

Chapter 9: The Circumcision of Abraham

Genesis 17:1–14

So far, God has clearly communicated his election of Abram. In his very first words to Abram, Yahweh declared his intentions to make Abram into a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great in order for Abram to be a blessing to the world, so that in Abram all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:2–3). How exactly, though, do the blessings of Yahweh's gracious calling and election of Abram extend to all the families of the earth? What rightful claim to these blessings does *anyone* other than Abram have to the blessings that Yahweh promised to Abram?

In some ways, this is the nagging question behind the sin of Abram and Sarai with Hagar. Sarai recognized that Yahweh had promised to give biological offspring to Abram (Gen. 15:4), but she did not understand that she must personally conceive that offspring (Gen. 16:2). Even Hagar fled from the house of Abram because she did not understand her own new connection to Abram's promises until Yahweh clarified his intentions to include her and Ishmael in some of the blessings reserved for Abram (Gen. 16:10–12). Moving forward, one of the key questions that Yahweh must clarify for everyone in the world is this: How do I know whether the promises *for Abram* in any way extend to *me*? Indeed, after his grievous sin with Hagar, even Abram may be wondering whether *he* still has a rightful claim to Yahweh's promises.

For this reason, Yahweh now ratifies the covenant that he made with Abram in Genesis 15. That is, Yahweh confirms and authenticates not only the trustworthiness of his promises, but also the rightfulness of his people's *claim* to those promises. By the end of Genesis 17, Yahweh will have clarified the difference between those who have a rightful claim to his covenant promises, and those who do not. To make this difference clear, Yahweh now gives a covenant sign as the ratification of his covenant promises. That is, all those who possess the *sign* of the covenant know that they may rightfully lay hold of the *blessings* of the covenant. Or, put another way: *God gives covenant signs to ratify our claim to his covenant promises.*

The Promises: Redeeming Creation (Gen. 17:1–8)

The narratives of Genesis do not always tell us how much time passes between one event and another. Sometimes, we start to get the sense that Abram and Sarai are moving from one event in their lives to another in a matter of days or weeks, but this is a false impression. The Scriptures inform us that years and decades pass between one event and another. Abram and Sarai sinned with Hagar after they had lived in the land for ten years (Gen. 16:3). Then, as we enter into Genesis 17, we discover that another thirteen years have passed since the birth of Ishmael, when Abram was eighty-six years old (Gen. 16:16):

[1] 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] that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” (Gen. 17:1–2)

If Abram and Sarai experienced so much anguish over not seeing the fulfillment of the promise for a son during the course of the first ten years, how much more must they have suffered over these last thirteen years? During this long period of time, Sarai still has not conceived, and “Abraham’s hopes of an heir have focused on Ishmael (17:18).” Furthermore, during this long period of waiting after his epic failure by taking Hagar as a second wife, Abram must have wondered in anguish whether there was “still hope” for him after he fell “short of God’s standards”²

After these thirteen years, however, Yahweh now breaks the silence by *appearing* to Abram (cf. Gen. 12:7).³ The emphasis of this appearance is not on the “actual nature of the Lord’s appearance,” but on the words Yahweh speaks here.⁴ So, as Yahweh appears, he first identifies himself: “I am God Almighty” (Gen. 17:1). This is the first occurrence of name “God Almighty” (*El Shadday*), although this name will appear “forty-eight times in the Old Testament, thirty-one of them in Job.” Identifying himself by this new name is significant, since Yahweh will also give Abram a new name later in this passage (Gen. 17:5): “A special name for each party (1, 5) marks the occasion, as later on an unfolding of the name of Yahweh would commemorate the burning bush encounter (Exod. 3:14; 6:3).”⁵ While *El* means “God,” the meaning of *Shadday* is less well understood. Allen Ross writes:

The traditional understanding, “God Almighty,” came from the translation of Jerome. That translation, however, could be a substitution for the...tetragrammaton (*YHWH*). Modern studies have suggested etymological connections with “mountain,” and “breast” (which may be connected etymologically). If such connections could be proved, then the name would mean something like “the One belonging to the mountain”; it would designate the high God (as, for example, at the revelation of the Lord on Mount Sinai)...In the passages in Genesis (17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3), the name occurs with the promise of posterity. Power could be included in the meaning; at least the name is associated with promised blessing and increase.⁷

While the precise *meaning* of this name is unclear, its *purpose* is straightforward: Yahweh is identifying himself as he makes his covenant with Abram.

“Walk before me, and be blameless”

After identifying himself, God issues a command to Abram: “[1] ...walk before me, and be blameless, [2] that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly” (Gen. 17:1b–2). The word “walk” is from the same root word for “go” in Abram’s initial call from Yahweh: “Go from your country...” (Gen. 12:1).⁸ In this instance, however, God does not simply command Abram to go from one place (Ur of the Chaldeans) to another (the land of Canaan). Instead, he is describing the ongoing nature of how Abram is to conduct his entire *walk*—that is, his entire life. This exact phrase for “walk before” only occurs a few times in the Old Testament (Gen. 17:1; 24:40; 48:15; 1 Sam. 2:30, 35; 1 Sam. 12:2; 2 Kgs. 20:3; Isa. 38:3; Ps. 56:14; 116:9; Esth. 2:11). This is a slightly different phrase than when we read that Enoch (Gen. 5:22, 24) and Noah (Gen. 6:9) “walked with” God, although the meanings are probably closely related.⁹

Sometimes, this phrase describes a life of special consecration to Yahweh, such as how the priests “walk before” Yahweh in the sense of coming into his tabernacle (e.g., 1 Sam. 2:30, 35). Most of the time, the sense seems to be more like the idea of living out one’s life before the face of God (e.g., Gen. 48:15; 1 Sam. 12:2; 2 Kgs. 20:3; Ps. 56:13; 116:9; Isa. 38:3). The phrase “to stand before” may be a parallel expression, since that phrase “usually expresses the service or devotion of a faithful servant to his king” (cf. Deut. 10:8; 18:7; Judg. 20:28; 1 Kgs. 1:2; 10:8; Ezek. 44:15).¹⁰ Benno Jacob paraphrases God’s command to Abram beautifully:

If you want to become whole, which is my request for you, you must walk before me; you must place yourself under my exclusive supervision, guidance, and protection. The image is taken from the shepherd who walks behind his herd directing it by his calls (48, 15), or from the father under whose eyes the child walks. It is more than the walking “with” God of Enoch and Noah who were practically lead [*sic*] by the hand.

