

Circumcision as a Sign: The Theological Significance

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My purpose in this paper is to explore the theological significance of circumcision within the narrative context of Genesis 17. My approach is to utilize literary methods of narrative interpretation, allowing these data to interpret the significance of circumcision found in the Abraham story. This approach differs from the purely theological approach, which interprets circumcision on the basis of formulated dogmatics.

My procedure will be to outline the narrative structure of Genesis 12-17 and to suggest, on the basis of this structure, that circumcision functions as the Divine resolution to the narrative complication. Next, I will attempt to strengthen this interpretation by demonstrating the distinctive aspects of Israelite circumcision when compared to circumcision in the Ancient Near East, and finally that this interpretation fits well with the later theological use of circumcision in Scripture.¹

The Narrative Structure

In order to understand the inner workings of Genesis 17, it is necessary to see it as part of the narrative flow beginning in chapter 12. Commentators agree that chapters 12-25 function as a unit, as do chapters 25-36 and 37-50.² In 12-25, the primary focus is that of the promised seed while 25-36 focuses in greater measure on the brother-to-brother relationships and 37-50 on brother-to-brothers, reintroducing the promised seed motif. Even the style of the narrative shows these unit boundaries: 12-25 consists essentially of single narratives, 25-36 of larger units, and chapters 37-50 are a single, long narrative.³

Narrowing the scope of this investigation to the unit of 12-25, it is easy to see that the narrative divides into two main sections, 12-17 and 18-25. The change of scene at the beginning of 18 marks the beginning of a new sub-unit, and the narrative of 17 functions to gather the former story 12-16 and lead the reader into the new episodes of 18-25.

Within the many theories of narrative structure,⁴ I have adopted the more general scheme of

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1. This paper is a condensed section of a paper written in honor of my father, Dr. O. H. Hegg on the occasion of fifty years of pastoral service. The full version is contained in a festschrift entitled *Feed My Sheep: Writings in Honor of Dr. O. H. Hegg*.
 2. Westermann, *Genesis*, 2:29.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 4. Terminology used to discuss narrative structure varies. Robert Alter [*The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1981)] uses only two units or structure elements in his analysis of several Genesis narratives: "exposition" and "narrative event." The recent *FOTL* volume on Genesis [George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983)] suggests three structural elements: exposition, complication, resolution. This corresponds well to Westermann's *Spannungsbogen* ("arc of tension") in his article "Arten der Erzählung in der Genesis," *Forschung am Alten Testament* (München: Kaiser, 1965), 9-91. Note as well Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 101-107; George W. Coats, ed., *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms of Old Testament Literature [JSOT Supplement 35]* (Sheffield, 1985), 64-66; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987); J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975); David Jobling *The Sense of Biblical Narrative*, 2 vols. (Sheffield: Univ. Press, 1986, 1987); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press,

exposition, complication and resolution as appropriate labels for describing basic narrative rise and fall. These may be explained generally: "exposition" gives the necessary details in order to give the reader the proper setting for the story, "complication" brings tension into the story, usually through an event or person, and "resolution" is the manner in which the complication is overcome and/or resolved.⁵ Using this framework, the narrative unit of 12:1-17 may be seen as a grouping of sub-units which address the three main promises of 12:1-3: land, blessing and seed. The opening paragraph of the 12, then, functions as a kind of "table of contents" for the larger unit, 12-17.

Chapter 12 begins with the announcement of God's blessing upon Abraham (12:1-3) followed immediately by narrative exposition (12:4-9). Tension and complication are then introduced in 12:10-20. Famine "in the land" (ויהי רעב בארץ) brings a complication in connection with the general promise of the land, for Abram leaves the land for Egypt in search of food. In addition, the scheme concocted by Abraham for self preservation (in the face of Sarai's beauty and Pharaoh's power) brings into question the promise that his seed would inherit the land.⁶ In both cases, the narrative is clear: resolution comes because God supernaturally intervenes to save, protect and bless His chosen vassal (12:17-20).

Chapter 13 begins with Abraham experiencing the blessings spoken by God: he is rich, back in the land, and he returns to worship God "at the site of the altar that he had built there at first" (מקום אל). At this point complication again enters the story: the land will not support the growing population of people and livestock and thus Lot and Abraham separate. But rather than bringing a full resolution of the tension, the notice of 13:12-13 that ". . . the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against YHWH" leaves the reader aware that problems will no doubt result. Nevertheless, this unit ends with Abraham living in the peace and prosperity of God's promise, worshipping via sacrifice: "And Abram moved his tent, and came to dwell at the terebinths of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and he built an altar there to YHWH" (13:18).

As one would expect, chapter fourteen begins with a narrative exposition which sets the stage for the next complication. Abram the nomad will be challenged militarily. Caught in the middle of someone else's war, Abram is obliged to rescue Lot from the marauding invaders. The promise of God is once again put to the challenge, as is Abram's faith. But, as the reader has now come to expect, Abram is victorious and returns with Lot, his family and their possessions. And according to the narrative pattern, Abram worships God as the complication turns to resolution. This time he does so by honoring Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High," with a tenth of the returned goods. Abram further announces his faith in YHWH when he refuses to retain any of the spoils for himself, even at the invitation of the king of Sodom. Thus, the promise initially given at the beginning of the narrative is intact, and Abram is living in the realization of it.⁷

1989); Peter D. Miscall, *The Workings of OT Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

5. In this particular narrative unit (12-25), a change (often to resolution) is signaled by a note either that Abram/Abraham was at a place where he had worshiped God, or that God had appeared to him. Note 13:4, 18; 14:22; 15:1f; 17:1; 18:1; 19:27; 21:33; 22:1, 15.
6. The question of "sisterhood" as described in the Nuzi tablets is applied by some to this biblical incident. See A. A. MacRae, "Nuzi" in *ZPEB*, 4:472. Even if this does apply, Abraham was still making plans to save his own skin.
7. The interpretation on the part of some that Abram's oath in 14:22 constitutes a covenant oath taken at the inception of the promise is not well founded. In the first place, the phrase . . . הרימתי ידי אל יהוה should be translated "I raise (not raised) my hand to YHWH . . ." (= "I swear") since the Hebrew perfect has a present meaning in direct speech (Westermann, *Genesis* 2:187; E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* trans. A. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), § 106. Abram is therefore not referring to an oath taken previously. Further, to postulate an oath on the part of Abram in connection with the promise of 12:1-3 is to introduce something into the narrative which simply is not there. The oath taken here by Abram relates specifically to this conquest and his determination not to accept anything from a foreign king. This makes good sense in view of the covenant relationship Abram had with YHWH as a result of His gracious promise.

Chapter fifteen begins the cycle again: God promises Abram blessing, in this case, protection. The victory against the kings of the north in the previous narrative was not permanent, and Abram the nomad could expect future battles. YHWH promises him protection by the divine, outstretched arm.

