

# On the Significance of a Name Change and Circumcision in Genesis 17

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Genesis 16 relates the sixth episode concerning Abram: the birth of Ishmael, Abram's first son. In chap. 17, the seventh episode, God informs Abram that Ishmael, son of Hagar, will not be his spiritual heir (17:19); rather, a son named Isaac to whom Sarah will give birth, will be his heir. Just beforehand, God had appeared to Abram and made him other promises. In addition to the promises in chap. 17, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, and his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah, and commands Abraham to circumcise all the males belonging to his household.

The present study will investigate the question of why, at this particular time, the names of Abram and his wife were changed, and Abraham was commanded to undergo circumcision. We will try to show that the common denominator for both actions is that by means of these acts Abram and his wife Sarai become worthy to begin realizing Abraham's destiny in God's plans as presented in God's first revelation to Abram (12:1–3). The uncircumcised Abram could have a son Ishmael by Hagar, the slave-concubine; but Isaac, the exclusive spiritual heir, was born to the circumcised Abraham by his first wife, Sarah. Thus the seventh story of Abram/Abraham marks the main turning point for the realization of the seventh blessing, which was given to Abraham at the time of God's first revelation to him, namely, "and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you" (12:3b).

Scholars have noted the linguistic and thematic similarity of the verses in the first speech (Gen. 17:1–2)<sup>1</sup> to the first revelation to Abram as recorded in Gen. 12:1–4, to the covenant of Gen. 15,<sup>2</sup> and to the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. However, it should be pointed out that this section contains two new details that were not noted in prior stories about Abram:

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1. Chapter 17 consists of five speeches by God: 1) vv. 1b–2; 2) vv. 4–8; 3) vv. 9–14; 4) vv. 15–16; 5) vv. 19–21. See, e.g., V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, 1990–91), 459; G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC (Dallas, 1994), 17. For a discussion of the importance of the age of Abraham as a preparation for the stories about Abraham see, J. P. Fokkelman, "Time and Structure of the Abraham Cycle," *OTS* 25 (1989), 96–101.

2. See, e.g., J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven–London, 1975), 282–84; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1981), 25–27; T. D. Alexander, "Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision," *JSOT* 25 (1983), 17–22; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 463; Wenham, *Genesis*, 12, 17, 20; S. D. Kunin, *The Logic of Incest*, *JSOT* Supp. 185 (Sheffield, 1995), 60.

Chap. 17 is ascribed by source critics to P while chap. 12 is assigned to J. Nevertheless it is proper to compare them because "biblical texts had integrity to those who put them together." See H. E. Goldberg, "Cambridge in the Land of Canaan: Descent and Alliance, Circumcision and Instruction in the Bible," *JANES* 24 (1996), 4, and especially E. L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (Atlanta, 1989), 29–51.

1. God appears to Abram with a new name, "(I am) El Shaddai," (Gen. 17:2). Though the etymology of this name is still a matter of dispute,<sup>3</sup> it is nevertheless quite clear that only now does God reveal to Abram a new aspect of divinity. This name is the preferred name of God in the patriarchal narratives.<sup>4</sup>
2. God commands Abram: "Walk in My ways and be blameless," and so indicates to him that he must be absolutely loyal.<sup>5</sup> This demand may suggest that despite the fact that for 25 years Abram had demonstrated great loyalty to God, his loyalty was not yet considered absolute.<sup>6</sup>

The first revelation concludes by noting that upon experiencing the divine vision, Abram fell on his face. The narrator thus shows the humility of Abram, his desire to hear the word of God, as well as his feelings at the moment of the revelation.<sup>7</sup> Verses 1–3a prepare the reader for the metamorphosis that is about to take place in Abram.

