  - q. Verses 3-4: *Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations."*
  - r. Abram falls on his face which is a sign of humility.
  - s. God continues talking. Abram will be the father of a multitude of nations.
  - t. Verses 5-8: *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. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And 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. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."*
  - u. God is now changing his name. His name was Abram and now it will be Abraham.
  - v. "Abram" means "exalted father."
  - w. CSB: *This section contains the fullest presentation of God's covenant with Abram. Eight different aspects of the covenant are presented in these verses. Most of these promises are not new, but nowhere else are they put together in one place. The new aspect is where God changed the patriarch's name, thus indicating his authority over him: instead of **Abram** ("Exalted Father"), his new **name** would be **Abraham** ("Father of a Multitude").*<sup>11</sup>
  - x. "Abraham" means "father of a multitude."
  - y. NET: *The renaming of Abram was a sign of confirmation to the patriarch. Every time the name was used it would be a reminder of God's promise. "Abram" means "exalted father," probably referring to Abram's father Terah. The name looks to the past; Abram came from noble lineage. The name "Abraham" is a dialectical variant of the name Abram. But its significance is in the wordplay with אַבְרָהָם ('av-hamon, "the father of a multitude," which sounds like אַבְרָהָם, 'avraham, "Abraham"). The new name would be a reminder of God's intention to make Abraham the father of a*

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<sup>9</sup> Michael A. Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, eds., "[Genesis](#)," in *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Constable, [Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible](#) (Galaxie Software, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Bergen, "[Genesis](#)," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 35.

multitude. For a general discussion of renaming, see O. Eissfeldt, "Renaming in the Old Testament," *Words and Meanings*, 70–83.<sup>12</sup>

- z. In the ESV and NASB it reads past tense: God "has" made him the father of a multitude of nations. It is as if it is showing that God has already made this in his new name.
- aa. Verse 6: God says that He will make him "exceedingly fruitful." God will make him into nations.
- bb. Kings shall come from him.
- cc. Wow!

**Four Kinds of Abraham's Offspring**

<b>Offspring</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Natural, physical offspring	Physical descendants of Abraham	of Ishmael, Isaac, the sons of Keturah (and by extension Esau, Jacob, etc.)
Natural, yet special offspring	Physical descendants of Abraham especially tied to God's elective and saving purposes	of Isaac (by extension Jacob and the entire nation of Israel)
Promised offspring	The true, unique offspring of Abraham	A distinctive line of offspring, starting earlier with Seth and continuing through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Israel, and David, culminating in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16)
Spiritual offspring	Those united with Christ (the promised offspring)	Jews and Gentiles who trust in the Messiah

Chart reference- see footnote<sup>13</sup>

- dd. In verse 7 God is speaking of establishing His covenant with Abraham and his offspring. This covenant is for Abraham and Abraham's offspring.
- ee. This is an everlasting covenant. We know that from Genesis 12 and 15. Though God is about to give a sign of the covenant which is circumcision.

<sup>12</sup> Biblical Studies Press, [The NET Bible First Edition Notes](#) (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Ge 17:5.

<sup>13</sup> Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 79–80.

- ff. In verse 8 God tells Abraham that He will give to him and his descendants the land they are in. God will give them all of the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession.
- gg. God will be their God.
- hh. That is incredibly powerful.
- ii. God is clearly Abraham's God, now this is saying that He will also be their God.
- jj. God will be the God for all of Abraham's descendants.
- kk. This sets things in motion for the Jewish people and later the Christians.
- ll. Do we realize that as Christians God is our God? Do we realize all that we have in Christ?
- mm. Abram's new task (Genesis 17:9-13): As a sign of the covenant, he is to circumcise himself, all males in his camp, and all boys eight days after birth.
- nn. Verses 9-13: <sup>9</sup> *And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, <sup>13</sup> both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.*
- oo. God is still speaking. God is giving them something they must do.
- pp. Circumcision:
- qq. *Herodotus said circumcision was for Egyptian priests, but on the White Horse Inn they shared that all Israel were to be priests so they are all circumcised. This is not about health but separating the people.<sup>14</sup>*
- rr. *ESV Study Bible: 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 (c. 2575–2134 B.C.) depict the practice.<sup>15</sup>*
- ss. *Moody Bible Commentary: Part of the reason the Abrahamic covenant is viewed by some as conditional is the conditional language surrounding the use of the word "covenant" (berit) here in vv. 9–16 (**you shall keep My covenant; he has broken My covenant**). Biblical Hebrew, however, is an extremely efficient language, and so the same word can be used in different passages in somewhat different senses, determined as always by the word's use in context. Since the unconditionality of the Abrahamic covenant has already been established, the word "covenant" in this*

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<sup>14</sup> White Horse Inn, 06.06.2021

c. about, approximately

<sup>15</sup> Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 80.

