

A Rood Awakening!

Presents

Awakening in the Word

By Glenn McWilliams of TK TORAH KEEPERS

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THE OVERVIEW

In this week's portion we encounter the Creator in yet another one of His many attributes – this time an attribute known to the patriarchs – “El Shaddai.” We also witness the partial fulfillment of YHWH'S promise to Abram concerning the enlargement of his name. We also observe the expansion and clarification of the covenant with Abram and his descendants. But at the very heart of this portion is the ratification of the covenant between Abraham and the Sovereign One through the commandment of circumcision. Circumcision was and continues to be one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of keeping the Torah. It is my hope that this teaching will help to bring greater clarity and understanding to this critical issue.

THE OUTLINE

- Genesis 17:1 YHWH appears to Abram as El Shaddai and calls Abram to walk perfect before Him.
- Genesis 17:2-8 YHWH enlarges Abram's name to Abraham and confirms that Abraham shall be the progenitor of numerous kings and nations.
- Genesis 17:9-14 The laws of circumcision are put forth to Abraham.
- Genesis 17:15-21 Sarai's name is enlarged to Sarah. Sarah is revealed to be the progenitrix of numerous kings and nations. Isaac is named as Abraham's heir instead of Ishmael.
- Genesis 17:22-27 Abraham fulfills the commandment of circumcision.

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the meaning of "El Shaddai"?
2. Who is El Shaddai?
3. What is the meaning of the changing of the names?
4. What is the significance of the letter *hey*?
5. Who are Sarah's other children?
6. What does *tamim* mean?
7. Why does YHWH repeat the covenant?
8. Why is circumcision so significant?
9. Why did YHWH choose circumcision as a sign of the covenant?
10. How is circumcision a sign? And to whom is it a sign?
11. How do women enter the covenant?
12. Why were slaves circumcised?
13. Why is Isaac the heir and not Ishmael?
14. Is circumcision the automatic means of entering the covenant?

15. Did Shaul do away with circumcision?
16. Do believers in Yeshua have to be circumcised?

THE TEXT

Genesis 17:1-27 *And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, YHWH appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am El Shaddai; walk before Me, and be thou perfect. ²And I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. ³And Abram fell on his face: and Elohim talked with him, saying, ⁴As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. ⁵Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. ⁶And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. ⁷And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a Elohim unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. ⁸And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their Elohim. ⁹And Elohim said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep My covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. ¹⁰This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt Me and you. ¹²And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. ¹³He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant. ¹⁵And Elohim said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. ¹⁶And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. ¹⁷Then 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?*

¹⁸And Abraham said unto Elohim, O that Ishmael might live before Thee! ¹⁹And Elohim said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.

²⁰And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹But My covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year. ²²And He left off talking with him, and Elohim went up from Abraham. ²³And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as Elohim had said unto him. ²⁴And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son. ²⁷And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him.

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While the rite of circumcision is clearly at the heart of this portion, there are several other issues, such as names and name changes, which I would like to address before launching into the larger and more demanding topic of circumcision. Since the Torah is the self-revelation of YHWH, the primary purpose for studying the Torah is to come to a deeper clarity, knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the identity and character of the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe. This is especially so for the children of Israel, who have been specifically called to embody this revelation in their lives. Therefore, it is essential that we understand the meanings of the various titles given to the Creator as well as the attributes of the Creator that these titles express.

In previous portions we have addressed the names El and Elohim, but for clarity's sake let us review. The meaning of the word *el* may best be understood from the Ancient Hebrew ideographs of the word. The Hebrew name El is spelled *aleph, lammed*. The ideograph for the letter *aleph* is the picture of an ox head and conveys the idea of strength and gentleness; and since it is the first letter, it imparts the idea of being first or prime. The ideograph of the letter *lammed* is the picture of a shepherd's crook, which can convey the concept of authority, movement, or protection. Together these images may convey the idea of "prime mover," or "strong authority," or even "gentle protector." All of these concepts aptly describe various attributes of the Creator. While often translated as "God" or "god," the word *el* and its plural form *elohim* may best be understood simply as "authority" or "sovereign." The word *elohim* is thus variously translated as "God" (Genesis 1:1), "god" (Exodus 7:1), "gods" (Exodus 12:12), "goddess" (1 Kings 11:5), "judges" (Exodus 21:6), and even once, although erroneously, as "angels" (Psalm 8:5). The use of the word *el* or "El" was not exclusive to the ancient Hebrew people.