When questions arise you shall take directions only from God and be devoted to him without reservation. This word does not refer to moral conduct, for that would be too insignificant in this situation and is self-understood. The high demand corresponds to God’s, “Be you mine, and I will be yours.”¹¹

In all, the command “walk before me” expresses the total submission of Abram to God’s will. Abram must be set apart as holy to his God.

The next phrase, “...and be blameless,” describes the way in which Abram is to walk before God. In Abram’s original call, the two imperatives were to “go/walk” and “be a blessing,” while here, the imperatives are “go/walk” and “be blameless.”¹² That is, God insists that his people must be holy as they walk before him.¹³ Earlier, we read that Noah was “blameless in his generation” (Gen. 6:9).¹⁴ Notice that we have already seen two connections with Noah: Noah *walked with God*, and Abram must *walk before God*. Now, just as Noah was *blameless*, so must Abram be. We will see several more connections with the story of Noah through the rest of this passage.

Giving the Covenant

These two imperatives establish a foundation upon which God intends to establish his covenant: “that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly” (Gen. 17:2). Yahweh followed the same grammatical pattern in Genesis 12:1–2, where he explains the purpose of obeying his imperatives (“go...be a blessing”) with statements of intention: “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great...” (Gen. 12:2).¹⁵ Just as the purpose of leaving Ur was to become a great nation, to be blessed by Yahweh, and to receive a great name, so the purpose of walking before God blamelessly is to receive God’s covenant and to be multiplied greatly. More literally, God does not say that he will “make” his covenant, but that he will “give” his covenant to Abram. It is in this context of gracious generosity that God lays out his stipulations: “The opening is no bargain: these are the conditions in which God can *give*, rather than *get*, all that he desires (indeed verse 2 begins, literally, ‘that I may give (or grant)...’), for he wills no distant or half-hearted relationship.”¹⁶

What does it mean, though, to say that will God *give* this covenant? Or, how does the covenant that Yahweh *gives* in Genesis 17 relate to the covenant that Yahweh *made* (lit., “cut”) in Genesis 15?

It is probably best not to see these as two separate covenants. Instead, it would be better to understand Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 as not only re-establishing the covenant after Abram's failure, but also as reflecting "two stages of covenant-making":

The earlier chapter fixed the basic pattern of grace and answering faith; nothing was asked of Abram but to believe and 'know of a surety'. Now emerge the implications, in depth and extension: in depth, for faith must show itself in utter dedication (1); in extension, for the whole company must be sealed, one by one, down the generations (10ff.). Together then the two chapters set out the personal and the corporate participation; the inward faith and the outward seal (cf. Rom. 4:9, 11); imputed righteousness and expressed devotion (15:6; 17:1).¹⁷

Later, when God says that he will "establish" his covenant (Gen. 17:7, 19, 21), that word may have the sense of "confirm" or "ratify," which would "involve a human response."¹⁸ When Yahweh inaugurated his covenant in Genesis 15, he declared "gratuitous love; to which was annexed the promise of a happy life"; now, as God confirms his covenant, he offers to Abram "a more ample declaration of his grace, in order that Abram may endeavor more willingly to form his mind and his life, both to reverence towards God, and to the cultivation of uprightness."¹⁹

Additionally, a similar two-stage process of covenant-making occurs in relation to God's covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. There, God makes a covenant with his people in Exodus 24:8, and then makes a covenant again with his people in Exodus 34:10. Between Genesis 15 and 17 is Abram's failure with Hagar (Gen. 16), and between Exodus 24 and 34 is Israel's failure with the golden calf (Ex. 32). In both cases, the failure of the covenant people may have prompted "a need to reestablish the earlier covenant."²⁰ By ratifying his covenant, God communicates that the covenant promises are still *for* Abram.

"As for me..."

Through the rest of this first section, we see Abram's response (Gen. 17:3) and what God promises to give to Abram in this covenant (Gen. 17:4–8):

[3] Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, [4] "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall 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 you into nations, and kings shall come from you. [7] 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. [8] 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." (Gen. 17:3–8)

Unlike in Genesis 15:2–3, 8, Abram does not respond verbally: "Here Abram, in a gesture more powerful than words, shows his humility before God and his willingness to listen."²¹ If Abram spent the previous thirteen years wondering whether God would still keep his promises after Abram's failure with Hagar, then this initial revelation may have overwhelmed him with gratitude, joy, and

fear. He does not feel the need at the moment to plead his case, but he silently bows down to allow God to continue speaking.

The ESV does not translate the first word in Genesis 17:4, but literally, we might translate this passage this way: “I, behold my covenant *is* with you....” By that first word ‘I,’ “God declares that he is the speaker, in order that absolute authority may appear in his words.”²² Beyond simply identifying himself and authenticating the authority and truthfulness of these words, however, God is also defining his own involvement in this covenant: “What God is doing and will do for Abraham is the subject of this speech.”²³ Therefore, many Bible versions translate that first word, “I,” with the phrase, “As for me...” (KJV, NASB, NRSV, CSB). This is likely the intended significance, since it forms the first part of a twofold structure to this covenantal arrangement: God first states his promises to Abram (“As for me...”, lit., “I...”; Gen. 17:4–8), and then God articulates the obligations that will fall on Abram and his offspring (“As for you...”, lit., “And you...”; Gen. 17:9–14).²⁴ A third section regarding God’s promises to Sarai (“As for Sarai your wife...”, lit., “Sarai your wife...”; Gen. 17:15–16) follows afterward.

A Multitude of Nations

As the first provision of God’s promises in this covenant, God states that Abram “shall be the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:4b). While God has promised Abram abundant offspring before this point, a new wrinkle to that overall promise emerges: “Previously the promise had simply been that Abram should be a great nation (12:2), beyond counting (16:10). This promise goes much further.”²⁵ Then, God bolsters that promise by renaming Abram to Abraham. This is important, since to “change a name usually meant to change a person’s status or circumstances.”²⁶ From one perspective, this new name is not that significant, since the difference between Abram and Abraham is only a “dialect variant”—like Amy and Aimee, Jack and Jacques.²⁷ Nevertheless, the change in name reflects Abraham’s important new status as the father of a multitude by playing on the sound of the word “multitude”: “The name *Abraham* suggests a fusion of the original two elements ‘*Ab* (father) *rām* (high) with part of a third *hāmôn* (multitude).”²⁸ Previously, Abram’s name reflected his *own* exalted father; now, Abraham’s name reflects God’s promises to make *him* the exalted father of a *multitude*.²⁹

