

Covenant (Notes on Genesis 17)

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COVENANT AND CIRCUMCISION (GENESIS 17)

17:1 וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בֶּן-תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתֵּשַׁע שָׁנִים וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו *And Abram was ninety-nine years old and the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him.* This whole chapter is considered to be part of the P document, not only because of the insistence on the idea of covenant (mentioned 13 times in this chapter), and the interest in the ages of the characters, but also because of the way the author appears to underscore Abraham's role as an exile getting sure and permanent control of the land. The mention of 99 years indicates that time is about to be fulfilled, something momentous is about to happen. But as Buber says, the analysis of Genesis into documents all too often misses the overarching structure. For instance, the promise of a covenant in this chapter is one of seven such formulations made to Abraham, from 12 to 22, with a marked progression in the themes evoked along.

Note that the Lord "appeared to Abram," not an angel as in Hagar's case. The text doesn't simply mention that "he said," as is the case when God speaks outside of the land of Israel. The whole text from Gen 12 on is also a reflection on the possibility of seeing the divine, but only from special vantage points, in the land of Israel (what is presented here as a future land of Israel). Compare with Ezekiel's visions.

אֲנִי-אֵל שַׁדַּי *I am El-Shadday.* An ancient designation of the Israelite god, or an assimilation of another cult? The name "El-Shadday" combines the well-known El and a noun referring perhaps to mountains (Literally, El of my breasts, "breasts" as mountains). The chapter normally uses the name "Elohim", but once in this verse, "Yahweh" and "El-Shadday."

הִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תָּמִיד *Walk before me and be blameless.* This verse appears theologically, i.e. historically loaded, because it refers again to the act of "walking" or "going" with which 12:1 begins. The "going" from Haran, that seemed just an emigration of sort (prefiguring a going westwards, however, i.e. to a land imagined as a home-garden or paradise from which there had been an expulsion far back in time), now becomes a moral or religious "going," similar to that of Enoch and Noah. Be blameless: the promise of a descendance and kings i.e. a political system and independence, is dependent upon a moral engagement which is also indicated in Noah's episode. Walk before me: Taken on its face, could this mean

that the divinity itself migrated and is waiting for Abram to build, or at least prepare the sort of lineage that will build the proper abode (“house” i.e. temple eventually in Jerusalem, according to this post-exilic reframing of their story by Judaeans)? Again, see Ezekiel to see how “moveable” is this God.

17:2 וְאַתָּנָה בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאַרְבָּה אוֹתָךְ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד *And I will grant my covenant between me and you and I will multiply you exceedingly.* The promise of a covenant comes in three: first progeny and land (with the promise of kings to issue from Abram and Sarai); then circumcision as sign of this covenant; finally Sarah’s maternity.

17:3 וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר *And Abram fell on his face and God spoke with him, saying.* Abram prostrates himself, as one sees courtiers doing before kings on the walls of Assyrian or Babylonian palaces and temples. “God” is the divine name here, after El-Shadday and Yahweh in 17.1 above.

17:4 אֲנִי הֵנָּה בְּרִיתִי אִתְּךָ וְהָיִיתָ לְאָב הַמְּוֹן גּוֹיִם *As for me, this is my covenant with you: you shall be father of many nations (peoples).* Is the constant repeat of this theme meant to convey the incongruousness of proposing an extraordinary descendance to a 99-year-old man who has but one son, and this yet by a slave-girl?

17.5 וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת-שְׁמֹךְ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמֹךְ אַבְרָהָם כִּי אֲב-הַמְּוֹן גּוֹיִם תִּתֶּיךָ *And your name shall no more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham because I have set (made) you father of many nations.* In the context of the vision and hearing of Yahweh, who is revealing himself in this passage, the addition of a heh (ה) to the name of Abram can safely be taken to mean that it is a trace or a mark of the divine name, an addition made to the most intimate part of the person, and marking him as different from everyone else, very much like the circumcision, another kind of mark (a removal) does too. Here an “h” is added, transforming the name in a way that seems contrary to what happened with the primeval man, “adam”, who was extracted from the soil, “adamah”, by virtue of withdrawing the same “h.” In that sense, Abraham is a counter-Adam, both in his naming and in the direction he follows.

17.6 וְהִפְרֵתִי אִתְּךָ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וְנָתַתִּיךָ לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּךָ יֵצְאוּ *And I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will turn you into nations (set you), and kings shall come forth from you.* Abraham’s role in history, according to the author (an exilic Judaeen author reflecting on an ideal monarchy that mightn’t fail like the pre-exilic ones makes is to be supposed), is to be the ancestor of kings.