In Ancient Mesopotamia ilu is attested as an appellative for deities, though a deity Il is not attested...The Ugaritic texts from Ras Shamra supply more than five hundred references to El. The noun il in the Ugaritic texts frequently has the appellative meaning too, especially in the epistolary literature, but partially also in the mythological, cultic, and epic texts. In about half of the occurrences, El denotes a distinct deity who, residing on the sacred mountain, occupies within the myths the position of master of the Ugaritic pantheon. He bears the title mlk "king"...and possesses ultimate authority.¹

The Canaanites worshipped El as chief among their many *elohim*. Eventually the worship of El among the Canaanites was replaced by the worship of Baal as their chief deity.² We should not be surprised by the use of various divine names and epithets among the heathen, since the whole human race came from Noah and his descendants, who knew the one true Elohim. Remember that it was only after the confusion of languages at Babel that names and images of the true Elohim became distorted and divided, spawning the various pagan religions.

¹ Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst, Brill Academic Publishers and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Pg. 275

² *Ibid.*

That the Gentiles worshipped El is attested to in the Torah itself. On returning from the rescue of his nephew Lot, Abram encounters Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who, though a Gentile living in Canaan, is a priest of El Elyon.³ We should note that it is Abram who clarifies who this "most high" deity truly is.

Genesis 14:18-22 *And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of El Elyon. ¹⁹And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of El Elyon, possessor of heaven and earth: ²⁰and blessed be El Elyon, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all. ²¹And the king of Sodom said unto Abram, Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself. ²²And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto YHWH, El Elyon, the possessor of heaven and earth.*

Here we should note that while Melchizedek makes reference only to El Elyon as the possessor of heaven and earth, Abram makes it very clear that this El Elyon is YHWH. In our portion we once again encounter an ambiguous title for the Sovereign One.

Genesis 17:1 *And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, YHWH appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am El Shaddai; walk before Me, and be thou perfect.*

This is the first usage of the title "El Shaddai." We should note that the Torah removes any ambiguity about the identity of El Shaddai by stating that it was YHWH who appeared to Abram. This is the only use of the name "YHWH" in this particular portion. Thus, the sole use of the Tetragrammaton Y-H-W-H is clearly for the purpose of identifying El Shaddai. The title "Shaddai" or "El Shaddai" appears 48 times in the Tanach (9 times in the Torah, twice in the book of Ruth, 31 times in the book of Job, twice in the book of Psalms, and 4 times in the Prophets). The frequency of this title in the book of Job is of particular interest, since the historical context of this writing is the patriarchal age. This fact substantiates what is written in the Torah:

Exodus 6:3 *And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name El Shaddai, but by My name YHWH was I not known to them.*

Let me be clear that the patriarchs were well-aware of the name YHWH, as is given evidence in the book of Genesis itself.

Genesis 4:26 *And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of YHWH.*

While the patriarchs knew the name YHWH, they had not yet fully experienced the attributes connected with this name. Rather, the patriarchs were familiar with the attributes expressed by the titles "Elohim," "El Elyon," and "El Shaddai."

The use of the name El Shaddai or Shaddai is predominantly found in the poetic material. It should be understood that poetry tends to preserve older and even archaic language. Nahum M. Sarna writes:

The overwhelming appearance in poetic contexts points a priori to a verable tradition, for Hebrew poetry tends to preserve or consciously employ early forms of speech. The remarkably high incidence of Shaddai in Job is of particular importance in light of that book's patriarchal setting. All the prose usages are concentrated in the Genesis narratives (17:1, 28:3, 35:11, 43:14, 48:3; 49:25), a fact that is in perfect harmony with Exodus 6:3: "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai," a tradition explicitly assigning the divine name to the pre-Mosaic age.⁴

³ Genesis 14:18ff

⁴ JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis, Nahum M. Sarna, Jewish Publication Society, Pg. 348

While we recognize that the name El Shaddai is an older epithet for the Creator, it is important that we have some understanding of what the name or title means. The etymology of this word is debated by scholars. Some scholars, like Ernest Kline, feel that the most likely etymology of the word Shaddai (*shin, dalet, yud*) is from the root *shin, dalet, dalet*, which means to "overpower," "destroy violently," "rob," "devastate," or "ruin." If this is the root of Shaddai, we may easily understand the translation as "Almighty." Others, however, point to the root word *shad (shin, dalet)*, which can mean "breast" or "breasts."⁵ We may ponder upon the numerous images of Astarte, the many-breasted fertility goddess of the Canaanites, depicting her as sufficient to feed all her children. If *shad* is the origin of the word Shaddai, then we may better translate El Shaddai as "the All Sufficient One." C. I. Scofield writes:

El Shaddai is the name of God which sets Him forth primarily as the strengthener and satisfier of His people. It is to be regretted that Shaddai was translated "Almighty." The primary name, El or Elohim, sufficiently signifies almightiness. "All-sufficient" would far better express the characteristic use of the name in Scripture. Almighty God (El Shaddai) not only enriches but makes fruitful. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the first occurrence of the name (Gen. 17:1-8).⁶

The image of YHWH as the satisfier and sustainer of His creatures is clearly given evidence in the words of the psalmist:

Psalm 145:14-16 *YHWH upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down. ¹⁵The eyes of all wait upon Thee; and Thou givest them their meat in due season. ¹⁶Thou openest Thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.*

Nahum M. Sarna and others point out that there may be yet another possible origin for the word "Shaddai."