Through the rest of Genesis, we will see the literal fulfillment of this promise. Abraham becomes the father of the Midianites (Gen. 25:2–4), the Ishmaelites (Gen. 25:12), the Edomites (Gen. 36:1–42), and the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 49:28–33).³⁰ Still, the significance of Abraham’s being the father of a multitude of nations goes far beyond these few explicit nations whom he immediately begets. John Calvin rightly notes that Abraham is “not called the father of many nations because his seed was to be divided into many nations; but rather, because many nations were to be gathered together unto him.”³¹ In other words, Abraham eventually becomes the father of a multitude of nations who count as his offspring not by biological descent, but by putting their faith in the ultimate offspring of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:16–17; Gal. 3:7–9).³² Or, as Victor Hamilton puts it, Abraham’s “new name identifies him as the father of the faithful, regardless of what particular ethnic group they represent.”³³

Exceedingly Fruitful

God continues: “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and

kings shall come from you” (Gen. 17:6). The word “exceedingly” might be more literally translated as “in great greatness,” and it is the exact same expression that the ESV translates as “greatly” in Genesis 17:2: “that I...may multiply you *greatly*.” Therefore, “in great greatness” God promises that he will both make Abraham fruitful and multiply him. Gordon Wenham writes this:

To “be fruitful and multiply” was the first command given to man (1:28) and was repeated to Noah (8:17; 9:1, 7). Here a similar remark is made to Abraham, who, like Adam and Noah, stands at the beginning of an epoch in human history. God’s original purpose for mankind, thwarted by the fall and faltering again in the post-Noah period, is eventually to be achieved by Abraham’s descendants. It may be noted that whereas Adam and Noah were simply commanded “be fruitful” (qal imperative), God makes Abraham a promise, “I shall make you fruitful” (hiphil). This change of conjugation suggests that Abraham will be given divine power to achieve this fertility, whereas his predecessors, left simply to themselves, failed.³⁴

This is a critical point in our understanding of this passage. In Abraham, God is re-instituting and re-establishing his original, creational mandate; however, God is promising that *he* will be the one who will both make Abraham exceedingly fruitful and also multiply him exceedingly.

Kings

Furthermore, God promises Abraham that “kings will come from you” (Gen. 17:6). In the book of Genesis, we read that kings do descend from Abraham among the nation of Edom (Gen. 36:31).³⁵ Beyond the kings of the Edomites, we also learn in Genesis that kings will eventually emerge from Israel’s tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:8–12), a prophecy which finds fulfillment in Israel’s later history not only when David is anointed as king of Israel (1 Sam. 16), but also when Yahweh makes a covenant with David, promising to establish David’s throne forever (2 Sam. 7:1–16). These royal promises are so important that the very first line of the New Testament insists on their fulfillment in Jesus: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1).³⁶ Jesus must be *both* the son of David *and* the son of Abraham in order for him to fulfill God’s promises of kings to both men.

“Your offspring after you...”

Next, God identifies the membership of this covenant: “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” (Gen. 17:7). God is not establishing his covenant for the sole benefit of Abraham, but of all Abraham’s offspring after him. Gordon Wenham observes that this is another similarity to the story of Noah: “Hitherto he [Abraham] has been promised descendants (13:16) and the land has been promised to them (13:15), but this is the first occasion that the covenant is extended to include Abraham’s seed. This makes the covenant with Abraham like the Noahic covenant...”³⁷ It is not Noah alone who could look at the rainbow and know that God will never again destroy the world with a flood, but all living creatures, for all future generations (Gen. 9:12–17). In the same way, Abraham does not inherit the grace of God’s covenant alone, for Abraham’s offspring after him, throughout their generations, will be “heirs of the same grace.”³⁸

An Everlasting Covenant

Because this covenant will include all Abraham's offspring, throughout their generations, God calls this "an everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:7). Noah's covenant was also an "everlasting covenant" (Gen. 9:9, 11, 16).³⁹ If we look ahead to recognize that God will establish circumcision as the sign of his "everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:7, 11, 13), then this phrase raises an interesting question: Did God intend his people to be circumcised forever? Specifically, is there a conflict between God's covenant here in Genesis 17 and the witness of the New Testament, which explicitly sets aside circumcision as obsolete (e.g., Acts 15; Rom. 2:28–29; 4:11–12; Gal. 2; Phil. 3:2–11; Col. 2:11–14)?

John Walton helpfully defines the meaning of the word "everlasting" (*'olam*):

Nevertheless, there are many contexts where *'olam* clearly has more to do with an open-ended perpetuity than an absolute eternity. In 1 Samuel 1:22, Hannah vows that her son will remain in the house of the Lord *'olam*. This clearly does not mean for all eternity, nor does it even mean for his entire life. It merely indicates that her vow is open-ended. It is not just for one year or five, but in perpetuity. There is no designated term. Even today it is not unusual to hear "May the king live forever," which is equivalent to "Long live the king"—indicating that nothing is being done to limit his reign.

What, then, should be understood when the text speaks of a covenant that is *'olam*? The implication of the terminology is that these agreements are not temporary, not stopgap, nor are they on a trial basis. They are permanent in the sense that no other alternative arrangement to serve that purpose is envisioned. This does not mean that the purpose it serves will never be obsolete. Circumcision, for example, became obsolete even though it is designated here as a covenant *'olam*. Likewise the Aaronic covenant for priesthood became obsolete even though it was designated a priesthood *'olam* (Num. 25:13).⁴⁰

God's covenant with his people is everlasting, stretching into absolute eternity. Nevertheless, with the advent of Jesus, the sign of circumcision becomes obsolete. It has served its purpose in pointing forward to the coming of Christ. So, to insist that we continue to practice circumcision as a matter of covenantal faithfulness entirely misses the everlasting purpose that God appointed circumcision to accomplish.

"To be God to you and to your offspring after you..."

Now we come to the "heart of the covenant."⁴¹ While it is important for Abraham to be multiplied greatly (Gen. 17:2), to become the father of a multitude of nations (Gen. 17:4, 5), and to become exceedingly fruitful (Gen. 17:6), with kings coming from him (Gen. 17:6), all of this would be for nothing if the covenant promises ended here. Beyond these promises, however, God solemnly swears that he "will be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Gen. 17:7). In distinction from the temporal, worldly promises that God made to Hagar for Ishmael (cf. Gen. 16:12), God insists that his promises for Abraham's true offspring will be spiritual in nature.⁴² God not only promises blessings to Abraham; God promises *himself* to Abraham. Furthermore, God promises himself to all of Abraham's offspring after him.