But a complication is introduced: while significant tangibles of the promise of land and blessing have been received, the promised offspring has not come. Moreover, whatever land parcel had been given to Abram was insignificant if he had no heir to claim it after him. YHWH responds by giving Abram a visual promise: the stars would illustrate the magnitude of his offspring. Yet Abram presses for covenant ratification in verse eight. After reiterating the promise of the land, Abram asks, "O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?" God answers by ratifying the covenant via a ceremony where He alone takes the oath. In other words, Abram would know for sure the reality of the promise on the basis of YHWH's word and by no other means. Faith in YHWH would continue to be the hallmark of God's covenant with Abraham.

Thus, the covenant ratification ceremony of chapter fifteen resolves the complication as far as Abram is concerned: YHWH swears an oath under penalty of death to give him the promised seed. But the narrative becomes increasingly tense. The heightened emphasis upon the promise of offspring also reminds the reader that the promised son has not yet arrived. The narrative continues to narrow its scope, to focus upon the issue of the seed to the exclusion of other matters.

Chapter sixteen opens with an exposition and complication: Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. If the former narrative settled the question of God's full intention to give offspring, this unit questions the method by which the promise would be fulfilled. Abram follows the advice of his wife⁸ and takes Hagar as a second wife. The reader is aware immediately, however, that rather than solving the problem, the action of Abram and Sarai has introduced complication into the story. Hagar is identified as an Egyptian (16:2) reminding the reader of Abram's descent to Egypt for food. Further, the narrative notes that Abram had dwelt ten years in the land before this event, a reminder on the one hand of God's faithfulness to him but also emphasizing the lengthy period of time for which the promised seed was anticipated. In addition, the somewhat difficult phrase *אולי אבנה ממנה*, "perhaps I will be built up by her" would indicate that from Sarai's viewpoint she had not yet attained a *bona fide* position as a covenant partner.⁹ Some feel that the use of *בנה* is a play on the word *בן*, "son,"¹⁰ but its parallel in Genesis 30:3 in which the same phrase is used, more likely than not would indicate that this terminology was standard when attempting to acquire children through a surrogate. A woman in the patriarchal society was not considered a full member of that society until she gave her husband male children. It seems certain that Sarai's actions reflect the pressure of androcentrism which controlled the lives of women without regard to their personhood.

The narrative at this point is compacted, short and terse. In the scope of only a few verses Abram has cohabited with Hagar, she has conceived, despised Sarai, and Sarai has given the ultimatum to Abram. The narrative continues to develop the tension and complication through the expulsion of Hagar and her subsequent return to bear Abram a son, Ishmael. Though Hagar's

8. There seems to be sufficient ANE parallels for Sarah's action, though such parallels in no way condone the disregard for the "oneness" principle revealed by God in the earlier creation narrative (Gen. 2:24). For parallels to the giving of a handmaid for the purpose of offspring, note K. Grayson and J. Van Seters, "The Childless Wife in Assyria and the Stories of Genesis," *OR* 44 (1975), 485-486; S. E. McEvenue, "A Comparison of Narrative Styles in the Hagar Stories," *Semeia* 3 (1975) 64-80; Note a Nuzi text which parallels the Hagar story, translated by Speiser in *AASOR* 10 (1930), 31ff. which is also contained in his commentary on Genesis [*Genesis in The Anchor Bible*, 44 Vols. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1964), 1:120-21]. For a critical evaluation of these purported parallels, see J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, 1975).

9. This may not have been Sarai's fault. Perhaps Abram had not sufficiently detailed the promises God had given to him, nor accepted her as an integral part of the covenant promises.

10. See the note at Gen. 16:2 in *Tanakh—The Holy Scriptures* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), p. 22.

meeting with the angel of the Lord and her return seems to signal a resolution of the conflict, the reader is keenly aware that Ishmael, rather than fulfilling the promise, has rather brought conflict into the narrative. The prophetic oracle in 16:11-12 alerts the reader of the ominous future for Ishmael. The narrative clearly announces that the promise is yet to be fulfilled and the reader looks ahead for the resolution.

The story continues with the appearance of YHWH to Abram (signaling resolution) reassuring him of the continuation and maintenance of the covenant.¹¹ The issue of the promised offspring, the main subject of chapters fifteen and sixteen, continues in this section. Regardless of the etymological meaning of the change from Abram to Abraham,¹² the narrative is clear that YHWH has installed¹³ Abraham as a father of the nations. Thus, chapter seventeen gives the Divine solution to the problem addressed in chapter sixteen, namely, the realization of the promise regarding the seed. The Divine speech to Abraham in 17:1-5 is taken up exclusively with the promise of offspring.

The introduction of circumcision continues this theme. The promise of offspring has been established, but the method or manner by which the offspring would be realized is now made clear. In the same way that the complications surrounding the promise of land and blessing were resolved by direct, Divine intervention, so too the promised offspring would come by Divine fiat. Human enterprise and strength would not be the means by which God would fulfill His promise to Abraham regarding the seed. Circumcision, the cutting away of the foreskin, revealed this explicitly. Coming on the heels of God's renewed promise to Abraham regarding his progeny and his installation as a father of a multitude of nations, the sign of circumcision upon the organ of procreation must be interpreted within the narrative flow as relating to the method by which the complication (absence of children and age of both Abraham and Sarah) would be resolved. The promise would come, not by the strength of the flesh (which the "Hagar plan" represented) but rather by above-human means.

The narrative goes on to emphasize this by (1) the changing of Sarai's name to Sarah and (2) Abraham's question regarding the feasibility of them having children, an issue which (3) prompts him to plead for Ishmael. The name change for Sarai, like that of Abraham, marks her as the one through whom God's promise would come.¹⁴ Abraham's questions regarding their ages, and his request that Ishmael stand in the place of the promised son further emphasizes the issue at hand in the narrative: could the seed be realized by normal procreation? The answer, to which circumcision already pointed, is a marked "no." The promise would come despite overwhelming odds because the promised seed would be from God's hand. Ishmael will be blessed due to Abraham's request, but he could not fulfill the promise.

The narrative unit of Genesis 12-17 has followed a consistent pattern. Events and situations are described (exposition), which bring tension into the story (complication) to which God responds

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11. Nearly all agree that chapter 17 is a renewal of the covenant made to Abraham in 12:1-3 and chapter 15. As far as I know, only Erick Sauer [*The Dawn of World Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951), p. 98] construes this as a new and distinct covenant.
 12. The etymological significance of the name change is illusive. Some note the Arabic root ruhiam, "multitude" [John Davis, *Paradise to Prison* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 191; C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* 10 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), 1:225] as the basis of the new name. Probably the best explanation is to consider the assonance between המון and אברהם, from the phrase לאב המון גרים (v. 5) so that Abram's name would now contain the idea of "multitude" from the "sound alike word" המון. Westermann's explanation of this view is excellent (*Genesis*, 2:261).
 13. The use of נתתיך in the phrase "I will make you the father of a multitude of nations" in verse 5 (*NASB*) is technical language for "installing." The phrase could as well be translated "I will install you as the father of a multitude of nations." See the comments in Westermann, *Genesis*, 2:261.
 14. The text here, unlike at the place where Abraham's new name is given, does not give an explanation for the new name. Perhaps "Sarah," meaning "princess," does not need explanation. The new name simply puts her in the sphere of the promise given to Abraham as the one through whom the promise would be realized.