The modern conjecture that has gained widest currency connects Shaddai with Akkadian Shadu, "a mountain," often used as a divine (a royal) epithet. The name would originally have meant "the One of the Mountain," probably referring to a cosmic mount or corresponding to the divine epithet "the Rock."⁷

In truth, all three of these options may be conceptually connected. Please excuse any insensitivity on my part, but it is not a huge leap to see the connection between full, sufficient breasts and mountains. It is likewise not difficult to imagine the connection between a large, dominant mountain, such as a volcano, and the idea of "overwhelming" or "powerful." I would suggest that all three of these concepts are contained in the name El Shaddai. Clearly Abram, Isaac, and Jacob knew YHWH in His attribute of strength, sufficiency, and fruitfulness. But as we see in Moses' encounter with the Elohim of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, YHWH is also "the Elohim of the Mountain."

What is clear is that regardless of who the other people groups and religions may have understood El Shaddai to be, the Torah clearly associates the title El Shaddai with YHWH, the same Elohim who met with the descendants of Abraham at Mount Sinai. So it may be that this title is used prophetically to confirm to Abram that YHWH has sufficient power and strength to fulfill the promises of the covenant, to make Abram fruitful, and to bring his descendants out of bondage to the mountain where He would meet with them personally. We should remember that in the Covenant of the Pieces, YHWH foretold of Abram's descendants being in bondage in another country not their own and then returning to the land. Clearly YHWH knew what was yet to come for the descendants of Abram.

⁵ The New Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words, James Strong, LL.D., S.T.D., Thomas Nelson Publishers, Pg. 835

⁶ The New Scofield Study Bible KJV, C.I. Scofield, Oxford University Press, Pg. 31, notes (1) and (2)

⁷ JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis, Nahum M. Sarna, Jewish Publication Society, Pg. 385

Genesis 15:13-16 *And He said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; ¹⁴and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. ¹⁵And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.*

The name El Shaddai, therefore, reveals to us that Abram and his descendants first experienced the Creator as the one sufficient to fulfill His promises.

The name El Shaddai is not the only significant name in this portion. Within this portion we also witness the changing of Abram and Sarai's names. This is the first of several instances in the Torah where someone's name is changed either by the Creator or by His servants.

Genesis 32:28 *And He said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with Elohim and with men, and hast prevailed.*

Genesis 35:10 *And Elohim said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and He called his name Israel.*

Numbers 13:16 *These are the names of the men which Moses sent to spy out the land. And Moses called Oshea the son of Nun Jehoshua.*

Hosea 1:9 *Then said Elohim, Call his name Loammi: for ye are not My people, and I will not be your Elohim.*

Hosea 2:23 *And I will sow her unto Me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not My people (Loammi), Thou art My people (Ammi); and they shall say, Thou art my Elohim.*

John 1:42 *And he brought him to Yeshua. And when Yeshua beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.*

In Hebrew, names have meanings. Often when a child is born the reason for their name is given along with the name.

Genesis 4:1 *And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have **gotten** a man from YHWH.*

The name Cain (*kof, yud, nun*) comes from the root word *kanah* (*kof, nun, hey*), which means "acquired."

Genesis 4:25 *And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For Elohim, said she, hath **appointed** me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.*

The name Seth (*shin, tav*) comes from the root word *shayt* (*shin, yud, tav*), which means "appointed."

When studying the Torah, one should always seek out the meanings of the names of the people and places involved, for they often contain meaningful revelations. Since our ancestors lived in a predominantly oral/aural culture, the names used often help to reveal the meaning and events of a story.

Let us now turn our attention to the names of the two main characters in our story, Abram and Sarai. Before we go any further, let us understand the meanings of these two names. Abram (*aleph, bet, resh, mem*) is understood by some to be a compound of the word *ab* (*aleph, bet*), which means "father" or

“ancestor,” and the word *rum* (*resh, vav, mem*), which means “to be high” or “exalted.”⁸ Thus, according to some scholars, the name Abram means “exalted father.” But this is not the only definition. Victor Hamilton explains the name thusly:

*The meaning of Abram is either “he is exalted (as to his) father,” that is, noble by birth, if one takes the “ab” element as an adverbial accusative, or else, “the father is exalted.”*⁹

Here we see that the name could be understood as an appellative describing the honor that has been bestowed upon Abram by the Creator, or we may understand it as descriptive of Abram’s life, which brings honor to the Creator. In true Hebraic thinking, I am going to suggest that both are correct. What we witness next in the story is the changing of Abram’s name to Abraham. The fact that the Sovereign One chooses to change Abram’s name indicates some change in either the destiny and calling of Abram or his character. The Torah reveals the reason for the name change.