17.7 וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין זֶרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדֹרֹתָם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְהִיְוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ *And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you through their generations, as an everlasting covenant to be God for you and your seed after you.*

17.8 וְנָתַתִּי לְךָ וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֶיךָ אֶת כָּל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאַחֲזֹת עוֹלָם וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לְאֱלֹהִים *The land of your sojournings.* In the background, *mezzo voce*, is repeated the theme of the conditionality of the relationship to the land. The land of Canaan is perpetually deeded to an Abraham commanded to be blameless at the beginning. The condition of גר /ger was a tenuous one, as the story of the descent in Egypt indicates.

17.9 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם וְאַתָּה אֶת-בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר אֶתָּה וּזְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדֹרֹתָם *Keeping (and remembering) the covenant means keeping the commandments, not yet spelled*

out in this story, but subsumed under a major one, circumcision, a marker differentiating Judaeans and Israelites from Assyrians and Babylonians, as well as from Philistines and Greeks, but not from Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Aramaeans, and “Canaanites.” It became a most important ethnic marker in the exilic and post-exilic period, when Israelites and Judahites were part of an empire in which not all ethnic groups practiced it. It became a crucial marker for two main reasons: first, it could easily be practiced in homes and communities. Secondly, it became a symbol of belief in the Sinai covenant (the Exodus story) and the hopes shared by a whole community of faith. In other words, a biological and genetic marker was given a much broader meaning.

17.10 זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריך המול לכם כל-זכר Male circumcision only.

17.11 ונמלתם את בשר ערלתכם והיה לאות ברית ביני וביניכם The first “sign” for the first covenant, with Noah, was the rainbow. Note that there was a sacrifice accompanying this sign too, as there was in ch. 15, where the covenant is announced to Abram in a different way, attributed to the J document.

17.12 ובן-שמן ימים ימול לכם כל-זכר לדתיכם יליד בית ומקנת-בסך מכל בן-נכר אשר לא מזרעך הוא Every male of the household must be circumcised, even if of foreign origin, as Abraham himself is originally a ger (גר).

17.14 וערל זכר אשר לא-ימול את-בשר ערלתו ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מעמי את-בריתי הפר And a male with a foreskin, who has not circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. The verb for “cutting off” is the same seen in a previous framing of the covenant, chapter 15, in which animal victims are offered on an altar and divided (“severed,” same verb).

17:22 Circumcision, the major mark of belief in YHWH and of belonging to a community, is tied to the birth of Isaac, the miraculous child of a long, barren union.

VISION IN MAMRE (GENESIS 18)

18.1 וירא אליו יהוה באלני ממרא. Yahweh, the god without images, statues, and whose name couldn’t be pronounced without great fear, at least in post-exilic times, makes himself visible in the land. Here it is under the terebinths of Mamre, in Hebron. The name of Mamre also evokes vision. והוא ישב פתח-האהל כחם היום: Abram is at the door (or flap) of the tent, as the heat of the day is at its highest. The story of the three visitors and the extraordinary hospitality shown them by Abraham strikes the reader as a beautiful text crying for interpretation. The first verse starts by telling that YHWH appears to Abraham in the full light of day. The author—J or the so-called Yahwist, for chapters 18–19—is careful to show that this is different from the appearances to other characters (Hagar and Jacob, or Joseph) who see angels or night apparitions, in dreams. Another important thing to keep in mind is that the deity appears everywhere on the land, before there exists temples such as the one in Jerusalem. Or at least this is what the authors writing after the loss of the Jerusalem temple meant to convey. The deity, they were convinced, was not a simple territorial god but a universal being who could appear anywhere. Yet, its appearances in various places in the land are what

justified their sacredness, together with the rights of descendants of Abraham to inherit the territory hallowed by them (Schechem, Bethel, Beersheba, Mamre = Hebron—and even Jerusalem, which is not mentioned but presumably suggested in the story of the binding of Isaac in Gen 22).

18.2 וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא: Abraham lifts his eyes. This seemingly unproblematic or mundane remark invites the reader to imagine Abram's state of mind. He will also lift his eyes in significant ways in Gen 22, the story of the binding of Isaac.