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- section signifies an individual rite or obligation. This is clarified further in v. 11, in which circumcision is called **the sign of the covenant** that already existed between Him and His people Israel (cf. 12:1–9; 15:18–21). In this respect circumcision anticipates and parallels baptism, which as a sign of the new covenant is likewise a follow-up rite of obedience, not a precondition of entrance.*<sup>16</sup>
- tt. Verse 11 says that this is a “Sign” of the covenant.
- uu. MacArthur: *There was a health benefit, since disease could be kept in the folds of the foreskin, so that removing it prevented that. Historically, Jewish women have had the lowest rate of cervical cancer. But the symbolism had to do with the need to cut away sin and be cleansed. It was the male organ which most clearly demonstrated the depth of depravity because it carried the seed that produced depraved sinners. Thus, circumcision symbolized the need for a profoundly deep cleansing to reverse the effects of depravity.*<sup>17</sup>
- vv. Verses 12-13 give more detail. This is to be done on the 8<sup>th</sup> day (see Lev. 12:3). Circumcision is to be done on servants born in their houses as well as anyone bought with their money.
- ww. This is to happen through his generations, his descendants (verse 12).
- xx. This is an everlasting covenant and this sign of the covenant is on their flesh.
- yy. ESV Study Bible: *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 household and those bought with money.*<sup>18</sup>
- zz. Dr. Constable:  
*“At birth, a baby has nutrients, antibodies, and other substances from his mother’s blood, including her blood-clotting factors, one of them being prothrombin. Prothrombin is dependent on vitamin K for its production. Vitamin K is produced by intestinal bacteria, which are not present in a newborn baby. After birth prothrombin decreases so that by the third day it is only 30 percent of normal. Circumcision on the third day could result in a devastating hemorrhage.*  
*“The intestinal bacteria finally start their task of manufacturing vitamin K, and the prothrombin subsequently begins to climb. On day eight, it actually overshoots to 110 percent of normal, leveling off to 100 percent on day nine and remaining there for the rest of a person’s healthy life.*

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cf. compare or consult

<sup>16</sup> Michael A. Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, eds., [“Genesis,”](#) in *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 74.

<sup>17</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., [The MacArthur Study Bible: New American Standard Bible.](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), Ge 17:11.

<sup>18</sup> Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 80.

*Therefore the eighth day was the safest of all days for circumcision to be performed. On that one day, a person's clotting factor is at 110 percent, the highest ever, and that is the day God prescribed for the surgical process of circumcision.*

*"Today vitamin K (Aqua Mephyton) is routinely administered to newborns shortly after their delivery, and this eliminates the clotting problem. However, before the days of vitamin K injections, a 1953 pediatrics textbook recommended that the best day to circumcise a newborn was the eighth day of life."<sup>520</sup>*

*"Research indicates that other Middle Eastern cultures practiced circumcision . . . However, the Hebrews were unique in that they practiced infant circumcision, which, though medically risky if not properly performed, is less physically and psychologically traumatic than circumcisions performed at an older age."<sup>521</sup><sup>19</sup>*

- aaa. The penalty (Genesis 17:14): Those who refuse to be circumcised are to be cut off from the Israelites.
- bbb. Verse 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."*
- ccc. Ex 4:24-26 is an example of this. In that passage Moses had not circumcised his son. Zipporah circumcises him but says that he is a bridegroom of blood to her. She is saying your religion is a religion of blood! It takes blood to cover sin.
- ddd. Moses should have known better and he was disobedient.
- eee. *Moses had not circumcised his son like he was supposed to. This may be because he grew up in Egypt. Circumcision was supposed to happen on the 8th day. Zipporah didn't understand the religion but she saved Moses. She basically said that you made this bloody mess for me. Even today there is a professional that does the circumcision on Jewish boys, the father gives him permission to do it in his name. It is the father's responsibility to circumcise the children.<sup>20</sup>*

## II. God and Sarai (Genesis 17:15-19)

- a. The renaming of Sarai (Genesis 17:15): *God changes her name from Sarai to Sarah ("princess").<sup>21</sup>*
- b. Verses 15-19: *And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."<sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah,*

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<sup>520</sup> 520. L. Holt Jr. and R. McIntosh, *Holt Pediatrics*, pp. 125–26.