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.*

Victor Hamilton gives a great deal of insight into this change.

*But Abraham does not literally mean “father of nations” (which would be ‘ab hamon, “Abhamon”). To be sure, ‘Abraham is similar phonemically to ‘ab hamon, witnessed to by the repetition of ‘ab and ham in both the name and the explanation. Other Semitic languages provide instances in which -h- is inserted within a weak root or in a long syllable. Ugaritic is particularly rich with plurals formed by the insertion of an h: bt, bht “house(s)”; ‘mt, ‘mht, “maidservant(s)”; ‘m, ‘mht, “mother(s).”*¹⁰

Hamilton is suggesting that the meaning of the new name does not need to be literal in order to convey the idea that the name Abraham now implies an enlarging of Abram’s name and honor with the change. This is consistent with the original promise made to Abram when called to leave his country, kinfolk, and father’s house.

Genesis 12:1-3 *Now YHWH had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:² and I will make of thee **a great nation**, and I will bless thee, and **make thy name great**; and thou shalt be a blessing:³ and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.*

We should note in this original promise that YHWH promised to make Abram a great nation (in the singular). Now, however, after the birth of Ishmael, Abram is promised that he will become the father of nations (in the plural). Thus, the addition of the letter *hey*, implying plurality, is indeed consistent with the Torah. We should also note that YHWH likewise promised that He would enlarge or “make great” Abram’s name. By the addition of the letter *hey*, YHWH fulfilled this promise both literally and figuratively.

The question that remains to be answered, however, is why, of the twenty-two letters that YHWH could have used to enlarge Abram’s name, did He choose the letter *hey*? Once again, I believe that the Ancient Hebrew ideographs may give us a clue to understanding this choice. The letters *hey* and *chet* are very similar looking letters in both Biblical Hebrew and Ancient Hebrew. The *chet* is a picture of a fence or closed window, while the letter *hey* is a picture of an open window. The letter *chet* often means “closed,” while the letter *hey* conveys the idea of “open.” The addition of the letter *hey* (open) to the

⁸ The New Strong’s Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words, James Strong, LL.D., S.T.D., Thomas Nelson Publishers, Pp. 295, 299, 300, 810

⁹ New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17, Victor P. Hamilton, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Pg. 464

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Pg. 464

name Abram may signify that the gates of heaven have been opened and blessings poured out. Thus, the addition of the “open window” may be an indication that Abram has been blessed by YHWH. The same may be said of Sarai, since the letter *hey* was added to her name as well. We may also see that the letter *hey* or the open door may represent the fact that Sarah’s womb would now be opened that she may conceive and bring forth Abraham’s heir.

The name Sarai (*sin, resh, yud*), from the root word *sar* (*sin, resh*), which means “prince,” “captain,” or “leader,” is generally understood to mean “princess.”¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna presents yet another possibility. Remembering that Abram and Sarai originally came from Ur and that their father Terah was an idolater, it is possible that Sarai was named for a pagan deity.

*Sarai—the name changed to Sarah in 17:15, means “princess” in Hebrew but “queen” if based on Akkadian carat, a term used for the female consort of the moon-god Sin, the principle god of Ur.*¹²

While YHWH directly revealed to Abram both the change in his name and the reason for the change, this was not the case with Sarah. YHWH told Abraham of Sarai’s name change, but He did not directly communicate this change to Sarai. Consistent with the explanation of why the letter *hey* was added to the names, the only reason for Sarai’s name change to Sarah is the fact that YHWH blessed her. We may also conclude from the fact that the letter *hey* was added to both names that this was to indicate that it was Sarai and not Hagar who was to produce Abraham’s covenant-bearing heir.

We may also note that with the name change is the reiteration of the promise of multiple nations and kings descending both from Abraham and now specifically from Sarah. It is easy to see the immediate fulfillment of this promise in the reality that Abraham would father a number of offspring that could and would become nations. Abraham fathered Ishmael with Hagar; Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah with Keturah; and finally Isaac with Sarah. That Abram would be considered the father of more than one nation is made evident in YHWH’S response to Abraham’s request concerning Ishmael, his firstborn.

