



## **GENESIS 16-18 GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM; CIRCUMCISION**

After Abraham rescued Lot from the Mesopotamian kings and gave tithes to Melquizedek, he settled down with his great flock of animals in the area of Hebron. It was here that God extended and formalized a covenant with Abraham. He promised him his descendants would be as abundant as the stars in the night sky.

In the Bible, when God makes a **covenant**, it means He is establishing a special and solemn relationship with a person or persons who have found grace in His sight. In it, God commits Himself to carry out His part, *because* the other party has shown to be faithful and obedient to Him. This is the basic meaning behind the expressions, "Enoch *walked* with God...Noah *walked* with God...Abraham...walk before Me and be blameless...Abraham *obeyed* My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (Gen. 5:22; 6:9; 17:1; 26:5).

Yet, no one *earns* the right to have a covenant with God--it is always an act of mercy and undeserved favor. He carries out the superior role in the covenant, as a father would toward his children, or as a king does with his loyal subjects.

### **To "cut" a covenant**

It is also important to understand another concept about a covenant. In the Hebrew, the expression is not to "make" a covenant but rather to "**cut**" a covenant, (*karat berit*) because it involved a solemn ceremony of cutting animals in two parts.

God "cut" this type of a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. He said: "'I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, **to give you this land to inherit it.**' And he said, 'Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?'" (Genesis 15:7-8). Abraham had listened to God make this marvelous promise, but saw he was getting quite old, his wife was infertile and they still did not have a son as an inheritor. He was naturally wondering *when* this promised son would finally arrive.

So God lovingly reassured him of this promise of a son by "cutting" a **solemn covenant** with him. "So He said to him, 'Bring Me a three-year old heifer, a three-year old female goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' The he brought all these to Him and **cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each place opposite the**

**other**, but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram, '**Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs**, and will serve them, and **they will afflict them four hundred years**. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge, **afterward they shall come out with great possessions**. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But **in the fourth generation they shall return here**, for **the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete**. And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, **there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces** [God was passing between the split animals]. On the same day the Lord **made [cut] a covenant** with Abram, saying: '**To your descendants** I have given this land, **from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates...**'" (Genesis 15:9-18).

So this type of covenant, where the animals are divided in two meant, "if I don't fulfill my part of the covenant, then **may I be cut into pieces just as these animals have been.**" We see the same concept in Jeremiah 34:18, "The men who have transgressed My covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, **I will treat like the calf they cut in two** and then walked between the pieces." That is the degree of commitment God made with Abraham and his descendants. Also, we should always remember **when we are baptized, God "cuts" a covenant with us and we with Him.**

This covenant consisted of the following points:

- 1) Abraham would have a son in his old age.
- 2) His descendants would become a nation and a multitude of nations. They would be blessed above all the countries of the world.
- 3) His descendants would go down to Egypt, dwell there for 400 years and then, through wondrous miracles, depart with abundant riches from Egypt, and as a great multitude would journey to Canaan to inherit the land.

God prophesied this land of Canaan would be forfeited by the Amorites because of their constant atrocious sins, and would be given to Israel forever. The borders of Israel would extend between the Nile and the Euphrates rivers.

After Abraham witnessed God had “cut” a covenant with him, he truly believed in those promises, and yet, in spite of these assurances, he was about to make another serious mistake by taking things in his own hands.

The Bible explains, “Now Sarai, Abraham’s wife had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, ‘See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai...So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived” (16:1-4).

Why did Abraham listen to Sarah’s request? He did have the faith God would bring him a child, but upon Sarah’s constant insistence to take her maid, he yielded when he shouldn’t have, for this was not God’s will. “Sarah’s suggestion was unobjectionable,” says the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, “but God often repudiates social customs.” They would all pay a heavy price for trying to work out on their own God’s plans for them. Family life would be turned topsy-turvy. Yet this arrangement may seem very strange for us today, but in Abraham’s time, it was perfectly legal to take a “surrogate” wife to have a child heir.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains: “In the ancient Near East it was essential that women produce male offspring in order to perpetuate the family, and childlessness was the greatest misfortune that could befall a woman and her family...According to a widespread ancient Near Eastern custom, any children born to Hagar and Abraham could be counted as Sarah’s own offspring.”

The marriage contracts in the Nuzi Tablets of northern Mesopotamia, expressly mention that a woman without a child was expected to provide her husband with a concubine by which the child would be considered as born to the wife.

The Code of Hammurabi says something similar: “If a man takes a wife and she does not bear him a child, he can decide to take a concubine, but the concubine will not have the rank of a wife. If the concubine bears a child and she aspires to be treated

as a wife, she cannot be sold by the wife, but can be reduced to slavery.” This is precisely what occurred. The Bible explains, “Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The Lord judge between you and me. So Abram said to Sarai, ‘Indeed your handmaid is in your hand; do to her as you please.’ And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence” (16:5-6).

Once Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, there were constant jealousies and warring between the two women for Abraham’s and Ishmael’s attention. Things finally got so bad Abraham let Sarah have her way and she punished Hagar for her haughtiness. Eventually she could not stand it any longer and fled with her baby from the camp. In the wilderness, they almost perished, if God had not intervened. He told her to go back to the camp and prophesied about Ishmael, whose name means *God hears*: “He shall be a *wild man*; his hand shall be against every man, and every man’s hand against him, and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren” (Genesis 16:12). Later, God said, “I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, *because he is your seed*” (Gen. 21:13). Ishmael would have twelve sons that would be the princes of twelve Arab nations living in the Arabian desert (Gen. 25:12-18).