<sup>521</sup> 521. Fawver and Overstreet, p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Constable, [\*Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible\*](#) (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ge 17:1.

<sup>20</sup> Dr Rydelnic; Open Line; 01.30.2021

<sup>21</sup> H. L. Willmington, [\*The Outline Bible\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:15.

- who is ninety years old, bear a child?”<sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”<sup>19</sup> God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.*
- c. Verse 15: God is still speaking. Sarai is being renamed Sarah. Sarai and Sarah mean princess.
  - d. NET: *The name change seems to be a dialectical variation, both spellings meaning “princess” or “queen.” Like the name Abram, the name Sarai symbolized the past. The new name Sarah, like the name Abraham, would be a reminder of what God intended to do for Sarah in the future.*<sup>22</sup>
  - e. CSB SB: *During the OT period at least four nations came from Sarah’s womb: Israel, Judah, Edom, and the Amalekites. Over Israel and Judah collectively a total of forty-one kings reigned. Sarah is the only woman in the OT whom the Lord specifically indicated he would **ble**ss.*<sup>23</sup>
  - f. The reassuring of Sarah (Genesis 17:16-19): God promises that this barren woman will indeed become the mother of nations.
  - g. God is re-affirming that Abraham will have a son by her.
  - h. Remember, in the previous chapter Abraham took matters into his own hands. God is showing that Ishmael is not the son of promise. God will give a son through Abraham and Sarah.
  - i. This is a pro-woman passage. In the day in age when it was common to use a surrogate God is not accepting that method.
  - j. This is to happen the following year. See Genesis 18:10.
  - k. God will bless her.
  - l. She will be the mother of nations.
  - m. Kings of peoples will come from her.
  - n. Earlier in this chapter (Genesis 17:6), God said something very similar about Abraham.
  - o. Verse 17: this verse tells us what Abraham is thinking internally.
  - p. Moody: *After establishing the rite of circumcision, God changed Sarai’s name to **Sarah** (the former possibly meaning “striver,” foreshadowing her difficulties with Hagar [16:1–6; 21:9–14], to the latter meaning “princess,” reflecting the promise that kings of peoples will come from her, vv. 15–16), even as He had earlier changed Abram’s to **Abraham** (“exalted father” to what sounds like “father of a multitude,” v. 5). Following this, God once again affirmed His promise to give Abraham a son by*

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<sup>22</sup> Biblical Studies Press, [The NET Bible First Edition Notes](#) (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Ge 17:15.

OT Old Testament

OT Old Testament

<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Bergen, [“Genesis.”](#) in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 36.

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her, in response to which **Abraham fell on his face** (as He did in v. 3). But instead of worshipping God he **laughed** (v. 17, *vayitschaq*), asking instead that **Ishmael** be confirmed as his heir and inheritor of the promise. To this God responded with gentle patience and unflappable grace (a perfect Father!), declaring that it will not be Ishmael with whom He will establish **better, “maintain”** His covenant (vv. 19, 21), but rather with the son **whom Sarah will bear to Abraham** the following year (v. 21). God also told Abraham to name that son **Isaac** (v. 19, *yitschaq*), meaning “he laughs,” thus serving as a continual reminder to the parents, from the moment of Isaac’s birth, of their faithless response (Sarah laughed also in 18:12) to the promise that God faithfully fulfilled (the negative nuance of the laughter is also given a positive twist in 21:6). In light of these specifics, Abraham’s doubt, as in 15:4–5, is again quelled—this time more substantially since no further expression of doubt is attributed to him. For this reason, Paul wrote that Abraham did not waver but was strengthened in his faith (see Ro 4:19–20 and comments there). In marked obedience he proceeded to circumcise **all the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money** (v. 23–27).<sup>24</sup>