Genesis 17:18-20 *And Abraham said unto Elohim, O that Ishmael might live before Thee! ¹⁹And Elohim said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. ²⁰And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.*

With Sarah, however, it is a little more difficult to see the immediate fulfillment of this promise, due to the fact that Sarah brought forth only one son, Isaac. For Sarah, this promise would be realized only in the future descendants of Isaac – Esau, Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel. I would also suggest that the fact that Sarah’s offspring is singular, while the promise is plural, may be an allusion to the spiritual descendants of Abraham that would one day rule with Messiah as priests and kings.

Revelation 5:9-10 *And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to Elohim by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; ¹⁰and hast made us unto our Elohim **kings** and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.*

Revelation 1:5-6 *And from Yeshua Messiah, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us,*

¹¹ The New Strong’s Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words, James Strong, LL.D., S.T.D., Thomas Nelson Publishers, Pg. 875

¹² JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis, Nahum M. Sarna, Jewish Publication Society, Pg. 87

*and washed us from our sins in his own blood,⁶ and hath made us **kings** and priests unto Elohim and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*

Before we move on to the issue of circumcision, let us first note the clarity in which the Torah speaks of Isaac as being THE heir of Abraham.

Genesis 17:20-21 *And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹**But My covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.***

We should note that Sarah is repeatedly referred to and confirmed as the “wife” of Abraham.¹³ Hagar, on the other hand, is always referred to as Sarai’s “handmaid,” not as Abram’s wife. The only time that Hagar is referred to as “wife” in relation to Abram is in the intent of Sarai.

Genesis 16:3 *And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.*

We must be clear, however, that until the prophecy given in this portion, there has been no promise connected to Sarai. In other words, the only criteria given thus far for being the “heir of Abram” is that he would be “seed” from Abram’s own body and not an adopted son. Let us quickly compare the various promises concerning Abram’s heir and the inheritance.

Genesis 12:1-3 *Now YHWH had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:² and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:³ and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.*

This first promise makes only an illusion to Abram becoming a nation. This promise is expanded to include the fact that Abram would have “seed” or an heir to inherit a specific land.

Genesis 12:7 *And YHWH appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto YHWH, who appeared unto him.*

After Abram separates from his nephew Lot, the promise is repeated and somewhat enlarged to include the promise of multiple seed.

Genesis 13:14-16 *And YHWH said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward:¹⁵ for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. ¹⁶And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.*

When this “seed” is not evident, Abram questions YHWH as to what good these promises of land will be if there is no seed to inherit it. YHWH responds with the specific promise that Abram’s heir will be seed from his own body.

Genesis 15:1-6 *After these things the word of YHWH came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. ²And Abram said, Adonai YHWH, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? ³And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no*

¹³ Genesis 11:29, 31; 12:5, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20; 13:1; 16:1, 3; 17:15, etc.

seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. ⁴And, behold, the word of YHWH came unto him, saying, **This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.** ⁵And He brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be. ⁶And he believed in YHWH; and He counted it to him for righteousness.

In all of these promises given, there is no mention of a requirement that Sarai be the vessel through which Abram's heir would be born. It is understandable, therefore, that Abraham would advocate that his firstborn son Ishmael be considered his rightful heir.

Genesis 17:17-18 *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? ¹⁸And Abraham said unto Elohim, O that Ishmael might live before Thee!*

We may understand this advocacy in several different ways. In previous Torah portions we talked of how Abram may have been afraid that because he had used up all his merited favors in heaven in the battle of the kings in an effort to rescue his nephew Lot, he deserved no further favor from the Creator. Here too we may understand that Abraham is discouraging the Creator from performing yet another miracle on his behalf, since he believes that Ishmael fits the criteria and is readily available to fulfill this role. It may also be that since Ishmael is Abraham's firstborn, he sees the selection of another heir as an injustice; therefore, he seeks to right the perceived wrong. We see another example of this when Joseph tries to switch the hands of Jacob, preventing him from elevating the second born above the firstborn.

Genesis 48:17-19 *And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him: and he held up his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head unto Manasseh's head. ¹⁸And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father: for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head. ¹⁹And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it: he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great: but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations.*

Finally, I believe that Abraham understood Sarah was to be the mother of his true heir; nevertheless, he desired that his son Ishmael would likewise be blessed and grow in love for the Holy One.

The question that remains before us is why Isaac was the chosen seed and not Ishmael. The answer to this question is found in the Covenant of Circumcision. Therefore, let us now turn our attention to the heart of this portion – the Covenant of Circumcision.

The topic of circumcision is rife with pertinent questions. The first of these questions must be, "What is the purpose of circumcision?" Let us first rule out the notion that circumcision had anything to do with Sarah being barren. The conception and birth of Ishmael with Hagar clearly rules out the idea that Sarai was barren because Abram was not circumcised. Thus, circumcision was not for the purpose of conception. The Torah tells us that circumcision was to be a "sign" for the children of Israel. The questions we must now ask are: a sign to whom and a sign of what?

