

Genesis 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis 17 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. And God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you, throughout their generations.

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

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, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised.

[1 : 42] So shall my covenant be in your flesh, an everlasting covenant. 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. And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 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 people shall come from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a son be born to a man who is a hundred years old?

Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you. 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. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly.

[2 : 49] He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. 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. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house, and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

The events of Genesis chapter 17 occur in the ninety-ninth year of Abraham's life, thirteen years after the events of the previous chapter. It's worth paying attention to the spans of time that are covered here.

[3 : 53] There are eleven years after Abraham is first called, until the events of chapter 16. But then there's thirteen years between chapters 16 and 17.

And then, between chapters 17 and chapter 21, a period of only one year is covered. At the age of ninety-nine, Abraham is about to enter into his century.

He's about to reach the double jubilee of two times fifty years. Ishmael is in a similar significant point in his life. He's thirteen, about to reach fourteen, a double week of years.

We'll see fourteen years occurring on a few occasions later on in the story of Genesis. And so it might be worth paying attention. The giving of the covenant of circumcision prepares Abraham for what's about to take place in the coming chapters.

For the birth of Isaac. And circumcision is a very significant event. It changes a number of things. Abraham has been in a relationship with God. He's been given promises.

[4 : 58] But this event solidifies a number of these things. Serving as a sign or a symbol. That actually manifests something of the reality of the covenant. It brings the covenant to light in different ways.

The covenant is in part a cutting of a covenant. Israel has been cut off from other nations. And circumcision establishes a new body of people.

Before this point Abraham was very much associated with the line of terror. With his brothers and with others. But now after circumcision you have a new body of people defined by a ritual.

That differentiates them from their forebears. It differentiates them from others who might be associated with the broader line of terror. Such as Lot. And it gives them a distinct identity.

Many questions could be asked about what circumcision means. But here are a few suggestions. It occurs on the eighth day. The eighth day was the first day that animals were fit to be sacrificed.

[5 : 57] Circumcision I think is associated in part with sacrifice. It's the giving of the child to God. You can see this theme playing out throughout the story of Genesis. The giving over of the son to God.

Handing over the son. Holding the son with an open hand so that God might actually take or require the son from the hand of the person who offers. Circumcision is also associated with rendering an organ functional.

If you look through the Old Testament and even into the New you'll see circumcision or the lack of circumcision associated with bodily organs and their functionality. Or lack of functionality.

You can talk about the uncircumcised heart. Isaiah talks about uncircumcised lips. Elsewhere we read of uncircumcised ears. In each of these cases uncircumcision is the inability of a wild or untamed organ to perform its proper function.

And so there's a cutting off to render something functional. The word wild here I think is important. If we read the book of Leviticus chapter 19 verses 23 to 25.

[7 : 05] We read. When you come into the land and have planted all kinds of trees for food. Then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised. Three years it shall be as uncircumcised for you.

It shall not be eaten. But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy. A praise to the Lord. And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit that it may yield to you its increase. I am the Lord your God.

So you have trees planted for fruit and food. And not to eat of those trees for the first three years. The juvenile trees which have just been planted. They're dedicated. They're uncircumcised.

No one can eat of them until the fourth year. And the fruit is dedicated to the Lord for that period of time. It's the first fruits. And what does this tell you about circumcision? It connects the symbolism of the fruit and the tree with the organ of generation.

The male organ of generation. And it's seen in some way as something that's bringing forth fruit or sowing seed. That's prepared for bearing. Now when we look at the example of the fruit tree.

[8 : 08] The cutting off or the pruning that would occur before that point. Pruning the tree before it becomes fruitful. Prepares it for that great fruitfulness. Allowing it to be more fruitful and fertile later on.

It's part of the promise that is given by treating it as uncircumcised in this earlier stage and preparing it. In the fifth year it will be more fruitful. Now Israel is in a similar position.

There's a close correlation between Israel and the symbolism of the land of animals and other things like that. And Ishmael is described like a wild donkey.