All the Land of Canaan

Finally, God confirms and solidifies his promise of giving Abraham and his offspring the land: “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” (Gen. 17:8). This is the first time that God has explicitly identified the land by the name “Canaan,” and here God states that Canaan will become their “everlasting possession,” “that is, their inalienable property.”⁴³ Even so, the temporal, worldly promises of the land are secondary to the primary, spiritual promises of the covenant: “and I will be their God” (Gen. 17:8).

The Fulfillment: Revealing Christ (Gen. 17:9–11)

Only now do we come to the stipulations of the covenant for Abraham.⁴⁴ Up to this point, God has been declaring what *he* will do (“As for me...”; Gen. 17:4), but now God turns declares the implications of this covenant for Abraham (“As for you...”):

[9] And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. [10] This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. [11] You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Gen. 17:9–11)

We should perhaps notice that what it means to “keep” God’s covenant is largely undefined at this point. Derek Kidner writes, “The striking feature of the stipulations is their lack of detail. To be *committed* was all. Circumcision was God’s brand; the moral implications could be left unwritten (until Sinai), for one was pledged to a Master, only secondarily to a way of life.”⁴⁵ The most important thing in God’s promises is that he pledges to be God to Abraham and Abraham’s offspring. In the same way, the most important thing for “you and your offspring after you throughout their generations” is to keep *God’s* covenant. That is, *God in his covenant* is the main point of emphasis; circumcision, which comes next, is subsidiary.

Circumcision

As the primary stipulation for Abraham in keeping the covenant, God declares that “Every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10). Circumcision was widely practiced in the ancient near east, but here God gives circumcision a different emphasis: “The new feature was its new meaning, to mark the threshold not of manhood (as among modern Arabs) but of the covenant; hence its early administration (12).”⁴⁶ Even though this sign is for males alone, God unquestionably intends these promises for both males and females in the covenant community of Abraham’s household.⁴⁷ Why, though, does God choose circumcision at all? What spiritual purpose does God seek to address by this rite?

First, the bloody nature of circumcision represents our need for spiritual cleansing through the shedding of blood: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22). Second, circumcision indicates our *need* for cleansing as well as the *means* of cleansing. O. Palmer

Robertson writes, “Not only does [circumcision] indicate that man by nature is impure. It also represents the removal of defilement essential for the achievement of purity.”⁴⁸ We need God to remove our sinful flesh by faith, according to his covenant promises, if we wish to be saved. Third, we should observe that the sign of circumcision is applied to the male reproductive organ. That is, circumcision reflects God’s promises about bringing forth *offspring*. As Allen Ross writes, “human nature alone was unable to generate the promised seed if God was not willing to grant such fruitfulness.”⁴⁹ These three meanings connect directly to the covenant God makes with Abraham. For Abraham’s part, circumcision testifies to his need for blood atonement and cleansing in order to walk before God and to be blameless (Gen. 17:1). For God’s part, circumcision reflects God’s promises of multiplying Abraham greatly (Gen. 17:2).

Revealing Christ

In these facets of symbolism, circumcision points to a single, definite fulfillment: the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to the significances of circumcision mentioned above, circumcision is a ceremonial sign that points forward to the person and work of Jesus Christ in a variety of ways. First, circumcision foreshadows the *birth* of Christ. In circumcision, the cutting away of the flesh of a father’s reproductive organ anticipated the way in which the process of Christ’s conception would cut out the human father altogether. Jesus was born to the virgin Mary, by the supernatural power of God (Luke 1:34–35), apart from any sexual involvement from Joseph (Matt. 1:24–25). Second, circumcision symbolizes the *death* of Christ. The bloody nature of circumcision, like the bloody nature of the sacrificial system and the Passover lamb, pointed forward to the blood that Jesus would shed once for all for our cleansing (1 John 1:7) and for the forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:12; 10:10). Third, in the requirement that circumcision be applied on the eighth day of an infant’s life (Gen. 17:12), circumcision typologically represents the resurrection of Christ. Robert Haldane expresses this reality well:

Here [Rom. 4:11], it would appear, we learn the reason why this seal [of circumcision] was to be affixed on the eighth day after birth. On the eighth day, the first day of the week, when Jesus, the seed of Abraham, arose from the dead, that righteousness, of which circumcision was a seal or pledge, was accomplished.⁵⁰

Therefore, circumcision played a crucial role during the time of the old covenant by pointing forward to the coming of Christ.

Because circumcision foreshadows the coming of Christ, circumcision’s usefulness comes to an end once Christ actually comes. John Calvin puts this well: “For, at length, by the coming of Christ, circumcision was substantially confirmed, so that it should endure forever, and that the covenant which God had before made, should be ratified.”⁵¹ This is how God’s covenant can be “in your flesh [by circumcision, as] an everlasting covenant” (Gen. 17:13), even though circumcision itself is eventually abandoned as obsolete. In circumcision, God held out Christ as the eternal fulfillment of his covenant promises. Returning to the sign circumcision is to elevate the sign above the One signified by that sign.

The Sign of the Covenant

Finally, we should note that circumcision is a *sign* of God's covenant. God begins by saying that his covenant *is* that "Every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen. 17:10). Then, he clarifies that circumcision is not the entirety of the covenant, but rather than "it shall be a *sign* of the covenant between me and you" (Gen. 17:11).⁵² Literarily, the figure of speech used in Genesis 17:10 ("This *is* my covenant...") is called a synecdoche, where the *part* of circumcision represents the *whole* of the covenant: "this is [the aspect of] my covenant you must keep."⁵³ Gordon Wenham identifies three kinds of signs: (1) "proof signs that convince the observer about something," like the plagues against Egypt (Ex. 7:3–5); (2) prophetic signs that "resemble the situation announced (e.g., Ezek 4:3)"; and (3) signs that serve as "reminders of something."⁵⁴ In this case, circumcision functions as this third kind of sign, reminding people of the promises of the covenant. John Calvin reflects this idea when he writes, "As formerly, covenants were not only committed to public records, but were also wont to be engraven in brass, or sculptured on stones, in order that the memory of them might be more fully recorded, and more highly celebrated; so in the present instance, God inscribes his covenant in the flesh of Abraham."⁵⁵

As such, we may rightly call circumcision a *sacrament*. The role of a sacrament is to represent God's word visibly in order "to help, promote and confirm faith."⁵⁶ Regarding circumcision, the Apostle Paul writes that Abraham "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11). That is, circumcision *symbolizes* a reality that Abraham already knew, which is that righteousness comes by faith. Abraham's circumcision does not make him righteous, for God already counted him as righteous because of his faith (Gen. 15:6). These are the spiritual promises in God's covenant when he declares, "I will be God to you"—that is, God promises to be our God by counting us righteous through faith. So, the rite of circumcision does *not* make God's people righteous; however, the rite of circumcision was always intended to point beyond itself to the reality of how God *does* make people righteous: by faith (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 2:28–29).