Victor Hamilton rightly addresses the controversy over the rite of circumcision.

Circumcision does not identify Israelites qua Israelites to non-Israelites, for many non-Israelites already practiced the same rite. And the later verses of this chapter record the circumcision of Ishmael, who is not part of the covenant that is to be perpetuated by Isaac! Also, how would one identify an Israelite via circumcision when clothing concealed it?

May the act of circumcision be a sign for the benefit of the one circumcised? Every time he looks at his body he is reminded that he is part of Yahweh's covenant. Thus interpreted, circumcision is a mnemonic sign, reminding God's people of who they are (as in Exod. 13:9, 16; 31: 12-17; Num. 15:37-40; Deut. 6:8, 11:18; Josh. 4:6-7), from what they have been delivered, and by whom they have been delivered.

It is equally possible that circumcision is a sign to God, as was the rainbow in ch. 9. God will see the circumcised penis of the Israelite before and during sexual congress, and will then "remember" His promise to Abraham and to all his descendants to make them very fertile.¹⁴

While it is possible that the "sign" of circumcision is either for the benefit of the one circumcised or for the Holy One who commanded it, there is yet another more reasonable possibility.

The Torah answers our question in simple, straightforward language.

Genesis 17:11 *And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall **be a token of the covenant** betwixt Me and you.*

Clearly circumcision was to be a sign or token of the covenant between Abraham and YHWH. The question we must now ask is "Which covenant?" The traditional approach to this question has always been to separate the Covenant of the Pieces from the Covenant of Circumcision. If this is correct, then we must state that circumcision is a sign of circumcision, which makes little sense at all. Instead, I would suggest that circumcision is to be a token of the Covenant of the Pieces. In the Covenant of the Pieces Abram cut the bodies of several animals in pieces. The presence of the Sovereign One then passed between these pieces, binding Himself in word and action to the fulfillment of His promises.

Genesis 15:9-12 *And He said unto him, Take Me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon. ¹⁰And he took unto Him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. ¹¹And when the fowls came down upon the carcases, Abram drove them away. ¹²And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.*

Genesis 15:17-18 *And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. ¹⁸In the same day YHWH made a covenant with Abram...*

The text blatantly tells us that Abram played a very passive part in this covenant. Only YHWH passed through the cutting, binding Himself to His words. Since Abram was in a deep sleep and darkness when it happened, this covenant is talked about as being a one-sided, unconditional, royal-grant type of covenant. Fourteen years later YHWH again speaks to Abraham, enlarging the covenant and commanding that Abraham perform yet another cutting. This time the cutting was to be in his and his descendants' own flesh. This time Abraham and his descendants would be very active participants in the covenant. I believe that this cutting was to serve as a token of the Cutting of the Pieces. In other words, the Covenant of Circumcision was to serve as a second part to the cutting in the Covenant of the Pieces.

While it was YHWH who passed through the first cutting, it would be the "seed" or descendants of Abraham who would pass through the cutting of circumcision. This explains why the circumcision of the foreskin was the chosen sign. Every seed that passed through the cutting of the circumcised gland would be entering into the binding of the covenant. Circumcision was to be the ratification of the Covenant of the Pieces made with Abraham and his descendants. Therefore, circumcision would serve as a sign to

¹⁴ New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17, Victor P. Hamilton, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Pp. 470-471

both parties involved in the covenant. YHWH created the covenant when He passed through the cutting of the pieces, and now the seed of Abraham would ratify the covenant when they passed through the cutting of circumcision.

It is important to understand that the covenant is made and ratified by passing through the cutting. In other words, it is not being cut that is important; it is passing through the cutting. When the seed passes through the cutting, it now belongs to YHWH via the covenant. This is why the Torah prohibits Israelite (circumcised) men from given their seed to Molech.

Leviticus 20:2-5 *Again, thou shalt say to the children of Israel, Whosoever he be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, that giveth any of his seed unto Molech; he shall surely be put to death: the people of the land shall stone him with stones. ³And I will set My face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people; because he hath given of his seed unto Molech, to defile My sanctuary, and to profane My holy name. ⁴And if the people of the land do any ways hide their eyes from the man, when he giveth of his seed unto Molech, and kill him not: ⁵then I will set My face against that man, and against his family, and will cut him off, and all that go a whoring after him, to commit whoredom with Molech, from among their people.*

The difference between being cut (circumcised) and passing through the cutting (the circumcision) is the difference that stands between Ishmael and Isaac, qualifying Isaac as the sole inheritor of the covenant. Again, let us remember that the original promise stated only that Abraham's heir would be a seed from his own body. No mention was made concerning who the mother would be. By all rights, it would seem that Ishmael should be Abraham's heir. Ishmael is seed from Abraham's own body. He is the firstborn of Abraham, and he is circumcised. But it is Isaac who is chosen to be the heir. What did Isaac do that would set him apart from Ishmael? The answer is simple. Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised. Isaac was not even born at that time. This is made clear in the promises YHWH gives concerning Sarah.