He's a wild, undomesticated person. He's someone who dwells as a stranger. He's someone who acts as an outsider. Someone who's not a domestic figure.

And as we look in scripture I think we'll see parallels between trees and plants and persons. And Israel is supposed to be a tended vine.

[9 : 06] It's not just going to be a wild vine. And if it's going to be a tended vine it needs to be circumcised. It needs to be prepared to bear fruit. And that is provided by pruning as it were the male organ of generation.

Circumcision is in some sense a domestication of the fruitfulness of the vine of Israel so that it will be fruitful. It's significant that circumcision is something that tends the natural wildness of fertility.

And particularly of the male sowing of seed. If you look at the passages that surround this you'll see a vision of a society where male sexuality was often running amok.

You can think of the story of Shechem and Dinah as we see in chapter 34 of Genesis. Or Abram and his relationship with Hagar. Or the story of Sodom in a few chapters time.

These are stories that show untended sexuality. Sexuality that functions in a wild way. That has not been pruned in any form. And the creativity of the person which is unpruned can be wild and dangerous.

[10 : 15] But yet God wants to prune the fertility. The agency of the man in this way. It's a restriction of fertility. It's a tending of it. It's a bringing of it into subjection to God as its gardener.

Now the difference between the wild and the cultivated. With circumcision representing the pruned man I think is important. If we look through scripture you'll see that the male genitalia, the phallus, is associated with the flesh.

It's associated with a lot of the other things that the flesh is associated with too. The flesh can be seen as a natural power of the spirited man. It's associated with the body in its untamed natural form.

And it can be associated with the sinful nature. As an untamed natural impulse. This can be concentrated upon the phallus or the penis. And we see this elsewhere in scripture.

And within culture more generally. It's not an accidental association. It's a site of male creative power. Of spiritedness. The power to form civilizations. To make a name for yourself.

[11 : 23] To make a generation. To be a powerful fruitful vine. And in all societies the danger of the untended, untamed, undomesticated phallus. That sort of phallic power that is just left to run wild, untended, do whatever it wants.

There's something wrong there. And so God tames humankind. God tames Abraham and his descendants. By leaving a sign in this particular part of their body.

That part of their body will represent God's claim upon them. That no longer are they to act in whatever way they want according to that male energy. But they're supposed to act as those who have been sacrificed to God.

There may even be a sort of symbolic castration involved here. The organ being cut off in part to represent the offering of the entire virility of the man to God.

Prior to the cutting off of the foreskin, Abraham is as good as dead in some sense. He could bear a child of the flesh beforehand. But after the foreskin has been cut off, after he's been circumcised, he's a tamed person.

[12 : 28] A pruned person. And as a pruned person he's no longer bearing wild fruit. He's one who's going to be bearing the child of promise. The child who's the true seed given by God himself.

Circumcision might also be related to themes of priesthood. The person who is circumcised is set apart for a sort of priestly vocation. And this is something that I think you see in the priestly initiation rites.

Where the priest has blood put on his thumb, his big toe, and also upon his ear. The four corners of the body, if you include the phallus. It's associated with hearing, with walking, with stepping and moving around in the world.

And it's also associated with generation. Bearing children. And these sacrificial dimensions that are associated with the priestly initiation rites, I think highlight something of what circumcision means.

That these children are set apart for God's service. Set apart as God's people. What else can we see? It happens in a particular context. There's a transition about to occur.

[13 : 32] As God comes to judge the land. God is going to come and he's going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain. And the cutting off the flesh is a preparatory act for that.

Abram has to cut off part of his flesh so that the entirety of his flesh won't be cut off in judgment. In circumcision then, there's a symbolic part removed, dedicating the whole body to the Lord.

A pruning of the body so that the body can be dedicated its entirety to God and not be destroyed. So the cutting off of flesh that we see at this point is dealing with wild, untamed sexuality and virility.

It's taming it, subjecting it to God's authority. And there we see such a sharp contrast between the way that the behavior of the nations round about is characterized and the way that Abram and his descendants would have to be.