- q. He is questioning this.
- r. He will be 100 and Sarah 90 when the child is born.
- s. Cross references about laughing and also in Genesis 17:3 Abraham falls down. Gen 17:3; 18:12; 21:6. The Genesis 21:6 has Sarah saying that God gave her laughter. Isaac means “he laughs.”
- t. John Piper was asked if Abraham laughed at the promises of God. Piper responded:
- u. *This is a good example of how careful we should be not to read into a text something from our own experience that makes an interpretation seem likely, but rather let the context decide whether it’s likely or not... Now, here’s an interesting possible confirmation, before we turn to the Old Testament context for a minute. Here’s an interesting confirmation from Jesus in John 8:56: Jesus says to the Jewish leaders, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” What does gladness refer to when Jesus says, “Abraham saw the day of Christ and was glad”?*
- v. *Could it be the laughter of Genesis 17:17? God gave Abraham a glimpse of Christ in the sense that Genesis 17:1–19 says repeatedly, six times, that Abraham would have offspring of his own who would be the heir of the promise. And we know that Paul in Galatians saw that offspring as Christ (Galatians 3:16).*
- w. *I just can’t help but wonder when Jesus said, “He saw my day and was glad,” whether he might have had in mind, “He saw my day in the promises of Genesis 17,*

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<sup>24</sup> Michael A. Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, eds., “Genesis,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 75.

*and he laughed aloud with gladness.” Well, I can’t prove that, but what is clear is that Paul sees Abraham’s faith as strong and exemplary for us, even though it’s not perfect.*

1. Piper continues: In [Genesis 15:6](#), Abraham looked at the stars, listened to God, and believed the promise that his descendants would be like that. It says so: “He believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”
  2. Abraham asks God what evidence God would give him that the covenant would be kept, and amazingly in [Genesis 15:18](#), God acts out a kind of covenant ceremony in which animals are cut in half, and God passes between them as if to say, “May I be cut in pieces if I don’t keep my half of this covenant to make your seed nations.”
  3. God renews the promise in [Genesis 17:4](#) that Abraham would father many nations, and he changes Abraham’s name from Abram to Abraham to show how certain this is. This is as good as done. You have a name. And Abraham embraces that.
  4. In verse 17, it doesn’t just say that Abraham laughed. This is really significant, I think. It says he fell on his face. (It had already said that once in [Genesis 17:3](#).) He fell on his face and laughed. And falling on your face before Yahweh is a sign of reverence and respect and awe and fear. It’s not the posture you would assume if you were cynically laughing off the possibility of what God just said.
  5. Finally, as soon as the encounter with God is over in chapter 17, Abraham immediately obeys the terms of the covenant and has all the males circumcised.
- x. Piper: So, it seems to me that we have good reason, not only from the New Testament, but also from the context of the Old Testament, that Abraham’s faith really was astonishing. And when Paul said in [Romans 4:20](#) that Abraham was strengthened (passive voice) in his faith, giving glory to God, that passive voice is intended to draw our attention to the fact that this amazing work of faith in Abraham was not just his doing; it was the work of God in him.
- y. And that probably is the central lesson for us. Paul is trying to make clear that sinners like us come into a right relationship with God by trusting him, believing, having faith — not by working for him. And even more pointedly, Paul is showing us that this faith itself is a work of God, so that in the end God gets all the glory — not just because of our faith calling attention to his total trustworthiness and all-sufficiency, but also because the faith itself is a mighty work of God.<sup>25</sup>
- z. In verse 18 we have Abraham asking God that Ishmael might be the child of promise. Then, in verse 19 we see God respond. No, Sarah will have a son and he is to name

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<sup>25</sup> [https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/did-abraham-laugh-at-gods-promise?utm\\_campaign=Daily+Email&utm\\_medium=email&\\_hsmi=120347414&\\_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8YQvUkmY73l6AMln2eWCzKWZaKsXuc3eO-InCnHmvyhOdR227YnfmvZs-RxTF1v2hg-QCDjSF1fLHHngEDeHhz3dbg&utm\\_content=120347414&utm\\_source=hs\\_email](https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/did-abraham-laugh-at-gods-promise?utm_campaign=Daily+Email&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=120347414&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8YQvUkmY73l6AMln2eWCzKWZaKsXuc3eO-InCnHmvyhOdR227YnfmvZs-RxTF1v2hg-QCDjSF1fLHHngEDeHhz3dbg&utm_content=120347414&utm_source=hs_email)

him Isaac. God will establish His covenant with Isaac. There will be an everlasting covenant with Isaac and Isaac's descendants.