Genesis 17:15-19 *And Elohim said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. ¹⁶And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. ¹⁷Then 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? ¹⁸And Abraham said unto Elohim, O that Ishmael might live before Thee! ¹⁹And Elohim said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.*

Clearly the promised, yet unborn, Isaac was to be Abraham's heir. We must realize that Isaac would be the first of Abraham's seed to actually pass through the cutting of the Covenant of Circumcision. While Ishmael bore the "sign" of the covenant, he never passed through the "cutting of the covenant."

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to understand this truth concerning circumcision. It is not being cut but passing through the cutting that makes the difference. For centuries it has been taught that one enters the covenant through receiving circumcision. The blatant question that this teaching raises is "How do women then enter the covenant?" Since the Torah teaches that only males are circumcised, then women, especially unmarried women, could not enter the covenant. Clearly this is not what the Torah teaches. If, however, one enters the covenant by passing through the cutting of one's father's circumcision, then all the seed of Israel, male and female, enter the covenant in the same manner. Dinah, a daughter of Israel, passed through the cutting of the covenant in the same manner as her brothers; therefore, she was just as much a part of the covenant as her twelve brothers. The idea that it is by passing through the cutting and not merely by being cut that we enter the covenant likewise helps to explain what the apostle Shaul is teaching in the Brit Chadashah.

For centuries misinformed teachers and preachers have been erroneously teaching that Shaul has done away with circumcision. Nothing could be further from the truth. What Shaul is teaching is that there is no way for a grown Gentile man to enter the covenant by being cut. Here is the dilemma that Shaul was addressing: if a Gentile male was born to an uncircumcised Gentile father, then the adult Gentile cannot enter the covenant by passing through the cutting. The Pharisee Nicodemus asked Yeshua:

***John 3:4** Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?*

Shaul confronted the Pharisees with a very similar situation. If an adult Gentile comes to faith, how is he to enter the covenant? Can an adult male enter again into his father and pass through the cutting? Clearly the answer to this question is "No." Therefore, an adult male Gentile need not be circumcised to enter the covenant. The adult male Gentile believer will enter the covenant through faith; he cannot enter through circumcision.

***Romans 3:30-31** Seeing it is one Elohim, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith. ³¹Do we then make void the law through faith? Elohim forbid: yea, we establish the law.*

***Romans 4:1-3** What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? ²For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before Elohim. ³For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed Elohim, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.*

***Romans 4:9-12** Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? For we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. ¹⁰How was it then reckoned? When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. ¹¹And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: ¹²and the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.*

Clearly Shaul is holding up Abraham as the example for the believer to follow. Abraham entered into covenant with YHWH by faith and then circumcised himself and his children after him.

***Acts 7:8** And He gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.*

If we follow Shaul's advice, then we would follow the example of Abraham. Abraham entered the covenant by faith and circumcised Ishmael when YHWH commanded it and his other children on the eighth day. This is what Shaul establishes in his preaching – that one enters the covenant by faith. If one enters the covenant, then one agrees to live by the exclusive Word of YHWH. This Word obviously includes the command to circumcise male children on the eighth day. For Shaul, the adult convert's identity in Messiah was sufficient for him to lay claim to the promises of the covenant.

***Galatians 6:15** For in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.*

***Colossians 2:11** In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah.*

Shaul, like Moses and prophets, realized that the mere physical and external aspect of circumcision was meaningless if it was not received in a desire and spirit of submission and obedience to the will of the

Sovereign One. Bearing the sign of the covenant was meaningless if one did not intend to keep the covenant.

Deuteronomy 10:16 *Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.*

Deuteronomy 30:6 *And YHWH thy Elohim will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love YHWH thy Elohim with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.*

Jeremiah 4:4 *Circumcise yourselves to YHWH, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.*

Romans 2:25-29 *For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. ²⁶Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? ²⁷And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? ²⁸For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: ²⁹but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of Elohim.*

1 Corinthians 7:19 *Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of Elohim.*

Shaul is not teaching that we should cease from fulfilling the commandment to circumcise; he is responding to the errant and prideful thinking of the Pharisees, who claim that the physical sign of circumcision is sufficient to enter the covenant and be justified before YHWH. Shaul's teachings are reflective of Yeshua's rebukes to the Pharisees, who thought that merely being the "seed" of Abraham was enough to gain them access to the covenant promises and the world to come.