Once again, by establishing a *sign* of the covenant, this passage connects back with the story of Noah.⁵⁷ There, God instituted the rainbow as the sign of the covenant with all flesh, signifying that he will never again destroy the world with a flood. The rainbow and circumcision accomplish the same thing: reminding people of God's covenant promises. Indeed, the reason for the close similarity between this passage and the story of Noah probably has to do with the giving of covenant signs in both places.

The Sign: Ratifying our Claim (Gen. 17:12–14)

In this last section, God gives very specific commandments to guide how Abraham should administer the sacrament of circumcision:

[12] "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, [13] 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. [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.” (Gen. 17:12–14)

God includes the entirety of Abraham’s household in his covenant. Therefore, within the household of Abraham, God insists that the sign of circumcision must be universally administered among every male eight days old and up. The opening sentence in this section sets out this universality: “He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:12). In the entirety of Abraham’s household, the only males who will go without the covenant sign of circumcision are those less than a week old. God explains this command both positively (Gen. 17:12–13) and negatively (Gen. 17:14).

Every Male, Free and Slave

The first group of people God identifies as the proper recipients of the sign of circumcision are all those born to Abraham: “Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house....” This is the obvious group for inclusion, since God has just repeated his promises to make Abraham exceedingly fruitful (Gen. 17:6) and to multiply him greatly (Gen. 17:2). Furthermore, God has already stated his intention to “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” (Gen. 17:7). Without question, God intends to ratify his covenant with all of Abraham’s offspring by applying to them the covenant sign, throughout their generations. God permits one week to avoid harming a newborn child by applying circumcision too soon.⁵⁸ In the later law of Moses, we learn that, during the first seven days, the mother is ceremonially unclean while the child remains uncircumcised; then, the eighth day marks the day of the child’s circumcision and the beginning of a thirty-three day period for the purification of the mother (cf. Lev. 12:2–4).⁵⁹

Still, the direct biological offspring of Abraham are not the only recipients of God’s covenant and God’s covenant sign. God continues: “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” (Gen. 17:12–13). We do not know how many people are included in the household of Abraham, but the numbers seem to be large. When Abram sojourned in Haran on his way to the promised land, he acquired “souls” who continued with him into the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:5). These “souls” were probably not slaves, but converts to the word of Yahweh that Abram proclaimed on his journey. Nevertheless, we know that Abram owns a substantial number of slaves, many of whom (including Hagar) came from Pharaoh in exchange for Sarai’s marriage (Gen. 12:15–16). We only have two passages that give us a sense of the size of Abraham’s household. First, we know that Abram and Lot had to separate because their combined possessions (including Lot’s “tents”; Gen. 13:5) became so numerous that strife arises between each man’s herdsmen (Gen. 13:2–8). Second, Abram when went to rescue Lot from the Mesopotamian armies, Abram took with him “his trained men, *born in his house*, 318 of them” (Gen. 14:14). Abram has a vast household, including both freemen and slaves, in addition to his son Ishmael.

What, then, does this covenant tell us about God’s view of slavery? God does not condone slavery here, since it was always a violation of God’s intentions for human relationships for one

image-bearer to take another image-bearer into bondage. But, just as God blesses Hagar and Ishmael in spite of Abram and Sarai's wicked violation of God's intention for human marriage (Gen. 16), so God also blesses the servants of Abraham: "We know that formerly slaves were scarcely reckoned among the number of men. But God, out of regard to his servant Abraham, adopts them as his own sons."⁶⁰ Indeed, by incorporating Abraham's servants into this covenant, God is moving toward the eventual abolition of slavery. Victor Hamilton writes:

To circumcise a son is expected, but to circumcise a slave is to expand the range of the recipients of the covenant. God's covenant, however, is directed to no elitist class of society. Nor is it directed to sons, but rather to households. The firstborn son is no more in the covenant tradition than the slave. Hierarchialism gives way to egalitarianism.⁶¹

God elevates the dignity of Abraham's servants by granting them the same full covenant status as the biological sons of Abraham. This principle of abolishing distinctions of personhood between slave and free carries through all the way into the New Testament administration of the Abrahamic covenant in Christ: "[28] There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [29] And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:28–29). That is, there are not two distinct groups: slaves and Abraham's offspring. Rather, all those who are in Christ (regardless of their biological descent, their societal status, or their sex) are treated as one group together: Abraham's offspring.

Cut Off from the Covenant

After stating the commandment positively that every male eight days and up, whether son or slave, must be circumcised, God states the commandment negatively: "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" (Gen. 17:14). There is a wordplay on *cut off*, since covenants are *cut* (cf. Gen. 15:18; ESV: "made"), and since this particular covenant requires the cutting of the flesh: "Here is the choice: be cut or be cut off."⁶² To be "cut off" refers at least to excommunication, but it may also carry the idea that God will bring about this person's "untimely death."⁶³ Even if this cutting off did not bring about physical death, the excommunication certainly symbolized "the person's death in the eyes of the community (e.g., Exod 12:15, 19; Lev 7:20–21, 27; Num 15:30; 19:13, 20)."⁶⁴ The rationale for requiring a cutting-off is simple: "he has broken my covenant." *Breaking* a covenant is the opposite of *keeping* (Gen. 17:9, 10) or *establishing* (Gen. 17:7) the covenant.⁶⁵ When people reject the sign of the covenant, they renounce their claim to the covenant itself.

Covenant Breakers vs. Covenant Strangers

From this, we can start to understand the function of circumcision. Circumcision is the sign that ratifies the claim God's people have to God's covenant promises. Without circumcision, God's people have no clear indication whether the covenant promises are *for* them. That is, without circumcision, God's people have no way of knowing whether the promises are theirs to claim, even if the promises are true for other people. Circumcision gives God's people a tangible sign that ratifies, confirms, authenticates, and seals *their* claims to those promises.