III. God and Ishmael (Genesis 17:20-27)

- a. Verses 20-27: *As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.*  
*<sup>22</sup> When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those 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. <sup>24</sup> Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>25</sup> And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>26</sup> That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. <sup>27</sup> And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.*
- b. Revealing the future of Ishmael (Genesis 17:20-22): *God tells Abraham that Ishmael will become the ancestor of twelve princes and a great nation.*<sup>26</sup>
- c. God now responds regarding Ishmael.
- d. God has heard Abraham.
- e. Ishmael will be blessed. Ishmael will multiply exceedingly.
- f. Ishmael will be the father of 12 princes.
- g. We see this in Gen. 21:18; 25:12-16.
- h. Dr Michael Rydelnic has shared a number of times on Moody Radio Open Line (including on Saturday, November 3, 2018) that the idea that Islam goes back to Ishmael only comes from the Koran which would be the 7th century AD. This is not reliable.
- i. In verse 21: God responds about Isaac.
- j. Sarah will bear Isaac in that same season next year.
- k. In verse 22 God finishes talking with Abraham and goes up from there.
- l. Removing the flesh of Ishmael (Genesis 17:23-27): *At age ninety-nine, Abraham circumcises himself, the thirteen-year-old Ishmael, and all the men in his camp.*<sup>27</sup>
- m. So, now, beginning in verse 23 Abraham is obedient.
- n. Abraham obeys the verse same day.
- o. Abraham circumcises Ishmael, the servants born in his house, and all bought with his money, every male among his household. One would think this includes himself.
- p. Verse 24 confirms that Abraham was circumcised as well.
- q. Abraham was 99 years old.
- r. Verse 25 is about Ishmael being circumcised.

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<sup>26</sup> H. L. Willmington, [\*The Outline Bible\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:20–22.

<sup>27</sup> H. L. Willmington, [\*The Outline Bible\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), Ge 17:23–27.

- s. Verse 26 shares that they were both circumcised the same day.
- t. Verse 27: all the men...
- u. There is repetition to show how important this was as well as his obedience.

Extra info from Dr. Constable:

The Lord confirmed His covenant with Abram by commanding him to circumcise all the males in his household. Circumcision thereby became the physical demonstration (sign) of the obedient faith of Abram and his descendants.<sup>510</sup> God further encouraged the patriarch's faith by changing Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah. This was an added confirmation that God would indeed give them innumerable seed as He had promised.

“This chapter is a watershed in the Abraham story. The promises to him have been unfolded bit by bit, gradually building up and becoming more detailed and precise, until here they are repeated and filled out in a glorious crescendo in a long and elaborate divine speech. From this point in Genesis, divine speeches become rarer and little new content is added to the promises, but the fulfillment of these promises becomes more visible.”<sup>511</sup>

Abram undoubtedly assumed that Ishmael would be the promised heir until God told him that Sarai would bear his heir herself (v. 16). That revelation is the most important feature of this chapter. God gave the name changes and circumcision to confirm the covenant promise of an heir and to strengthen Abram's faith.

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael (16:16) God spoke to Abram again (the fifth revelation; v. 1). God called Himself by a new name: El Shaddai (the Almighty God). This was appropriate in view of the thing God proceeded to reveal to Abram that He would do. It would require supernatural power.

The references to the “covenant” in this chapter have caused some confusion. The Abrahamic Covenant (ch. 15) is in view (vv. 4, 7, 11, 19, 21) but also the outward sign of that covenant that was the covenant of circumcision (vv. 2, 9, 10, 13, 14). Thus Moses used the word “covenant” with two different references here. Whereas the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional, the covenant of circumcision depended on Abram's obedience (vv. 1–2). God would bless Abram as Abram obeyed God by circumcising his household. This blessing would be in the form of multiplying Abram's descendants “exceedingly,” even more than God had already promised.

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<sup>510</sup> 510. There are three types of signs in the Old Testament. Some signs were proofs that convinced observers of something (e.g., the Egyptian plagues). Others were certain acts that resembled an announced situation (e.g., acted prophecies). Still others were reminders of something (e.g., the rainbow, circumcision).