John 8:39 *They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Yeshua saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.*

Again, Shaul is in no way doing away with the commandment of circumcision. Shaul is, however, putting the teaching of circumcision in its proper perspective.

Those who come to faith in YHWH as adults come into the covenant through faith and identity with Yeshua the Messiah. By faith we are crucified with Messiah and risen with Messiah. Through faith we become members of the body of Messiah, and are, therefore, circumcised with Messiah. If one should desire to be circumcised, this is well and good; an adult believer may indeed be circumcised for the sake of future children. Even Shaul circumcised his *talmid*,¹⁵ Timothy.

Acts 16:1-3 *Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: ²which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. ³Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek.*

¹⁵ *Talmid* is the Hebrew word for "disciple."

For the sake of the gospel Timothy submitted himself to the rite of circumcision without diminishing or contradicting his faith in Messiah. It is clear that Shaul could not have taught that circumcision had been done away with and then circumcise Timothy without being considered a hypocrite.

What Shaul is teaching, however, is that contrary to the teachings of the Pharisees, we are not to put our faith in our obedience or our circumcision, as though it were an ancient indulgence that grants us safe passage to the world to come. Merely being circumcised in the flesh does not make one a member of the covenant. As has already been stated above, there were a number of other cultures that practiced the rite of circumcision. We likewise recall that Ishmael was circumcised by Abraham, but he was clearly not a member of the covenant. Even Esau passed through the cutting of the covenant, but he rejected his birthright; thus, he was not a part of the covenant. Our hope is to be in Messiah. It is through the death and resurrection of Messiah that we now have the ability to enter again into covenant with YHWH. It is through faith that we become the body of Messiah and are filled with his obedient spirit and character. Thus, it is through Messiah that we desire to keep the covenant, which includes circumcising our children on the eighth day.

The Torah is clear that Abraham and his descendants were to be "perfect" before YHWH. The word "perfect" is a translation of the Hebrew word *tamim*, which can mean "whole," "complete," "without blemish," or "perfect." This means that we should seek to do all of the Torah and not leave holes in our walk. We should seek to complete that which YHWH has called us to do. We should not seek loopholes and escape clauses that will give us a way out of fulfilling the Torah. We are to walk with YHWH with all of our hearts, souls, and beings. Again, simply being circumcised or even baptized means nothing if it is not a genuine expression of the inward reality of one's faith in YHWH and Yeshua His Messiah.

To this end YHWH commanded Abraham that he was to circumcise even the slaves born or purchased in his house. For Abraham's seed throughout the generations after him we must remember that there would be a distinction between Hebrew slaves that go free every seven years¹⁶ (which would have already been circumcised at eight days) and non-Hebrew slaves that belong to a family from generation to generation.¹⁷ Since non-Hebrew slaves remain with a family, it is essential that they too be circumcised in and practice the faith of Israel. To allow a servant to continue to worship idols and false *elohim* in one's household would be an abomination to YHWH and a snare to one's family. Therefore, non-Hebrew slaves were not given the right to worship their own *elohim*. Thus, even the servant was to submit to the commandments of YHWH. While this might, at first, seem to imply a "forced conversion," this is not necessarily true. The slaves belonging to the children of Israel were shown great respect and protection by the Torah. I believe that the goal of this command to circumcise even the servants of one's household is a commission to genuinely convert the heathen by love and justice to a love for the one true Elohim. Again, the means of doing this was through the exercise of hospitality, compassion, mercy, and justice extended even to the lowest of servants in one's house.

While many believers are coming to an understanding of the Torah as adults, the issue of circumcision continues to be debated. There are some who still do not understand either the nature or the purpose of circumcision; therefore, they side with the Pharisees and Judaizers against the Torah and Shaul. There are also those who in ignorance teach that if we should follow the Torah and practice of Shaul and participate in adult circumcision or circumcision at all, then we are denying the efficacy of the sacrifice of Yeshua. Both of these views are based upon ignorance and misunderstanding. The Torah clearly teaches that those who have entered the covenant, which always requires true faith, are to live according to the covenant. This means that we should circumcise our children when they are eight days old. But we do not enter the covenant by being circumcised; we enter through faith. Merely being a biological descendent of Abraham or merely being circumcised in the flesh means absolutely nothing if one's heart is not submitted to keeping the Torah!

¹⁶ Exodus 21:2

¹⁷ Leviticus 25:44-46

Romans 2:25-3:2 For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. ²⁶Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? ²⁷And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? ²⁸For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: ²⁹but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God. ^{3:1}What advantage then hath the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? ²Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

1 Corinthians 7:19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.

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