(resolution). This narrative structure may be visualized in this way:

| Exposition | Complication | Resolution |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| 12:4–9 | 12:10–16 | 12:17–20 |
| 13:1–4 | 13:5–13 | 13:14–18 |
| 14:1–9 | 14:10–15 | 14:16–24 |
| 15:1 | 15:2–3 | 15:4–6 |
| 15:7 | 15:8 | 15:9–21 |
| 16:1–4 | 16:5–16 | 17:1–21 |

Table 1

The rise of tension in the story and its resolution give the narrative a forward thrust as the promises to Abraham are unfolded. When the unit of Genesis 12-17 is considered in this way, it is also clear that the promises of 12:1-3 become the basis of the subsequent narrative, again, by way of exposition, complication and resolution, as may be visualized in Table 2:

| | |
|---------------|--|
| 12:1–3 | LAND → Famine → Egypt → Divine intervention |
| | BLESSING → Increased wealth → War → Divine intervention |
| | OFFSPRING → Sarai barren → Hagar → Divine intervention |

Table 2

The promise of the land is tested by famine and Abram’s response to it. Though Abram responds incorrectly, God intervenes and brings him back to the land.

The promise of blessing is tested by the separation of Lot to the fertile land and the fact that increased blessing made Abram and his family military targets. The odds are not in Abram’s favor as the narrative plainly tells: four kings and their troops against a nomad and his 318 men! Once again, Divine intervention gives Abram the victory, and the narrative emphasizes this by the appearance of God’s High Priest, Melchizedek, to whom Abram pays tribute.

In the same way, the promise of offspring is tested by the introduction of Hagar. And, according to the narrative pattern, the complication of Sarai’s barrenness and her attempt to substitute Hagar is met by Divine intervention in a renewing of the covenant. The promised seed would come, not as a result of human effort, but by the hand of God.

Thus, in each case, the promises of the covenant come by Divine action directed in grace toward Abraham. He must receive the promise on the basis of faith (15:6) without relying upon the flesh. This is the heart of the covenant and it is to this that circumcision points. Circumcision is an outward sign to Abraham and to his progeny that the promised seed in whom “all the nations of the earth would be blessed” would not come by human effort (as did Ishmael) but rather by the miraculous power of the Divine. In this way circumcision marked the necessity of faith as the promise of the seed was anticipated by each subsequent generation.

Genesis 17 and Covenant Structure

Having considered Genesis seventeen in the larger narrative context, I would now like to look at the chapter from a covenant standpoint. Does Genesis seventeen add stipulations and curses to what appears in the previous chapters as a unilateral covenant? Does this chapter turn the Abrahamic covenant from an unconditional covenant to a conditional one? Most important for the present study, how does circumcision function within the unilateral covenant structure delineated above?

The chapter itself is marked by a lengthy Divine discourse with Abraham, punctuated only briefly with Abraham's replies. This discourse begins at 1b and continues through 22, with Abraham's responses at 3a, 17 and 18.¹⁵ It becomes clear that 1b-3a functions as a preamble, being unfolded in the the following section, 3b-21 in this way:¹⁶

| | |
|--|--|
| 1b-3a | 3b-21 |
| 1b - Promise "I am El Shaddai" | 4-8 Promise (to Abraham) Renewal of covenant promise with emphasis upon Divine presence and giving of offspring <i>Abraham's name changed</i> |
| 1c - Command "Walk before Me and be blameless" | 9-14 Command Requirement to maintain circumcision |
| 2 - Promise "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and I will multiply you exceedingly." | 15-2 Promise (to Sarah) Covenant to be established to the promised seed, born from Sarah. <i>Sarah's name changed</i> |
| 3a - Abraham worships (end of unit) | 3b - God speaks (beginning of unit) |

Table 3

Furthermore, this neatly compiled section of Promise-Command-Promise is framed by genealogical information in verses 1 and 24. It therefore plays a central or summary role in the narrative. Thus, the first "promise" section (17:4-8) corresponds well with chapter 15 while the second "promise" section (17:15-21) parallels the material of chapter 18. In this way chapter 17 functions as a pivotal text, bringing the covenant of the former texts to summary and advancing the reader on to the realities of the promise in the continuing narrative.

Viewing the whole section canonically, such narrative structure shows a unity in the text and a determination to weave the story together as a theological unit. The statements of some¹⁷ that chapters 12-17 show a conflation of sources is not supported by the narrative itself. The text we have before us functions as a literary unit, presenting to the reader a theological as well as historical

15. Both of Abraham's responses are marked by the common phrase *ויפל אברם על פניו*, "And Abraham fell upon his face . . ."

16. The information in Table 3 is derived from the comments of Westermann, *Genesis*, 2:255.

17. See, for instance, the comments of Westermann, *Genesis*, 2:255-56 where he explains the "promise" sections as the work of P and the shorter, poetic sections as the older work of E or J. The explanation for *יהוה* in 17:1 is typical: P has retained the older vocabulary in the section derived from the older tradition. How convenient!

perspective of the covenant God made with Abraham.

Understanding the literary structure of the text in this way informs us of the function of chapter 17 within the covenant as a whole. Far from introducing new covenant conditions, the command of circumcision is given in such a way as to be in concert with the covenant already enacted. The narrative structure stresses this by “sandwiching” the command of circumcision and the penalty for disobedience with a reaffirmation of the unconditional promise. How then is circumcision a condition of the covenant?

The Hebrew syntax is clear that obedience is required for the maintenance of the covenant. In the preamble of our section (17:1c-3a) God appears to Abraham and reveals Himself as אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדַי, “El Shaddai,” the God Who gives offspring.¹⁸ He then issues the command, הִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי וְהָיָה תָמִים, “Walk¹⁹ constantly²⁰ in My presence and be perfect” which is followed by the simple vav and prefix conjugation, וְאָתַנְתָּה בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶךָ, “so that I may install My covenant between me and you.” The grammar demands this sentence coordination, so that the establishment of the promise to Abraham is dependent upon the completion of the command in the phrase, “Walk constantly in My presence and be perfect.”