There are two passages of Scripture that clearly illustrate different aspects of this principle. The first passage is in Joshua 5, when the people of Israel must all be circumcised before entering into the Promised Land. We do not learn that circumcision halted until this point, so the text explains why God's people were not circumcised for such a long time:

[5] Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. [6] For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. [7] So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised. For they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. (Josh. 5:5–7)

When Israel disobeyed Yahweh by failing to enter into the Promised Land in Numbers 14, Yahweh *disinherited* that generation from receiving the promises. They broke the covenant by their faithlessness, so the promises were no longer theirs to claim. Even when some Israelites recognized their sin and tried to go into the Promised Land in Numbers 14:39–45, Yahweh handed them over to defeat at the hands of the Canaanites to prevent them from entering into the land. The promises were no longer *for* them, since they were *covenant breakers*.

So, Joshua 5 reveals that when Yahweh disinherited that generation from receiving the Promised Land, circumcision of their *children* of that generation also ceased. That is, their children bore the shame of their parents' covenant-breaking by being "cut off" from the promises (cf. Gen. 17:14). They were not only cut off from the promises of entering into the Promised Land as they wandered in the wilderness with their parents for forty years. Even more, they were cut off from receiving the sign of circumcision as a ratification of their claim to the promises. Only when the older generation dies out will God bring the younger generation into the land. Before God brings them in, however, the younger generation must be circumcised to receive as ratification of the fact that the promises are indeed *theirs* to claim. By circumcising them, God rolls away their reproach of being cut off for forty years (Josh. 5:9). The promises are again *for* them.

The second passage is in Ephesians 2:11–12. There, Paul explains the ramifications of not having circumcision outside the household of Abraham. Importantly, the Israelites from Joshua 5 who did not receive circumcision in the wilderness were treated as *covenant breakers*—that is, people who had a rightful claim to the promises, but who forfeited that claim. In Ephesians 2, on the other hand, Paul describes the stark fate of *covenant strangers*—the people who *never* had a rightful claim to the promises:

[11] Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—
[12] remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph. 2:11–12)

The fact that these Gentiles were uncircumcised (Eph. 2:11) means that they were cut off from the fulfillment of the promises: “separated from Christ.” Moreover, they were alienated (kept outside) the commonwealth of Israel—that is, the extended household of Abraham. Because of this, they were “strangers to the covenants of promise,” which means that they did not have any claim to those promises. As such, they were without hope and without God in the world.

Covenant Keepers vs. Covenant Converts

Seen in this light, circumcision plays a critical in the relationship between God and his people. Circumcision ratifies the claim of God’s people to receive his covenant promises. Circumcision confirms and authenticates the status of someone as a rightful recipient of the promises. Now, this does not mean that every circumcised man *will* receive the promises, as in the case of the covenant breakers who forfeited the Promised Land and were disinherited from receiving it. Nevertheless, receiving the sign of circumcision was a great privilege among the old covenant people of God in comparison with the covenant strangers who had no access to the covenant promises. The value of circumcision was “much in every way” (Rom. 3:2).

God never intended for circumcision to be an end in itself. Instead, God gave circumcision to hold out his covenant promises to his people. Every time they an infant boy was circumcised, God reminded his people that he would eventually fulfill his promises. That is, God intended for circumcision to draw out faith from his people. God counted Abraham righteous through faith (Gen. 15:6), and God intended Abraham’s children to follow their father “in the footsteps of faith” (Rom. 4:11–12). The idea was that all the offspring of Abraham would be circumcised not only in their flesh, but also in their hearts by Holy Spirit-wrought faith (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 2:28–29). By faith, Abraham’s offspring would become *covenant keepers* (Gen. 17:9, 10), from the flesh-circumcision of their infancy to the heart-circumcision throughout their lifetimes. Indeed, we can only keep God’s covenant by faith, since we are all covenant breakers in our works. Jesus Christ alone perfectly kept every provision of God’s covenant *and* bore upon himself the curse of our covenant breaking at the cross. We cannot be covenant keepers by our own righteousness; we, like Abraham, must depend upon God to count us as righteous through our faith in the great covenant keeper, Jesus Christ (Gen. 15:6; cf. Rom. 4:11–12). Both Abraham and we are called to the same faith; while Abraham looked forward to God’s provision of his Son Jesus Christ (cf. John 8:56), we look back to the perfect work of Jesus Christ.

This offspring, of course, did not only include Abraham’s biological offspring, but all those born into Abraham’s household, whether slave or free. They received full covenant status along with the biological offspring of Abraham. This already happened when Abram brought up into Canaan the “souls” who joined his household in Haran (Gen. 12:5). This will happen again when Egyptians repent and believe after witnessing the glory of God in the outpouring of the plagues, so that Israel departs from Egypt as a “mixed multitude” (Ex. 12:38). This will happen yet again when Rahab and her family are preserved from the wrath of God against Jericho by faith, and incorporated into the household of Abraham (Josh. 6:22–25). This will happen once more when God’s people, in spite of God’s commandments, enter into a covenant with the Gibeonites (Josh 9). This will happen still another time when a Moabitess named Ruth forsakes her home, her people, and her gods in order to dwell in the household of Abraham, worshiping the God of Abraham (Ruth 1:16–17). Again and again, the narrative of the Old Testament tells of how God gathers the Gentiles into the household

of Abraham by faith and by the application of God's covenant sign.

Now, the first generation to enter into Abraham's household could *become* covenant members by faith, but they did not receive the covenant promises by birthright. Formerly, they were strangers of the covenants of promise (Eph. 2:11–12) until God calls them into his covenant family by faith. We might helpfully classify these first generational believers as *covenant converts*. Then, after their ingrafting into Israel, they became full-status covenant members, so that all their children after them are treated as covenant members by birthright. Remember, this does not mean that their children *will* receive the promises, but that they have the right to *claim* the promises. Like the biological offspring of Abraham, all the children of these first-generation converts will either end up as covenant keepers or covenant breakers—but no longer as covenant strangers. Even the genealogy of our Lord Jesus includes both the Canaanite convert Rahab and the Moabitess convert Ruth (Matt. 1:5) in his lineage.

Covenant Membership in the New Testament

What, then, does the New Testament teach about covenant membership under the new covenant? First, the New Testament teaches that *we* are the offspring of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:11–12; Gal. 3:7, 27–29). Second, the New Testament teaches that the only true righteousness and true covenant-keeping comes through faith in Jesus Christ, the ultimate offspring of Abraham (Rom. 4:1–25; 5:1–2; Gal. 3:7–9, 14, 22, 23–29; Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 3:9; Tit. 3:5–7). All Christians agree with these basic ideas. Our disagreement arises, instead, when we ask two questions: (1) Are the children of believers counted as members of the new covenant, as they were under the old covenant? and (2) Should the children of believers receive baptism as the sign of the new covenant, as the children of Abraham received circumcision?