18:2–8 Abraham runs to greet the three visitors, prostrates himself, proposes modest measures of relief but hurries to the tent and the herd so that Sarah and his servant can hurriedly prepare huge quantities of fresh first-quality bread and rich heaps of meat laced with butter and fat. His standing by his visitors while they eat and lounge recalls a similar scene in *Arabian sands* by W. Thesiger. Abraham's attitude is radically contrasted with those of kings or rich elites who snap their fingers to make the world work around them and never—never!—run. It also contrasts with the more prudent, limited hospitality shown later by Lot, and especially the very calculating invitation that Laban offers Abraham's servant in chapter 24 or later to Jacob.

18:16–21 A long and artificial discussion between YHWH and Abraham ensues. “Righteousness and justice” (צדקה ומשפט) are fundamental issues of the exilic and post-exilic period. The lateness of these concerns is apparent from the texts in Ezekiel 14, or the books of Jonah and especially Job. It was not simply a matter of discussing what just retribution could look like, and what its boundaries could be. The situation of the Israelite communities living in exile provoked questions about divine justice and the possibility of corporate forgiveness. Could the usual explanation of global punishment by the deity be sustained many years after –721 and –586 (the fall of Israel and Judah)? Shouldn't the righteous ones be saved, separately from the evil ones, who should be punished? The story of Sodom's destruction, aside from providing an explanation for the landscape, as well as a mean joke on the origin of Moabites and Ammonites, was used to present this question. In the case of Sodom, however, the six attempts by Abraham (50? 45? 40? 30? 20? 10?) imply that not one righteous person was left anyway, as even Lot and his surviving daughters are doomed versions of Noah and his family.

SODOM (GENESIS 19)

19.1 וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים סָדֹמָה בְּעָרָב וְלוֹט יֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר-סֹדֹם וַיֵּרָא-לוֹט וַיָּקָם לִקְרָאתָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֲפִים אָרְצָה: *And the two messengers came to Sodom in the evening.* Messengers, not angels as they are imagined since the late developments of angelology in Judaism and Christianity. “In the evening:” compare Abraham, who receives his visitors as the day is at its hottest, making his hospitality more praiseworthy, and the appearance of the divinity brighter.

Note that Lot is assumed to have made certain choices in life that explain his coming predicament. Like Abraham, he is a *ger*, i.e., an alien without long-established kinship connections and under suspicion from the local population as a foreigner. In Gen 16, when invited to choose another part of the land, he chose the Jordan valley (כבר הירדן), which proves to be a doubly wrong choice. First of

all, it is not quite in the “promised land;” secondly, he takes what is presented as a fully irrigated garden, before its destruction by fire. He chooses an easy life, a sort of Egypt, together with its slavery of sorts.

Lot, like Abraham, is sitting at an entrance, from which one can see all visitors, even at a distance. But Lot is at the gate of a city, which is socially and culturally different from Abram sitting at the opening of a tent. Nomads living a difficult and spare life are favorably compared here again, as in the story of Cain and Abel, to cities and their inhospitable, greedy and violent inhabitants. The narrator, however, comes from a sedentary society with villages, towns, and monarchs (at least in the recent past). It can be shown that the story of Abraham is written from this sedentary point of view rather than on the basis of stories coming from a remote patriarchal age of caravaners (as was argued by W. F. Albright and the “American School” of Biblical archaeology).

Lot saw and he rose to greet them and he prostrated himself, face to the ground. There is no “lifting of the eyes” here, as there was with Abraham and will happen again, momentarily, in the ‘Aqedah in Genesis 22. This simply means that Lot is not invested with the mission of Abraham. Another absence: the running towards the visitors, the insistence in the choice of meal, and Lot’s family, that is partly from Sodom (his wife, the husbands of his daughters).

19.2 וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נָא אֶדְנִי סוּרוּ נָא אֶל-בֵּית עֲבָדְכֶם וְלִינוּ וְרָחְצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁכַּמְתֶּם וְהִלַּכְתֶּם לְדַרְכְּכֶם וְנִלְיִן: וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא כִי בְּרָחוּב נִלְיִן *And he said: Here, please my lords, turn please to your servant’s house, lodge, wash your feet, and you will raise early to go on your way. But they said: No, but we shall sleep in the square.* The vocalic pointing under “lords” of the Masoretic Text (= the traditional Hebrew text) indicates that Yahweh is not part of the group. Abraham had used the same word, but with a slightly longer vowel, meaning my Lord. *Turn*: there is a hint of perversion or sin, i.e. of deviation from the straight path, in employing this particular verb (סורו), used in the Deuteronomy and elsewhere to indicate a problematic choice, leading to sin. Is there a second round of persuasive talk by Lot to dissuade the visitors from staying in the open square in a dangerous city?