

January 15, 2017 - Gen. 17:1-27 - Covenant of Circumcision

Torah Readings: Gen. 17:1-27 - Covenant of Circumcision

Psalm 12

Haftorah - Jeremiah 33:25 – 34:5 + 34:8-13

Isaiah 54:10 – 55:3

2 Kings 20:3-11 + 19

Genesis 17:1 - “And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be you perfect.”

The Hebrew for Covenant is “bĕriyth” - from a root “to cut” or to cut asunder, so called because the sacrificial victims are cut in two to mark the agreement. Other meanings are to select or choose, and to eat - all from the idea of cutting or separating.

God responds to Abram’s loss of direction concerning the Promise.

Almighty God - “El shaddai” - strong so as to overpower, all-sufficient

‘I am the Almighty God - in other words, take My power into all thy calculations, and reckon certainties with it as the chief factor. The one impossibility is that any word of Mine should fail. The one imprudence is to doubt My word.’ - MacLaren's Expositions

“Perfect” is tamiym - “complete,” without blemish, sound, whole, pure and undivided or adulterated, constant and true with integrity of heart (often used of sacrifices in Exodus and Leviticus)

Genesis 17:3-4 - “And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.”

“Elohim,” the third name for the Deity used in the space of only three verses.

Abram fell on his face, partly in self-abasement, and a humble sense of his own undeservedness of such favors; and partly in reverence and worship to God, and a thankful acknowledgment of his marvelous kindness. (Compare Leviticus 9:24, Joshua 5:14 and Ezekiel 43:3).

A new name

Genesis 17:5 - “Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.”

Abram - who left his home, old gods, family and culture behind - now is stripped of his old name and identity and given a new one by God.

Remember, in Genesis 15 God told Abram, “I will make of you a great nation.” The Midrash Tanhuma translated it as, “I will create you anew.”

Father of a multitude = 'ab hamôn

Some commentators see the insertion of the letter “h” or the phoneme “ha” as indicating the breath of God and being the representative of the name Yahweh.

Romans 4:17 - “For a father of many nations have I made thee; not that he was so already in fact, but in the purpose and promise of God.”

The Rabbis say at first he was the father of Aram, and therefore his name was called Abram, but now he is the father of the whole world, and therefore called Abraham; and so Maimonides himself says, quoting this passage, “behold he is the father of the whole world, who are gathered under the wings of the Shechinah.”

Faith brings with it a new spiritual identity:

Isaiah 62:2 - “The nations will see your righteousness, And all kings your glory; And you will be called by a new name Which the mouth of the LORD will designate.”

Revelation 2:17 - “To the one who is victorious, I will give the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone inscribed with a new name, known only to the one who receives it.”

Others whose name was changed:

Genesis 17:15 - Sarai to Sarah - “And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.”

Numbers 13:16 - “Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua.”

Judges 6:32 - “So because Gideon broke down Baal’s altar, they gave him the name Jerub-Baal that day, saying, ‘Let Baal contend with him.’”

2 Samuel 12:24-25 - Solomon - “She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The Lord loved him; because the Lord loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah (loved by the Lord).”

Saul became Paul; Cephas became Peter - and other disciples.

Genesis 17:7-8 - “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. ... and I will be their God.”

Here is a new emphasis placed on God’s relation to Abraham’s descendants. God promises to be ‘a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee,’ and, again, ‘I will be their God’

Abraham's seed will belong to God, and God will belong to them.

“To ‘possess’ God is only possible on condition of yielding ourselves to Him. When we lose ourselves in God, we find ourselves, and being content to have nothing, and not even to be our own masters or owners, we discover ourselves more truly than ever, and have God for our portion, and in Him ‘all things are ours.’” - - MacLaren's Expositions

Genesis 17:10-14 - The Covenant of Circumcision

From chabad.org
<http://buff.ly/2jQizcv>

Circumcision - cutting off the foreskin of the penis - is a ritual found in many cultures throughout history for initiation or other reasons. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Egyptians, the Semitic peoples, Phoenicians and other ancient people practiced it. God gave it a radical new meaning in his covenant with Abraham.