In the same way circumcision is added to the covenant as a necessary part and the blessing to the individual is contingent upon it. The covenant is to be “kept” or “guarded” (שָׁמַר v. 9, 10) by the establishment of a covenant sign (אוֹת, v. 11) or mark born in the flesh of the male covenant member, that is, circumcision. This sign or mark speaks so clearly to the heart of the covenant that it may stand as a metonym for the covenant itself (וְהָיְתָה בְּרִיתִי בְּבָשָׂרְכֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם), “and it (circumcision) will be my covenant in your flesh for an eternal covenant”. The text is very clear that inclusion in the covenant is dependent upon this act of circumcision: to circumcise is to accept the covenant, to not circumcise results in being cut off,²¹ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מֵעַמִּיהָ, “and that person shall be cut off from his people.”

One of the keys to understanding how these conditions function in the unilateral and essentially “unconditional” covenant²² made to Abraham is the use of the emphatic pronouns. In verse 4,

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18. The discussions on the etymological meaning of אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדַי are numerous. See the comments of G. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 95ff; J. Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 146; Keil, *Genesis*, p. 223; G. J. Spurrell, *Notes on the Text of the Book of Genesis*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), pp. 196-97 for the standard views. For the more recent discussion, see the excursus in Westermann, *Genesis*, 2:256 and the article “God, Names of” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (16 Vols., Jerusalem: Keter Pub. House, 1971), 7:676-77. More recently it has been admitted that the etymological evidence is less weighty than the contextual evidence. That is, the contexts in which אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדַי is used (Gen. 17:1; 28:3, 4; 35:10-12; 39:25; 48:3, 4; Ex. 6:3) might better determine its meaning. U. Cassuto [*A Commentary on Exodus*, (Jerusalem: Magnus Press, 1967), pp. 78-9] argues that the name has to do with the concept of fertility, especially when infertility is seen as a problem for which Divine activity is the only solution.
 19. The concept of “walk before me” is employed in the Grant Treaties as a description of a loyal vassal or servant of the king, see Weinfeld, “Covenant of Grant,” 186.
 20. The *hithpiel* probably denotes this aspect of continuation, see Holladay, *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 80. Westermann (*Genesis*, 2:253) translates, “live always in my presence and be perfect.”
 21. The play between circumcision and כָּרַת, “cut off” is obvious. But Kline’s remarks that circumcision functions to demonstrate the “cutting” of which כָּרַת originally spoke in the common בְּרִית כָּרַת, “cut a covenant” = “make a covenant” is not established by this text nor by the larger context. It is further not agreed on by scholars that כָּרַת בְּרִית finds its original meaning in slaying a sacrificial animal at the covenant ceremony, though this is certainly a possibility. To parallel circumcision to this sacrificial slaying, however, seems to me to fly in the face of a passage like Deut. 14:1 which explicitly prohibits the Israelite from cutting himself as part of a religious ceremony. Moreover, the phrase וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מֵעַמִּיהָ, “and that person shall be cut off from his people” becomes the standard language in Lev. and Deut. describing the penalty for severe offenses.
 22. To refer to the Abrahamic covenant as “unconditional” is not to deny reciprocity within the covenant. In Grant Treaties the continuing loyalty of the Vassal to the Suzerain is assumed and, in some cases, an explicit part of the

YHWH begins with **אני הנה**, “As for me” which is paralleled with the emphatic pronoun in verse 9, **ואתה**, “and you.” What these pronouns signal to the reader is the individualistic narrowness of the covenant in this context in contrast to the national flavor of the covenant in chapter 15. There, in the covenant ceremony, God speaks to Abraham and establishes the covenant with him, but it is clear the nation is represented by Abraham. The future of the nation is outlined, including the slavery in Egypt and the exodus (15:13f). The corporate solidarity of the nation is clearly in view, and the covenant as established to the whole nation is cast in entirely unconditional terms.

But in chapter 17, the blessings of the covenant are considered on an individual basis. This corresponds with the Grant Treaties where obedience and loyalty, for which the grant was given, were expected of the favored individual in the future. What is more, while the favored vassal could lose his rights to the covenant by his behavior, this could not alter the covenant as given to the future generations. For example, note the treaty between Hattusilis II and Ulmi-Tesup:

After you, your son and grandson will possess it, nobody will take it away from them. If one of your descendants sins (uastai-) the king will prosecute him at his court. Then when he is found guilty . . . if he deserves death he will die. But nobody will take away from the descendant of Ulmi-Tesup either his house or his land in order to give it to a descendant of somebody else.²³

The point is simply this: if Abraham or any of his descendants are disobedient in regard to circumcision, they will forfeit their rights in the covenant, but its established longevity cannot be altered.²⁴ As Beecher has said:

. . . it is not difficult to solve the verbal paradox involved in thus declaring this promise to be both conditional and unconditional. So far forth as its benefits accrue to any particular person or generation in Israel, it is conditioned on their obedience. But in its character as expressing God’s purpose of blessing for the human race, we should not expect it to depend on the obedience or disobedience of a few. So we are not surprised to find passages in which the other aspects of the case appear. Israel may sin, and may suffer grievous punishment; but Israel shall not become extinct, like other sinning peoples. The promise is for eternity, and Israel shall be maintained in existence, that the promise may not fail.²⁵

covenant. The characteristic mark of the “unconditional” covenant, however, is that the promises remain in force even if the vassal, through his own faithlessness or disobedience, forfeits any personal rights. The granted land parcel remains in the possession of his family regardless. Thus, stipulations are not foreign to Grant Treaties. What distinguishes the function of stipulations between conditional and unconditional covenants is the extent to which the penalties are carried out.

On the whole issue of conditionality in the context of unconditional covenants, see the profitable comments of Bruce K. Waltke, “The Phenomenon of Conditionality Within Unconditional Covenants” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, Avraham Gileadi, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 123-139.

23. Quoted from Weinfeld, “Covenant of Grant,” 189. He gives other examples from two other treaties as well. See also Postgate, *Neo-Assyrian Grants*, 37.
24. This individual emphasis may be noted in the emphatic Hebrew of 17:14 **ונכרתה** **עורלתו** **בשר** **את** **ימול** **את** **אשר** **לא** **ימול** **את** **בשר** **עורלתו** **ונכרתה** **הוא** **מעמיה** **את** **כריתיה** **הפר** **כריתיה** **הוא** **מעמיה** **את** **כריתיה** **הפר**, “and an uncircumcised male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin certainly that person (soul) shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.” This is not to deny any sense of corporate identity in the covenant command of circumcision (note the plural **בבשרכם**, “in your (pl.) flesh” of 17:13 as well as **עורלתכם**, “your foreskin” and **לדרתיכם**, “throughout your generations.”) The point is simply that there is an emphasis on an individual basis when it comes to the penalty for neglecting circumcision.
25. Willis Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 220. Note also the profitable comments in Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 Vols. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 2:289.