<sup>511</sup> 511. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 16. Really there are five divine speeches: vv. 1b–2, 4–8, 9–14, 15–16, and 19–21. The third speech is the center of the chiasmic structure of this chapter, which may also be read as two parallel panels, namely 1–14 and 15–27.

The rite of circumcision was to be a continuing sign of the Abrahamic Covenant to all of Abram's descendants. God also gave Abram and Sarai the added assurance that they would have a multitude of descendants by changing their names.<sup>512</sup>

**Abram** (high or exalted father) — **Abraham** (father of a multitude)

**Sarai** (my princess) — **Sarah** (royal princess [from whom kings would come, v. 16])

Abraham's name emphasized the number of his seed. Sarah's evidently stressed the royal nature of their line (vv. 6, 16, 20; cf. 12:2).

"The choice of the word *be fruitful* in verse 6 and *multiply* in verse 2 seems intended to recall the blessing of all humankind in 1:29: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land,' and its reiteration in 9:1: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land.' Thus the covenant with Abraham was the means through which God's original blessing would again be channeled to all humankind."<sup>513</sup>

God wanted Abraham to circumcise his male servants as well as his children. The reason was that the Abrahamic Covenant would affect all who had a relationship with Abraham. Consequently they needed to bear the sign of that covenant. The person who refused circumcision was "cut off" from his people because by refusing it he was repudiating God's promises to Abraham.

"This expression undoubtedly involves a wordplay on *cut*. He that is not himself cut (i.e., circumcised) will be cut off (i.e., ostracized). Here is the choice: be cut or be cut off."<sup>514</sup>

There are two views as to the meaning of being cut off from Israel. Some scholars hold it means excommunication from the covenant community and its benefits.<sup>515</sup> However the better evidence points to execution sometimes by the Israelites but usually by God in premature death.<sup>516</sup> The threat of being cut off hung over the Israelite offender as the threat of a terminal disease that might end one's life at any time does today.

The person who refused to participate in circumcision demonstrated his lack of faith in God by his refusal. Thus he broke the covenant of circumcision (v. 14).

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<sup>512</sup> 512. See note on 1:4.

<sup>513</sup> 513. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 157.

<sup>514</sup> 514. Hamilton, p. 473.

<sup>515</sup> 515. J. Morganstern, "The Book of the Covenant, Part III—The Huqqim," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 8–9 (1931–32):1-150; and Anthony Phillips, *Ancient Israel's Criminal Law*, pp. 28–32.

<sup>516</sup> 516. Keil and Delitzsch, 1:224; Hamilton, p. 474; M. Tsevat, "Studies in the Book of Samuel," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961):195-201; M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, pp. 241–43; W. Horbury, "Extirpation and excommunication," *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985):16-18, 31–34; and Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 25.

Only males underwent circumcision, of course. In the patriarchal society of the ancient Near East people considered that a girl or woman shared the condition of her father if she was single, or her husband if she was married.

Circumcision was a fitting symbol for several reasons.

1. It would have been a frequent reminder to every circumcised male of God's promises involving seed.
2. It involved the cutting off of flesh. The circumcised male was one who repudiated "the flesh" (i.e., the simply physical and natural aspects of life) in favor of trust in Yahweh and His spiritual promises.
3. It resulted in greater cleanliness of life and freedom from the effects of sin (i.e., disease and death).

Circumcision was not a new rite. The priests in Egypt practiced it as did most of the Canaanites and the Arabs, but in Mesopotamia it was not customary. Later the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites practiced it, but the Philistines did not.<sup>517</sup> By commanding it of Abraham and his household God was giving further evidence that he would bless the patriarch. Circumcision has hygienic value since cancer of the penis has a much higher incidence in uncircumcised males.<sup>518</sup> Circumcision was a rite of passage to adulthood in these cultures.<sup>519</sup> Normally it was practiced on young adults (cf. ch. 34). Circumcising infants was something new.

"Designating the eighth day after birth as the day of circumcision is one of the most amazing specifications in the Bible, from a medical standpoint. Why the eighth day?"