When people come close to a God who will judge the flesh, their flesh has to be prepared. So in the story of Moses, as he is about to enter the land of Egypt, as God is about to come near and judge, he has to have his son circumcised.

[14 : 45] It's a crisis moment. God is about to kill him if he does not circumcise his son. Elsewhere, we see it in the case of the Passover. If someone is not circumcised, they cannot participate in the Passover.

And if they do not participate in the Passover, they will be cut off. As God comes near, you need to be prepared. You need to batten down the hatches. And part of that is connected with the cutting off of the flesh.

Circumcision is applied to all the members of Abraham's house. This isn't just for his natural descendants. This is something that creates a new body of people defined by a shared right.

And elsewhere in scripture, we'll see that other people could come in and become part of the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham. This, I think, is a sign that it's not just a biological people.

It's a people defined by a particular practice, a particular covenant reality. There is an association with Abraham. There is a biological dimension, but there's more than that. The story is not just a story of the cutting off of the male foreskin.

[15 : 51] It's a story also about the opening of the womb. There's a parallel between the promise given to Abraham and the promise given to Sarai. Both of them have their names changed. Abraham's name is changed to Abraham as one to be the father of many nations.

And that change is important. It's not just going to be Ishmael that he's the father of. It probably refers to the nations descended from Jacob at this point. Abraham hopes that Ishmael would live before God, that God would fulfill his promise through Ishmael.

But yet it's going to be through Sarah that he receives the son Isaac. And Isaac is going to be the one who fulfills the promise. But there is a mirroring of Ishmael and Isaac.

And we'll see this more as we go through the story. We're told that Ishmael will beget 12 princes and he'll be made into a great nation. It's the same sort of promise that we see for Abraham and Sarah.

They will have ultimately 12 tribes arising from them and will become a great nation. So Ishmael and Isaac are similar characters. And the similarities invite us to compare and contrast.

[17 : 01] Isaac's name is called Laughter. Abraham laughs when he hears the news. It's a laugh of joy. Later on in chapter 18, Sarah also laughs. As you look through the story of Isaac, you'll see that theme of laughter occurring on a number of further occasions.

Ishmael laughs at Isaac and is seen as a threatening of his status. And Sarah casts out the bondwoman and her son. At a later point in the story, we see Isaac Isaac-ing or laughing with Rebekah and Abimelech finding them out.

So there's a preparation going on here. Abraham and his family are being pruned in preparation for a judgment of the land. There's going to be a burning up of the false trees of the land, the wild trees.

And God is going to sow a cultivated, tamed and pruned nation in their place. It's a pivotal event for understanding the story of Abraham. There's a movement here into an even greater stage of the covenant.

We've looked already at the way that the covenant promises ramp up stage by stage. God promises that he will make Abraham's name great, that he will be a blessing, that he will bless many nations, etc.

[18 : 08] Then he promises that he will make his descendants numerous as the dust of the earth, give them a place in the land. Then even further, that they will be like the stars in the heavens, not just the dust of the earth.

And now we have a cutting off of Israel from the other nations, a marking of the body with the covenant. They are now a vine tended by the Lord, a vine that will be fruitful, a vine that will receive the promise of seed that God has given.

And they're prepared for that time of judgment when God will come upon the land. And there will be this initial judgment as the cities of the plain in that great act of judgment that occurs in the chapters that follow will be removed from the scene.

A question to consider. In Colossians chapter 2, Paul talks about baptism and circumcision in close correlation. He talks about the circumcision of Christ.

Now, I believe the circumcision of Christ refers to the cross. Christ's flesh is cut off at the cross. It's the cutting off of flesh in a more decisive manner. And baptism relates to that.

[19 : 12] Can you think of some of the ways in which circumcision might help us to understand what takes place through the work of Christ, how Christ fulfills circumcision, and then how our practice of baptism might work out that meaning, that transition into the meaning that Christ brings.