Waltke also sees the conditionality of the covenant as individualistic as over against the unconditionality promised to the nation as a whole. Commenting on the two aspects (conditionality and unconditionality) in the covenants made between YHWH and Israel, he writes:

In this way YHWH irrevocably commits himself to fulfilling his promises, but not apart from ethical behavior on Israel's part. This connection between the two covenants [Abrahamic/Davidic and Mosaic] explains how the two apparently incompatible kinds of covenants—oath and obligation—could be made with the same people. Under the terms of oath, YHWH committed himself forever to Israel as a whole: under the terms of the obligation, he could discipline them individually, even to the point of putting them under a curse.²⁶

Thus, circumcision, which spoke to the central issue of the covenant, the promise that “in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed,” was a sign pointing to the faith required to believe God for the impossible, a faith possessed individually.²⁷ This faith, seen in Abraham at 15:6, is the rite of passage into the covenant. Anything done apart from faith is sin.²⁸

Verse 11 speaks of circumcision as a "sign:" (והיה לאות ברית ביני ובניכם) "and it shall be for a sign of the covenant between Me and you.") One cannot miss the parallel to the statement of God in the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:12-17) that the rainbow would be "the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth" (לאות ברית ביני ובי הארץ). This close parallel is no accident: Moses intends the reader to understand that in both cases the sign speaks significantly to the power of the Divine in maintaining the covenant. The bow speaks of the Divine promise never again to destroy the world with a flood (Gen. 9:11, 16) while circumcision reminds of the Divine promise to bring the Seed miraculously. In both cases, the covenant promises depend upon God. Man is helpless to bring them about.

The penalty for neglecting circumcision is prescribed in the text (17:14): any uncircumcised male who does not submit to the ritual is cut off from his people and therefore the covenant. Once again, the individual aspects of the covenant are highlighted. There is no penalty prescribed against a father who fails to circumcise his son, though it is apparent that the covenant required circumcision of all males at the age of eight days. Verse 14, on the other hand, gives the responsibility of covenant membership to the individual himself. The phrase "The uncircumcised male who fails to become circumcised" (וערל זכר אשר לא ימול את בשר ערלתו) could include a son of an unfaithful father. He is not cut off because of his father's disobedience. Rather, the responsibility of circumcision and the faith it represented comes to him individually.

The same may be said of the son who was circumcised at eight days. The obedience of the father in performing this ritual is not accredited to the son. The later Genesis narrative hints at this in the life of Esau. The story of Genesis 34 (the plot against the Shechemites) would indicate that circumcision had been practiced by Isaac and carried on by Jacob and Esau.²⁹ Yet Esau is not automatically blessed of God. On the contrary, Esau does not enter into the promise and is specifically "cut off"³⁰ from his people to eventually become the enemy of Israel in the nation of Edom.³¹ It appears certain that the faith of the circumcised son is best illustrated not only in his

26. Bruce Waltke, "The Phenomenon of Conditionality in Unconditional Covenants" in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, Avraham Gileadi, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 135.

27. This same faith was required of Abraham, not only in anticipation of the seed, but also after Isaac came, for Gen. 22 requires of Abraham a trust in God for raising the dead, cf. Heb. 11:19.

28. Rom. 14:23.

29. See Gen. 34:13ff especially.

30. cf. 1 Ki. 11:15, 16; Mal. 1:2-3

31. Gen. 36:1, 9, 43

continuation of the ritual upon his sons but also in maintaining its spiritual significance, something Esau did not do.³²

In a primary sense, then, circumcision is a sign directed to the Israelite father. By circumcising his male children he demonstrated his faith not only in God's promise to bring the Messiah but also in God's method for bringing Him. The son's own commitment to this same faith was demonstrated as he maintained the ritual of circumcision in his family and continued the faithful life of anticipating God's promised Seed.

The "circumcision" chapter does not contradict the unilateralness of the covenant as outlined in the previous Genesis narrative. The Abrahamic covenant follows the structure and posture of the Royal Grant Treaty so that it might be revealed as Divinely established and maintained. Circumcision, far from functioning as a symbol of the covenant curses (in the manner of a sacrifice),³³ speaks rather to the faith in the God of the covenant to establish His promises by bringing the offspring by supernatural means. Normal means, even culturally accepted means (such as using the wife's handmaid), simply were not in God's plan. Rather, the flesh must be cast away, and in its place must be faith in the God of miracles.

Why Circumcision?

So far I have shown that Genesis 17 and the ritual of circumcision functions within the narrative flow as a resolution to the complication introduced by Hagar and Ishmael. The central truth of the covenant was faith in the God of miracles, and circumcision was a sign pointing to the most significant of miracles, the giving of offspring in otherwise impossible circumstances. This call for continued faith in God is consistent with the manner in which the covenant is initiated, that is, as an unconditional covenant patterned after the Royal Grant Treaty.

But the question may still be asked, "Why Circumcision?" "Why did God utilize a ritual which was common in the pagan cultures and which therefore had all of the possibilities of bringing syncretism into Israelite worship?" An investigation into this question will show Israelite circumcision as distinct in several ways, a distinction which supports the view that circumcision was given to symbolize human inability to bring the promised seed.

No one disputes that circumcision was extant before it was given to Abraham in Genesis 17. The Egyptians practiced circumcision from the early days though they apparently did not regard it as a religious act.³⁴ Similarly, most other Semitic cultures of the ancient world practiced circumcision, with the exception of Babylon and Assyria, and apparently the Philistines.³⁵

While the significance of circumcision in the ancient world is shrouded in mystery, most feel that it marked the passage from boyhood to manhood, and perhaps prepared a young man for

32. cf. Jer. 9:25-26.

33. Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1968), pp. 43-50 interprets circumcision as a covenant ritual depicting self-malediction in connection with the covenant curses and precedes, in the framework of his covenant theology, to attach this same meaning to baptism.

34. Adolf Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Dover Pub. Inc., 1971), pp. 32-33. Note also the statement of Herodotus in II, 37, 59, 79 [A. D. Godley, *Herodotus, Loeb Classical Library* (New York, 1931), 1:319, 345ff, 365.