Actually, this jealousy between Hagar and Sarah marks the beginning of the rivalry there would exist between the Israelite and the Arab peoples. “Ishmael,” says the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, “became the ancestor of the Arabs, who are still hostile to the Jews...Sarah’s sin caused the origin of the Ishmaelites, a harvest that is still being reaped. In fact, Joseph, Sarah’s great-grandson, was later taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelites.”

Abraham was 86 years old when he had Ishmael, and had to wait 13 long years for God to explain the promise of a coming son was still unfulfilled. Yet, his faithfulness had not weakened through the years, and God expanded his covenant blessings with him. He said, “I am Almighty God, *walk* before Me and *be blameless*. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.’ Then 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. No longer shall your name

be called Abram, but your name shall be **Abraham**, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish **My covenant** between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, **all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God**" (Gen. 17:1-9).

The covenant had conditions, Abraham was to walk in God's way and be "blameless," which means being totally committed. Now, God changes Abraham's name, a very significant event. "In Eastern countries," says *The Explanatory & Critical Commentary*, "a change of name is an advertisement of **some new circumstance in the history, rank, or religion** of the individual who bears it. The change is made variously, by the old name being entirely dropped for the new, or by conjoining the new with the old; or sometimes only a few letters are inserted, so that the altered form may express the difference in the owner's state or prospects. It is surprising how soon a new name is known and its import spread through the country. In dealing with Abraham and Sarai, God was pleased to adapt His procedure to the ideas and customs of the country and age. Instead of Abram, "a high father," he was to be called Abraham, "**father of a multitude of nations**." At the same time, it must have been humbling for Abraham, at 99, to be called the "father of nations" when he still did not have a son by his legitimate wife.

Yet, he had true faith, as Rom. 4:18-21 explains, "God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; [Abraham] who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became **the father of many nations**, according to what was spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.' And **not being weak in faith**, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He **did not waver** at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened **in faith**, giving glory to God."

God extended His covenant to be an everlasting pact with Abraham and his descendants. It was based both on grace and obedience. Grace, because

it came freely from God and not "earned" by Abraham. But it was dependent on Abraham to follow and obey God. Notice: "And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, **you shall keep My covenant**, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and your descendants after you. Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and **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'" (Genesis 17:9-12).

Circumcision would be the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants. Throughout the Scriptures, circumcision is a symbol of separation, purity and loyalty to the covenant.

How does this apply to us today? One of our form letters explains the subject well: "Many wonder when they read Genesis 17:10 whether circumcision is necessary. The ordinance of circumcision was an outward, physical sign of one's willingness to obey God and be one of God's chosen people. Under the new covenant, God is calling a spiritual nation composed of individuals converted and begotten by His Holy Spirit. God's people now are all to be 'circumcised' spiritually. Physical circumcision is no longer necessary for religious purposes. It was only a forerunner or type of what God really wanted—circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4). Notice Romans 2:28-29, 'For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but **he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter**.' Spiritual circumcision is a process of conversion. That Christ circumcises us spiritually is made plain in Colossians 2:10-11, 'You are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.' That is why the assembled apostles and elders of the New Testament Church declared circumcision to be one of the physical requirements of the Old Testament which is not necessary for Christians (Acts 15:24, 28). It is for entirely non-religious reasons that many physicians recommend physical circumcision by a competent surgeon. It is to promote cleanliness and health."

Dr. S. I. McMillen wrote in his book, *None of These Diseases*: “After many laborious years of study, medical science has at last accepted the best method of preventing two deadly cancers in men and women. Medical science has at last arrived—four thousand years late [since the time of Abraham]. Science did not arrive because of any laboratory steam that had been generated; it was carried forward by a long train of statistics—statistics that existed only because down through the years many generations of Jews had been faithful to the command that God gave to their father Abraham about circumcision...There is one final but remarkably unique fact about circumcision. Doctors report that the tendency for a new born baby to hemorrhage after being circumcised is due to the fact that the important blood-clotting element, vitamin K, is not formed in the normal amount until the *fifth* to the *seventh* day of life. If vitamin K is not manufactured in the baby’s intestinal tract until the *fifth* to the *seventh* day, it is clear that ***the first safe day to perform circumcision would be the eighth day***, the very day that God commanded Abraham to circumcise Isaac” (pp. 19-20).

Now, not only was Abraham’s name changed, but also Sarah’s. “Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, ‘Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!’ Then God said, ‘No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name ***Isaac***; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him...Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year...That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael, and all the men of his house” (Gen. 17:15-27).

We see Abraham immediately obeyed God, a constant characteristic of his faith. Sarai’s name was changed to “Sarah,” which means “princess.” Out of her would come the future kings of Israel, and also the King of kings, Jesus Christ. Her future son would be called “Isaac,” that means “laughter.”

Ishmael was promised to be a great nation, with 12 princes, but as God says, “My covenant I will establish ***with Isaac***.” This contradicts the *Koran*, the holy book of the Arabs written 2,500 years later, that says Ishmael is the son of the covenant. Arabs have been taught to be in opposition to the descendants of Isaac, and try to usurp them, as we can still attest today.

Afterward, God visits Abraham with two of His angels. “And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate. Then they said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife? So he said, ‘Here, in the tent.’ And He said, ‘I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.’ (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of child-rearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.’ But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. And He said, ‘No, but you did laugh’” (Genesis 18:6-15).

So, when Isaac was finally born, his name, that means “laughter” would remind both Abraham and Sarah that they had laughed when God had promised them a son. Yes, although Abraham and Sarah had faith, they were also human, and had their doubts and weaknesses. The important point is that they persevered in the faith, kept obeying God and did not let their slip-ups get them down. That is a good example for all of us to follow.