(See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_male_circumcision)

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Rabbinical interpretations

God “made 13 covenants with Abraham” concerning circumcision (Talmud, Nedarim 31b), based on the fact that the word brit — “covenant” — appears 13 times in the verses of Genesis 17 in reference to this mitzvah. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains that this indicates that the brit milah (lit., “the covenant of circumcision”) evokes the revelation of God’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

Circumcision therefore is a “living” counterpart to the animal sacrifices depicted in Genesis 15:9-10. Abraham would carry the “cutting of the covenant” around with him perpetually. (In Pauline language, one who’s heart is circumcised becomes a “living sacrifice”)

The rabbis considered circumcision the equivalent to all of the mitzvot/commandments of the Torah combined.

“It establishes a sign, affixed in our flesh, that we are believers in the one God.” (Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 3:49)

“It is akin to a branding that ... masters would oftentimes imprint upon their slaves. It acts as a reminder for us that we are in G-d’s service, and must follow His ways.” (Commentary of Sforno to Genesis 17:11,13)

Why was the reproductive organ chosen for this imprint?

To symbolize that the covenant with God is eternal and must be passed on to the next generations (Commentary of Sforno to Genesis 17:11,13), and as a reminder to refrain from illegal sexual encounters, using sex only in a permissible and positive way. (Nachmanides)

(A New Testament view of the spiritual meaning of a circumcised heart then would be to refrain our hearts from idolatry, which the spiritual counterpart to adultery).

Abraham was not called “perfect” or complete until after his circumcision.

Genesis 17:14 - “And an uncircumcised male, who will not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that soul will be cut off from its people; he has broken My covenant.”

This is one of only two positive commandments whose neglect carries this punishment. The other is the Passover sacrifice.

Interestingly, someone who is circumcised is “doing” this commandment continually even when it’s not conscious of it.

On the Eighth Day

The number seven represents the natural order of this world, linear time exemplified by the seven great heavenly bodies (the sun, moon, and five visible planets), the seven days of the week, and God’s seven emotional attributes — the building blocks with which the world was created.

The number eight, according to the Zohar, represents Godly revelation that is completely beyond this world — the source of the supernatural. The covenant of circumcision is a manifestation of the Jew’s connection to God on a level that is completely beyond this world.

The Talmud says the Jewish women are considered naturally circumcised.

Final blessing at the Brit:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified the beloved one from the womb, set His statute in his flesh, and sealed his descendants with the sign of the holy Covenant. Therefore, as a reward of this (circumcision), the living God, our Portion, our Rock, has ordained that the beloved of our flesh be saved from the abyss, for the sake of the Covenant which He has set in our flesh. Blessed are You Lord, who makes the Covenant.”

Circumcision in the New Testament

Believers become a “living sacrifice” with the circumcision of the heart, made “without hands” but rather by the Spirit. Spiritual reproduction/regeneration is accomplished by sharing the gospel from one heart to another.

This idea is hinted at in the Old Testament:

Deuteronomy 10:16 - “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”

Baptism is a sign of the circumcision of the heart.

Colossians 2:10-12 - “And you have been made complete in Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority. In Him you were also circumcised in the putting off of your sinful nature, with the circumcision performed by Christ and not by human hands. And having been buried with Him in baptism, you were raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

Romans 2:29 - “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”

In the centuries before and during New Testament times, some Jews attracted to Hellenized society (or under persecution, as described in 1 Maccabees) would undergo procedures to “correct” their circumcision, so it would not be apparent while attending the baths or gymnasiums of Greece or Rome.

1 Maccabees 1:14 - “So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil.”

Similarly, Christian believers without zeal today might try to “cover over” the circumcision of their heart attempting to blend in to the world system.

Genesis 17:17 - “Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?”

Abraham laughs - he’s still not convinced this can happen. It’s unheard of.

Later Sarah will laugh, too, in unbelief. All this laughing - tsachaq - will be incorporated into the name Isaac - Yitschaq - the child of promise. The mocking laughter of unbelief is transformed into the joyful laughter of thanksgiving at his birth. (Genesis 21:6)