35. Ju. 14:3; 15:18 and 1 Sam. 14:6 speak of the Philistines as "uncircumcised." Jer. 9:25-26 lists Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab and the desert Arabs as "circumcised [in the flesh] but uncircumcised [in the heart]." Note also the data regarding early circumcision in other ANE cultures in I. E. S. Edwards, C. J. Gadd, and N. G. L. Hammond, *The Cambridge Ancient History* 10 Vols., 3rd edition (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), I/2:342 and Jack Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966), 473ff.

marriage.³⁶ It may well be that the etymology of the Hebrew *ḥṭṭ*, “son-in-law,” “bridegroom,” is rooted in the ritual of circumcision.³⁷ Likewise, Hyatt maintains that “the Hebrew word for ‘father-in-law,’ (*ḥṭṭ*), means literally ‘the circumciser.’”³⁸ Sasson notes:

. . . it may be appropriate to point out that the Egyptian word for the term ‘foreskin,’ *qmn.t*, is beyond doubt a phonetic rendering of the Semitic *ḥṭṭ*, Hebrew *’orlah*. This in itself may be an indication that the concept of circumcision traveled from the north to the south, and not the other way around.³⁹

Female circumcision was also known and practiced in the Ancient Near East. Sherman notes that the most probable original purpose for circumcision was a connection to the sexual life and marriage, and feels that this

. . . conclusion is confirmed by the fact and phenomena of ‘female circumcision’ (improperly so called), i.e., the cutting off of the internal labia, which is almost, if not quite, as common as the male mutilation and as a rule accompanies it—a fact which has generally been ignored and its significance strangely overlooked.⁴⁰

It should also be noted that Egyptian circumcision differed from that prescribed for Israel. Sasson explains that the Egyptian practice consisted of a dorsal incision upon the foreskin which liberated the glans penis.⁴¹ This may explain the “again” of Joshua 5:2. If in fact the Hebrews had accepted an Egyptian form of circumcision that did not discard the foreskin, the need to be circumcised a second time makes sense, as does the phrase “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt” (5:9).

When this overview of circumcision in the Ancient Near East is compared to the circumcision ritual prescribed in Genesis 17, it is significant, first, that the circumcision was to be done on an infant. This is unparalleled in the ancient world. If, as the data seem to indicate, circumcision was understood in Abraham’s time to be the ritual of passage into marriage, how strange it must have seemed to him that the sign of God’s covenant was to be administered to infants.⁴² It could only have been meaningful if Abraham realized that the ritual itself was to speak to the inability of the flesh to accomplish the bringing of the promised seed. In the same way that an infant was incapable of procreation, so he, and all Israel with him, was helpless to bring what only could come from the hand of God.

Secondly, in Israel, circumcision was specifically limited to males. There is no provision for the female to participate in being marked as a member of the covenant even though a similar ritual was available in the surrounding cultures.⁴³ Once again, this must have been considered significant.

36. Charles C. Sherman, "Circumcision" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 15 Vols., ed. S. M. Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 3:118-19.

37. Holladay, *Lexicon*, p. 120.

38. J. P. Hyatt, "Circumcision," *IDB*, 5 Vols, ed. G. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), I.629. Compare the comments of *BDB*, p.368 under the listing of *ḥṭṭ*.

39. Sasson, "Circumcision in the ANE," 476.

40. Sherman, "Circumcision," p. 119.

41. Sasson, "Circumcision in the ANE," 474.

42. Gen. 17:12, "And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days."

43. Covenant theologians have not sufficiently reckoned with this aspect of circumcision as a sign of the covenant. If baptism parallels circumcision, why is baptism administered to every covenant member (male and female) when circumcision was exclusively male-oriented? If it is argued that in the New Covenant the male/female distinctions

The male headship which God established at creation⁴⁴ continues in His dealings with Israel. It is not as though the woman is unimportant or of less worth. The Israelite woman figures equally into the covenant as does the male. But the responsibility for the maintenance of the society and clan (family) is placed in the hands of the male. Unless one is willing to admit to complete androcentrism in the Patriarchal times, the conclusion seems inescapable that circumcision was not the definitive mark of every covenant member. For certainly women figured in as bona fide members of the society and covenant.⁴⁵ Rather, the fact that circumcision was reserved specifically for the male speaks again to the issue of offspring. Since the man was the head, the offspring would be reckoned by his name, and the inheritance would come through being related to him. Thus, the matter of offspring is, in this legal sense, one which pertains to the male alone.

We may conclude, then, by answering the question "why circumcision?" in this way: God chose a ritual which was common and known to Abraham, a ritual which was tied to marriage and procreation. But, in making these two distinctions, He communicated the essence of the covenant, that is, faith in El Shaddai. For the cutting away of the foreskin of the eight day old male marked the reality that the Seed could only come by Divine intervention.

The Theological Meaning of Circumcision Throughout the OT

If circumcision were a sign given to Abraham which pointed specifically to the need for faith in regard to the coming Seed, it is valid to ask whether or not the other OT authors also attached this meaning to the ritual.

Interestingly, the two times circumcision is used in a metaphorical sense in the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6), the immediate context is that of the Abrahamic covenant. In Deuteronomy 10:12, the unit begins by an exhortation to "revere the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths" which is very close to Genesis 17:1, "Walk before me and be blameless." Further, in Deuteronomy 10:15 the covenant love of YHWH for "the fathers" becomes the basis for the exhortation to "cut away the thickening about your hearts." That is, if the promises made to the fathers should be realized, it will be so only as each Israelite relates to YHWH on the basis of faith. The heart which relies on the flesh (foreign powers, self strength, etc.) will fail. Rather, the fleshly heart must be cut away and discarded.

Deuteronomy 30:6 is also in the context of God's unfailing promises. For when Israel is dispersed among the nations God will not abandon her but will restore her fortunes when she returns to Him with the whole heart and soul. What is it that brings captivity and dispersion? Deuteronomy 29:23ff asks and answers this very question: it is relying upon foreign gods and powers in the place of YHWH. When, however, Israel is returned to her land by the hand of God, He will "circumcise"⁴⁶ her heart (30:6) and take away the heart which rests in the flesh. The disobedience at Kadesh Barnea

are erased (Gal. 3:28), what was the significance of the fact that circumcision was a male-only sign in the OT? It seems that the arguments of the covenant theologian, i.e., that salvation is in measure promised from parents to children, would correspond better to the idea of corporate solidarity as seen in male headship, in which case baptism ought to be given to males only. While this may appear as a small problem for the covenant theologian, I have yet to see a well-defined answer to it.

44. Note that the Scriptures regularly accredit Adam with bringing sin into the world, even though Eve was the first to disobey, cp. Rom. 5:12ff.
45. This is noted implicitly in the Abrahamic narrative. Though Abraham fathers both Ishmael and Isaac, it is the mother who makes the difference between the son who will be heir and the son who is cast out. This fact became the basis in Judaism for determining lineage through the mother. In addition, the explicit renaming of Sarai in the circumcision chapter marks her participation in the covenant as a *bona fide* member.
46. The JPS *Tanakh* translates "Then the Lord your God will open up your heart . . ." without explanation, while noting in a footnote that "others, (translate) 'circumcise'".

(resulting in Israel's 40 year desert sojourn) must be cut away and discarded. This will also picture the work of God in the New Covenant (to which 30:6 must speak) as He restores Israel to Himself, giving her the faith that has always characterized the covenant He made with Abraham.

The message of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is the same. Hearts and ears which need to be "circumcised" are hearts and ears which are closed to the Divine message of the prophet. Israel was faithless and made alliances with foreign powers, accepting their gods, playing the harlot.⁴⁷ She had turned to others rather than relying upon YHWH exclusively. The prophets therefore call for a "circumcision" of heart—a resolute act of the will which says there will be no more "Hagar plans," that is to say, no more relying upon any one other than YHWH.