To answer these questions, let us return to our basic definition of the purpose of God's covenant signs. What we have seen is that covenant signs ratify our rightful claim to the covenant promises. So, the question we have to ask is this: does the New Testament teach that the children of believers have a *claim* to the promises of the gospel that the children of unbelievers do not have? The most helpful text for understanding this question is from Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost: “[38] And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [39] For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself’” (Acts 2:38–39). Here, Peter tells us who should be baptized (Acts 2:38) by identifying *whom the promises are for* (Acts 2:39): (1) for you, (2) for your children, and (3) for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. Just like in the covenant with Abraham, those who are far off may claim the covenant promises if the Lord calls them to himself; however, the children of God's people have a claim to these promises by birthright. So, this text tells us that the “far off” *covenant strangers* may become *covenant converts* through faith in Christ, and, when this happens, this *covenant converts* should be baptized. Additionally, this text teaches that the children of believers should be baptized as a part of helping them grow to be *covenant keepers* through faith in Christ.

Furthermore, the rest of the New Testament reflects the Genesis 17 pattern of applying the covenant signs *by household*. When the gospel first comes to far-off, foreign Gentiles, an angel tells Cornelius to send for Simon Peter, who “will declare to you a message by which you will be saved,

you and all your household” (Acts 11:14), and they are baptized as fellow recipients of the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47–48). Later, when a woman named Lydia comes to faith in Christ, she is baptized “and her household as well” (Acts 16:15). Then, when the Philippian jailer asks what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas respond, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31), and, believing, “he was baptized at once, he and all his family.... And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:33–34). In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul states that he baptized the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16). Whether or not infants were present in any of these households is not really the point; the point is that the New Testament reflects exactly the same extension of the covenant promises and the covenant sign *by household*, according to the pattern established in Genesis 17.

We see the same reality reflected in 1 Corinthians 7:14. There, Paul is asking whether a *believing* spouse should leave the household of his or her *unbelieving* spouse. Paul says that the believer should remain in the same household as the unbeliever, and he gives this explanation: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). This passage is incomprehensible unless we recognize that Paul is utilizing categories of covenant membership by household from Genesis 17. So, Paul teaches not only that the *children* of believers are holy, even if only one parent is a believer. Beyond that, Paul says that the unbelieving spouse of a believer is made holy by remaining in the household of the believer. Like the foreign servants of Abraham, the unbelieving spouse lives in the household of someone who is the offspring of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:29). Therefore, both the spouse and the children are counted as covenant members. They are no longer *covenant strangers* by virtue of dwelling in the extended household of Abraham; however, if the unbelieving spouse persists in unbelief, he or she will be a *covenant breaker*.

The choice to withhold baptism from our children reflects a belief that our children are in exactly the same category as the children of the unbelieving world. Now, it is true that our children and the children of the unbelieving world will only be saved by faith. No child is saved or condemned by biological descent, but on the basis of their faith (or lack thereof) in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners. Nevertheless, it is untrue to lump all children into the same category. The children of believers are covenant members with claims to the covenants of promise by birthright: “For the promises are for you, and for your children...” (Acts 2:39). They are set apart as holy to the Lord by living in the household of a believer (1 Cor. 7:14). They are not *covenant strangers*, and so they cannot become *covenant converts*.

Instead, our children are counted as members of the new covenant, and we must disciple them as such. As covenant members, they receive the glorious privileges of baptism (which ratifies their claims to the covenant promises), membership in the visible church, shepherding by God’s appointed elders, and the growing up under the proclamation of God’s word. Furthermore, we must warn our children that, as covenant members, they have greater responsibilities, and, as such, they will be judged more harshly if they become *covenant breakers* than the unbelieving world will as *covenant strangers*. Hebrews 10:29–30 makes this clear:

[29] How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he

was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? [30] For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” (Heb. 10:29–30)

There will be greater punishment for the one who profanes the “blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.” These covenant breakers are *his* (the Lord’s) people, and they will be judged at a higher standard accordingly. This word for “sanctified” is the same word to describe the unbelieving spouse who is “made holy” and the children who are “holy” by dwelling in the household of the believer in 1 Corinthians 7:14. Hebrews 10:29 makes it clear that this *sanctification* means *covenant membership*, and that *covenant breakers* will be punished much worse than *covenant strangers*. Jesus echoes this idea:

[47] “And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. [48] But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.” (Luke 12:47–48)

We must disciple our children as covenant members, leading them toward becoming *covenant keepers* by faith, and warning them of the severe consequences of becoming *covenant breakers* by faithlessness. Our children are not *covenant strangers* like the children of the world, and much more will be required for them.

That discipleship begins at the beginning of their lives with baptism. In the covenant sign of baptism, God proclaims that our children have a rightful claim to his covenant promises of righteousness through faith in Christ. They must still believe in order to receive the fulfillment of those promises, but the promises are *for them*. From their first days, we should be leading them, by the grace of God, toward never remembering a day when they do not know and love Jesus as their Savior. And, if the Scriptures teach us that these promises are for our children, how can we withhold water for baptizing our children, who are the rightful claimants to God’s promises, just as we are (cf. Acts 10:47)?

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to “walk before” God? What are the practical implications of recognizing that we live our entire lives before the face of God? How does this affect how we listen to his word? How does this transform the way we pray? How does this influence the way we see other people? What areas in your walk are the furthest from “blamelessness”?
2. What does God promise to do in his covenant promises to us? Why is it important to recognize the cosmic, whole-creation scope of his plan for redemption? How does it shift our understanding of salvation when we recognize that God wants to dwell with us forever in a new heavens and a new earth? How are these promises fulfilled in Christ?

3. Why did God formerly command that his covenant people receive the sign and seal of circumcision? What does circumcision tell us about our own fallen condition? How does circumcision reveal Christ to us? Why is it important to recognize circumcision as God's everlasting covenant, and yet to also see that the practice itself is obsolete?

4. Why does God give covenant signs? What are the signs of the new covenant? How do they differ from the old covenant signs? How do covenant signs ratify our claim to God's covenant promises? What would we lose if we did not have covenant signs? Why should the children of believers receive circumcision (formerly) and baptism (now)?