"At birth, a baby has nutrients, antibodies, and other substances from his mother's blood, including her blood-clotting factors, one of them being prothrombin. Prothrombin is dependent on vitamin K for its production. Vitamin K is produced by intestinal bacteria, which are not present in a newborn baby. After birth prothrombin decreases so that by the third day it is only 30 percent of normal. Circumcision on the third day could result in a devastating hemorrhage.

"The intestinal bacteria finally start their task of manufacturing vitamin K, and the prothrombin subsequently begins to climb. On day eight, it actually overshoots to 110 percent of normal, leveling off to 100 percent on day nine and remaining there for the rest of a person's healthy life. Therefore the eighth day was the safest of all days for circumcision to be performed. On that one day, a person's clotting factor is at 110 percent,

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<sup>517</sup> 517. See Davis, p. 192; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>518</sup> 518. Jay D. Fawver and R. Larry Overstreet, "Moses and Preventive Medicine," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:587 (July-September 1990):276.

<sup>519</sup> 519. Kidner, p. 174.

the highest ever, and that is the day God prescribed for the surgical process of circumcision.

“Today vitamin K (Aqua Mephyton) is routinely administered to newborns shortly after their delivery, and this eliminates the clotting problem. However, before the days of vitamin K injections, a 1953 pediatrics textbook recommended that the best day to circumcise a newborn was the eighth day of life.<sup>520</sup>

“Research indicates that other Middle Eastern cultures practiced circumcision . . . However, the Hebrews were unique in that they practiced infant circumcision, which, though medically risky if not properly performed, is less physically and psychologically traumatic than circumcisions performed at an older age.”<sup>521</sup>

God has not commanded circumcision of the flesh for Christians. Some Christians in the reformed traditions of Protestantism regard baptism as what God requires of us today in place of circumcision. They practice infant baptism believing that this rite brings the infant into the “covenant community” (i.e., the church) and under God’s care in a special sense. Some believe baptism saves the infant. Others believe it only makes the infant a recipient of special grace. The Bible is quite clear, however, that baptism is a rite that believers should practice after they trust Christ as their Savior as a testimony to their faith. There are parallels between circumcision and baptism, but God did not intend baptism to replace circumcision. God did command circumcision of the Israelites in the Mosaic Law, but He has not commanded it of Christians. We do not live under the Mosaic Law (Rom. 4:10–13; 6:14–15; 7:1–4; 10:4).

Abraham’s laugh (v. 17) seems to have been a joyful response to God’s promise.<sup>522</sup> Sarah’s laugh (18:15) seems to have arisen from a spirit of unbelief. The basis of this distinction is God’s response to the two laughs.

The writer’s use of the phrase “the very same day” (v. 26) points to a momentous day, one of the most important days in human history (cf. Noah’s entry into the ark, 7:13; and the Exodus, Exod. 12:17, 41, 51).

The fifth revelation from God advanced God’s promises in five particulars.

1. Part of God’s blessing would depend on Abraham’s maintaining the covenant of circumcision though the Abrahamic Covenant as a whole did not depend on this (vv. 1–2).
2. Many nations would come from Abraham (vv. 4–6).
3. The Abrahamic Covenant would be eternal (vv. 7–8).

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<sup>520</sup> 520. L. Holt Jr. and R. McIntosh, *Holt Pediatrics*, pp. 125–26.

<sup>521</sup> 521. Fawver and Overstreet, p. 277.

<sup>522</sup> 522. See Raymond L. Cox, “What Made Abraham Laugh?” *Eternity* (November 1975), pp. 19–20.

4. God would be the God of Abraham's descendants in a special relationship (vv. 7–8).
5. Sarah herself would bear the promised heir (v. 16).<sup>523</sup>

“Abraham's experiences should teach us that natural law [barrenness] is no barrier to the purposes and plans for [sic] God.”<sup>524</sup>

“Thus Abraham and Noah are presented as examples of those who have lived in obedience to the covenant and are thus ‘blameless’ before God, because both obeyed God ‘as he commanded them’ (17:23; cf. 6:22; 7:5, 9, 16).”<sup>525</sup>

God requires a sanctified life of those who anticipate His promised bl<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> 523. This is also the first time God identified the Promised Land as Canaan by name (v. 8).

<sup>524</sup> 524. Davis, p. 193.

<sup>525</sup> 525. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Constable, [\*Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible\*](#) (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ge 17:1.