In the same way, uncircumcised ears are ears which have turned from hearing the righteous word of God. They are ears which are used to listening to the message of man and taking their cue from the flesh. They must be "circumcised" if the prophet's message will be received.

In each case, then, the metaphorical or theological use of circumcision parallels its physical import: the promise will be gained by faith and not by the works of the flesh. This may apply to the ultimate promise, i.e., the coming Seed, or to any of the promises of the covenant, including the gaining of the land. Simply put, the promises of God must be received by faith.

The Theological Meaning of Circumcision in the NT

The theological significance of circumcision comes to fulness in the teachings of the Apostles. Paul is fond of showing that circumcision merely of the flesh profits nothing.⁴⁸ He even accredits true "Jewishness" to those who are also circumcised in heart as opposed to mere circumcision of the flesh and states that those who are circumcised in the flesh only act as the uncircumcised when they transgress the law.⁴⁹

For my purposes in this paper, Romans 4:10ff and Colossians 2:9-15 are significant examples of the way in which the NT Apostles viewed circumcision theologically.

Romans 4:10ff

The question I want to ask as these two NT texts are discussed is this: "How did the NT Apostles interpret the meaning of circumcision as given to Abraham?" "Did they see circumcision as calling Abraham to a faith in God's method for bringing the Seed as I have interpreted it?"

The crux verse is Romans 4:11:

and he (Abraham) received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them.

The first point to note is that circumcision is referred to both by σημειον, "sign" and σφραγις, "seal." Paul's use of "sign" no doubt rests upon Genesis 17 where the LXX also employs shmeion. Though sfragi is not used of circumcision in the OT, it seems quite possible that this terminology was common in Paul's day. The ancient Jewish blessing over the wine of the Sabbath says:

47. cf. Jer. 6:6-23; 7:21-34 as examples.

48. Gal. 5:2-3; 1 Co. 7:19

49. Rom. 2:25-29.

He who pronounces the blessing [over the cup of wine] says: "Blessed be He who hath sanctified the Beloved from the womb and set the statute in his flesh and sealed his offspring with the sign of the holy covenant."⁵⁰

Cranfield also notes that Rashi and the Targum to Song of Songs 3:8 use the term "seal" in referring to circumcision.⁵¹

Cranfield goes on to argue that the purpose of this sign or seal was to point to the faith of Abraham:

Abraham's circumcision is characterized as the seal, that is, the outward and visible authentication, ratification and guarantee, of the righteousness by faith which was already his while he was still uncircumcised. . . . The words imply that Abraham's circumcision, while it did not confer a status of righteousness on him, was nevertheless valuable as the outward and visible attestation of the status of righteousness which he already possessed.⁵²

What brings Paul to use Abraham in his exposition here is the central promise of the covenant that "in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." Paul's argument is that this promise was given to Abraham before circumcision and that therefore Abraham may rightly be considered the father of all who participate in the same faith, whether circumcised or not. In fact, the promise that Abraham would be "a father of nations"⁵³ is applied more precisely by the Apostle in the phrase "father of all who believe."

Paul's argument, while given to prove another point, still confirms what I have previously maintained about circumcision. The ritual did not bring something new to the covenant, but rather reinforced righteousness on the basis of faith, the very hallmark of the covenant from the beginning. Circumcision required Abraham to continue in the faith that had brought him from Ur and to direct this faith toward the God Who had promised to bring a son by Divine intervention. It is on this basis that Paul, in Galatians 4:23, refers to Ishmael as "according to flesh" (κατα σαρκα) and Isaac as "through promise" (δι' επαγγελιας).

Paul has shown that a primary function of the law was to point to Christ (Gal. 3:24) and it therefore stands to reason that circumcision has fulfilled its function, for Christ, the promised Seed, has come. Israel, worshiping the sign rather than the Seed to which it pointed, had attributed to circumcision what only God's Son could accomplish. This Paul plainly asserts in his statement that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love."⁵⁴

In Romans 4:12-22 Paul goes on to develop the point that righteousness is on the basis of faith alone, and that circumcision symbolizes this. Note the following summary of his argument:

50. S. Singer, trans. *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire*, (London, 1954), p. 305. Though this is contained in a modern prayer book, it is based upon the ancient benediction, as noted in the Talmud, b. *Shab.* 137b.

51. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans in The International Critical Commentary* (2 Vols., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 1:236, n. 4.

52. *Ibid.*, 236.

53. Gen. 17:5.

54. It seems clear that what Paul decries in Galatians (particularly at 3:10-13) is the misuse of the Torah as it regards Gentile believers. That is, that Gentiles would need to become covenant members through a ritual of conversion (becoming a proselyte), so that they could be accorded the status of an Israelite, upon which the "influencers" based their covenant status.

1. Abraham is the father of those who "follow in the steps of the faith" - v. 12
2. The promise to Abraham that he would be "heir to the world"⁵⁵ was given before the command to be circumcised - v. 13
3. If the promise comes on the basis of Law (doing good works) then faith is nullified - v. 14
4. Since God intended the promise to be certain to all the descendents, it was necessary to base it upon faith and not works - v. 16
5. The object of Abraham's faith was the promised Seed, which Paul brings to his text by quoting Genesis 17:5, - v. 17
6. The inabilities of his body and that of Sarah's to produce offspring shut him up to hope in God, and so he grew strong with regard to the promise and in this faith gave glory to God - vv. 19-20
7. This faith is vitally connected to imputed righteousness - v. 21

For Paul, then, in this section, circumcision signaled a faith Abraham already had, a faith to trust God for the impossible. Circumcision did not precede faith, but was a sign and seal of faith already possessed. I think this fits with what I have maintained above, that the very ritual of circumcision reinforced the need to apply faith in the specific area of the promised seed.

Colossians 2:11-12

It has long been maintained that this text joins together the OT rite of circumcision with NT baptism.⁵⁶ The verse reads:

and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

The verses at hand answer the question of "how" the fullness of Christ asserted in verse 9 can be appropriated to the believer, so he or she might also be called "complete" (v. 10). The simple answer which these and the following verses give is "you have been fully forgiven and made clean by the work of Christ." This union with Christ is demonstrated via baptism (v. 12), for Paul asserts that the believer,⁵⁷ in baptism, was buried with Christ⁵⁸ as well as raised with Him.⁵⁹ This baptism, then, signals a casting away⁶⁰ of the flesh, a death to self and resurrection to newness of life in Christ. In the context, Paul's teaching is directed to those who are being taught that ceremonial rituals could bring them righteousness (vv. 16-23). But such trust in the works of the flesh brings only death.