Notes

1. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 19.
2. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*, 74.
3. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 460.
4. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 156.
5. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 330.
6. Kidner, *Genesis*, 139.
7. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 330.
8. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 330.
9. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 20.
10. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 461.
11. Benno Jacob, *First Book of the Bible* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1974), 109–10. Cited in Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 331.
12. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 330.
13. Calvin, *Genesis*, 443–44. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>
14. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 461.
15. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 463.
16. Kidner, *Genesis*, 139.
17. Kidner, *Genesis*, 139.
18. “This verse goes straight to the heart of the topic: ‘so that I may make my covenant between me and you.’ נתן ‘put,’ lit. ‘give,’ is used only here and Num 25:12 with the object “covenant.” It is not immediately obvious in what sense God needs to give a covenant to Abraham, as it has already been inaugurated (כרת ‘cut’) in 15:18. But this is clarified later: the chief concern of this chapter is to ‘confirm’ or ‘ratify’ (הקים, vv 7, 19, 21) the covenant, just as the covenant with Noah was confirmed in Gen 9. Whereas inaugurating the covenant was entirely the result of divine initiative, confirming it involves a human response, summed up in v 1 by ‘walk in my presence and be blameless’ and spelled out in the demand to circumcise every male.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 20.)
19. Calvin, *Genesis*, 444. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>
20. Contra Sailhamer, I would not see these as two distinct covenants: “The choice words in 17:2 (‘I will make my covenant,’ RSV) poses a question of the coherence of chapter 17 with the preceding narrative. Had not God already made a covenant with Abraham in 15:18? Why does he establish a covenant with Abraham a second time? Several solutions to this problem have been proposed. The simplest answer lies in seeing the two covenants as distinct covenants—a covenant made in regard to the promise of the land (15:18–21) and a

covenant made in regard to the promise of a great abundance of descendants (17:2). It should also be noted that between these two covenants was the incident with Hagar. There may thus have been a need to reestablish the earlier covenant after that unsuccessful attempt to take the promise into their own hands. A similar line of argument can be seen in the narratives of the covenant at Sinai. The covenant is first established in Exodus 24 and then, again, in Exodus 34. Between these two accounts, however, is the narrative of the incident of the golden calf (Ex 19:16; 32:1–35), which implied a failure on Israel's part in keeping the covenant." (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 156.)

21. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 21.

22. Calvin, *Genesis*, 445–46. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

23. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 21.

24. Kidner, *Genesis*, 140.

25. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 21.

26. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 327.

27. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 21.

28. Kidner, *Genesis*, 140.

29. "The etymology of the new name, the point of the story, is popular—'*abrāhām*' only sounds like '*ab-hāmôn*,' 'the father of a multitude.' In other words, the biblical explanation of the name is a sound play on the name rather than an exact etymology. The name '*abrāhām*' is probably a dialectical variant of '*abrām*,' with no appreciable difference in meaning. Its significance is from the word play.

The patriarch thus originally bore a name that spoke of his noble lineage. But when the Lord confirmed the promise of posterity without number, he signified it by the new name. This new name, '*abrāhām*,' was to be a perpetual reminder of the promise that the patriarch would be '*ab-hāmôn*,' 'father of a multitude.' There would now be a looking away from the noble lineage to the anticipation of progeny." (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 332.)

30. Kidner, *Genesis*, 140.

31. Calvin, *Genesis*, 447. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

32. Kidner, *Genesis*, 140.

33. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 464.

34. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 21–22. (My note: In the Hebrew language, the Qal form often represents a *standard* use of a verb (e.g., 'to be fruitful') while the Hiphil form often represents a *causative* use of a verb (e.g., 'to make someone/something fruitful').)

35. Kidner, *Genesis*, 140.

36. "A new element is added in verse 6b: 'Kings will come forth from you,' which seems not only to anticipate the subsequent history of Abraham's seed as it is recorded in the later historical books (e.g., Samuel and Kings), but also, more importantly, to provide a link between the general promise of blessing through the seed of Abraham and the author's subsequent focus of that blessing in the royal house of Judah (Ge 49:8–12; Nu 24:7–9). The notion that the blessing would come from a king is not new to the author's argument (cf. Ge 14:18–19), but what he here develops for the first time is the idea that this king would come from the seed of Abraham. At work here is the same theological planning that lies behind the structure of the genealogy of Matthew 1: 'A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.' Keeping in mind the close association of the term messiah ('anointed one,' as in Greek *christos*) with the kingship elsewhere in biblical literature (e.g., 1Sa 24:7, 11), one could speak of a 'Christology' of Genesis in such passages." (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 157–58.)

37. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 22.

38. Calvin, *Genesis*, 450. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 22.

40. Walton, *Genesis*, 450.

41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 22.

42. Calvin, *Genesis*, 450–51. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

43. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 22.

44. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 468.

45. Kidner, *Genesis*, 140.

46. Kidner, *Genesis*, 140.

47. Calvin, *Genesis*, 453. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

48. “This cleansing significance of circumcision is brought out forcefully through an allusion to the old covenant rite by Jesus Christ in John 7:22, 23. In the context of John’s Gospel, Jesus’ opponents are accusing him for healing a man on the Sabbath. The Lord responds by referring to the ancient practice of circumcision, a rite which had been instituted in the period of the fathers well before the days of Moses. If his adversaries proceed to circumcise a man on the eighth day even though that day should fall on the Sabbath, why should not he proceed to heal a man on the Sabbath? They make part of a man clean on the Sabbath by circumcision; should he not make a ‘whole man healthy’...on the Sabbath by healing?”

Circumcision, therefore, which is ‘from the fathers,’ partially cleanses. It does not merely communicate the need for cleansing. It actually symbolizes and seals the cleansing necessary for covenantal participation.” (Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 150–51.)

49. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 333.

50. Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Mac Dill AFB, FL: Mac Donald Publishing Company, 1835), 174.

51. Calvin, *Genesis*, 456. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

52. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 158.

53. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 470.

54. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 23.

55. Calvin, *Genesis*, 451. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

56. Calvin, *Genesis*, 452. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

57. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 327.

58. Calvin, *Genesis*, 454. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

59. “The eighth held special meaning as the day of atonement or dedication to the Lord (e.g., Exod 22:30; Lev 9:1; 14:10,23; 15:14,29; 22:27; 23:39; Num 6:10; Ezek 43:27).” (Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC, vol. 1B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 204.)

60. Calvin, *Genesis*, 455. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

61. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 472–73.

62. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 473.

63. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 25.

64. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 205.

65. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 25.