55. Gen. 17:4-6

56. It has always seemed impossible to me that those who hold to infant baptism would use this passage as their "crux" text. For even if one were to admit that Paul here links baptism with circumcision, it admits far too much for those who baptize infants. I have found no paedobaptist who is willing to admit that the baptizing of an infant puts him or her in vital union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Only those who hold to the extreme views of baptismal regeneration would make such a claim. Yet, in spite of this, Col. 2:11-12 is constantly appealed to by those who simply want baptism to be an external sign of the covenant.

57. Note *δια της πιστεως*, "through faith" of v. 12.

58. cp. Rom. 6:4

59. cp. Rom 6:5-6

60. Note the Greek *εν τη απεκδυσει του σωματος της σαρκος*, "in the stripping away of the body of flesh."

Circumcision, the very mark of Judaism in his day,⁶¹ becomes a fitting analogy for Paul's teaching. Everyone who is in the kingdom of Christ bears a "sign" or "seal" because he or she partakes of His fulness, and thus also of His "circumcision." That is, the Christian carries the marks in his or her life of death, death with Christ. The "circumcision of Christ" must refer to His death⁶² and speaks of His victory over the flesh and death.⁶³ All who are in Christ are likewise "circumcised."

. . . when Christ stripped off his physical body he was, as it were, inaugurating that death to self in which the Christian, in baptism, is united with him. . . This [interpretation] has the distinct advantage of suiting well with the movement of thought in v. 15 (ἀπεκδυσαμενος κ.τ.λ. referring to Christ's triumphant death), and with the thought that runs through much of the N.T., that by suffering physically Christ embodied an obedience which is effective for all who are united with him: cf. Rom. 7:4 ψμεις θανατωθητε τω νομω δια του σωματος του Cristou, and 1 Pet. 2:24 and 4:1; and note the important εν τω σωματι της σαρκος αυτου in Col. 1:22.⁶⁴

For Paul, circumcision speaks of ceasing to trust in the flesh and casting oneself fully upon God in faith. Our "circumcision," made without hands as we participate in Christ's "circumcision" (=death), is then very much like Abraham's: it is the decisive point at which we die to self and trust in God.

Thus, in this text Paul does not link circumcision with baptism as though they were both "signs" of the same "covenant." Rather, he links them here because they both point to the same truth: faith in the God of miracles is the only faith that saves, and this faith is born out of death to self and issues in life in Christ.

The Pesach Seder as the "Sign" of the New Covenant

The New Testament seems to offer the Pesach meal, not baptism as the "sign" of the Covenant. In 1 Cor. 11:25 Paul gives a most interesting commentary on the words of Christ as recorded in the gospels.⁶⁵ At the Last Supper, Christ identified the cup this way:

This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. (Lk. 21:20)

Paul writes:

In the same way the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood ; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you

61. Cp. Rom. 3:1 where "circumcision" is appositional to "being a Jew." Paul is fond of using the term "the circumcision" to refer to Jewish people who had not yet confessed Yeshua as Messiah, cf. Gal. 2:12; Eph. 2:11; Col. 4:11.

62. For the various views, see C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1968), p. 96. The parallel to Ex. 12:48 should also be considered. Only circumcised males could participate at the Passover seder, and the stipulation is that foreigners who may be residing in the Israelite home could "come near" (cf. Eph. 2:11-13) if they and their male children were circumcised. The believer's union with Christ allows him or her to be considered "circumcised" by Christ's "circumcision" and thus able to eat Pesach meal.

63. cp. 1 Pet. 2:24; 4:1.

64. Moule, *Colossians*, p. 95.

65. Matt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 21:20

proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." (1 Co. 11:25-26)

Paul's commentary on the words of Christ is interesting because he confirms that the Pesach seder functions as the sign of the New Covenant because it is the ritual of remembrance. It is itself a proclamation of the death of Christ, the very act which secures the New Covenant.⁶⁶ Further, the words of Christ approximate the terminology of circumcision in Genesis 17. There, circumcision is given the status of being the covenant⁶⁷, since it denotes the essential aspect, namely, the promised Seed. Here, in the NT words of Christ, the cup is said "to be the covenant." It is fitting that both speak of death to self and faith in the Promised One. Both look to the promised blessing, relying not on the flesh but rather dying to self and trusting in God. And both, interestingly, have a messianic thrust, for even the sign of the New Covenant is "until He comes."

Ross has captured this in his comments on Genesis 17:

Many commentaries correlate this sign of the Abrahamic covenant [circumcision] with baptism as the sign of the New Covenant, showing that it was performed once at the initiation into the covenant community and could be performed on infants and adults alike. But a good case can be made for the Lord's Supper being the sign of the New Covenant, for it is expressly identified as such: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Co. 11:25). Moreover, remembrance, the key element of a sign, is associated with the cup: "Do this in remembrance of me." As the believer takes the cup of communion, the New Covenant is perpetuated in the community of the faithful. Naturally, even this ritual (as well as baptism) can be empty if it is not accompanied by faith.⁶⁸

Conclusion

1. The narrative structure of Genesis 12-17 would indicate that circumcision is given as a sign of divine intervention to resolve a complication. The complication is Abraham's attempt to gain the promised offspring through fleshly means. The divine intervention is the promise of seed by Divine fiat. Circumcision pictures this by the casting away of the flesh of the organ of procreation. In this way faith in El Shaddai, the Giver of Offspring, continues to be the hallmark of the covenant.
2. Interpreting circumcision as meaning that God and God alone could bring the promised seed, and thus requiring faith, is in harmony with the general posture of unconditional covenants in the Ancient Near East. For in such covenants the loyalty of the Vassal to the Suzerain was expected to be maintained. In circumcision God requires of Abraham the same life of faith in which he obeyed God previously, only this time specifically regarding the promised offspring.
3. The distinctive aspects of circumcision in Genesis 17 (performed on infants and specifically reserved for males only) when compared to the well known ritual of the Ancient Near East emphasizes the fact that circumcision was a sign dealing with the whole issue of procreation. It further highlighted the faith required of covenant members in the God Who would bring the promised seed.
4. This vital connection between faith and circumcision is taken up by subsequent writers of

66. cf. Heb. 8:8-13; 9:15

67. Gen. 17:13, ". . . thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant."

68. Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 335-36.

Scripture. Israel is admonished to trust in God and not foreign powers, to be loyal to YHWH and not to seek help from pagan gods, to listen to God's prophets and not the false prophets—Israel must be circumcised in heart, ears and tongue. The NT writers likewise connect circumcision and faith. Paul speaks of circumcision as the seal or sign of Abraham's faith (Rom. 4), as well as of the believer's union with Christ in His death through faith (Col. 2).

5. Theologically, then, circumcision has a greater parallel to the Pesach seder than to baptism, since both circumcision and celebration of Pesach stand metonymically for the covenant ("This is the covenant in your flesh"// "This is the new covenant in My blood").