In the second speech (vv. 3–8), after God has promised Abram that he will become "the father of a multitude of nations," he changes his name from Abram to Abraham by adding the letter *he* (א"ה), "for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations" (v. 5c).<sup>8</sup> In the fourth speech (vv. 15–16) God changes Sarai's name to Sarah, by changing the last letter to *he* (א"ה). Although no explanation is offered

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3. For the various views, see J. Skinner, *Genesis, ICC* (Edinburgh, 1912), 290–91; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis, AB* (Garden City, 1964), 124; Westermann, *Genesis*, 257–58; K. Koch, "Šadday, zum Verhältnis zwischen israelitischer Monolatrie und nordwest-semitischen Polytheismus," *VT* 26 (1976), 299–332, esp. 316–26; H. Niehr & G. Steins, "שׁדַּי," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, (Stuttgart–Berlin, 1993), 7.1078–1104. For a discussion on the source of this name, see W. Wilfall, "El Shaddai or El of the fields," *ZAW* 92 (1980), 24–32.

4. This is also mentioned in Gen. 28:3; 34:14; 35:11; 48:3; 49:25. (All these references are from the Jacob narrative.) So, too, the tradition in Exod. 6:4 relates the names El-Shadday to the period of the patriarchs. See also I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence* (Minneapolis, 1995), 125, n. 3.

5. G. von Rad, *Genesis, OTL* (London, 1970), 193–94; Westermann, *Genesis*, 259; N. M. Sarna, *Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1989), 122.

The phrase *לפני ה' הלך* "walk in my ways" parallels the common Akkadian phrase in the Assyrian texts, *ina mahriya ittalak*, and the combination *והיה תמים* "be perfect" is parallel to the phrase *ittallaku šalmiṣ*. See M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford, 1972), 76, and cf. *CAD* Š/1, 255.

According to *Genesis Rabba* 46:1 the term *tāmim* connotes that circumcision removes the blemish from the male person making him a whole being, so to speak, in his relationship to God.

6. Thus, for example, during the famine in Canaan (12:10) he did not request God's help, but left Canaan and went down to Egypt; also, when God promised him a son from Sarah, he threw himself on his face "and laughed, as he said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?'" (17:17). From now on, his loyalty had to be absolute.

7. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, 260; Wenham, *Genesis*, 21. For a detailed study of the symbolism of falling on the face in the Bible and the ancient Near East, see M. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East*, *Studia Pohl* 12/II (Rome, 1980), 133–36. For the voluntary reflexive nuance of *נפל* "fall" in such passages, see C. Cohen, "Jewish Medieval Commentary on the Book of Genesis and Modern Biblical Philology," *JQR* 81 (1990), 8–9; idem, "Genesis 14:1–11—An Early Israelite Chronographic Source," in K. Lawson Younger et al., eds., *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1991), 76–77.

8. The narrator changed the name of Abram prior to the promises described in vv. 7–8. We have here a performative utterance, i.e., the words recited constitute the very action to which they refer. For the usage, see W. von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik*, 3d ed. (Roma, 1995), 130 (§80c).

for this change of name, God promises “For I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of people shall issue from her” (v. 16b).<sup>9</sup> In the third speech (vv. 9–14), as in the first one, the emphasis is placed on God’s demands from Abraham. Abraham is commanded to circumcise all the males that belong to his household. This demand is directed at Abraham and his descendants for all generations. Circumcision is the sign of the everlasting covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants (17:11, 13), and he who does not circumcise will be cut off because he has violated the covenant of God (v. 14).<sup>10</sup> Why, precisely at this stage of life, did God change the names of Abraham and his wife (the first name change in the Book of Genesis), and command Abraham and all the males of his family to undergo circumcision?

In the Bible and in ancient Near Eastern cultures a name served not only as a means of personal identification, but also as a cultural and religious marker, creating a link between the bearer of the name and associations linked to that name. Thus the giving of a name or changing it had great significance.<sup>11</sup>

The etymology of the name Abram is a matter of dispute.<sup>12</sup> However, despite the lack of certainty concerning the original meaning of the name, the reader assumes that since Abram was given his name by Terah, the name established a connection between Abram and Terah’s culture.<sup>13</sup> Thus it is significant that 25 years after leaving Mesopotamia in accordance with God’s command, Abram still bore the name that maintained a link to his former culture and belief.

The new name, Abraham, is interpreted as “father of a multitude of nations” (17:4–5). This is neither the literal nor the etymological meaning, but phonemically it is similar “to *’ab hamon*, attested to in the repetition *’ab* and *ham* in both the name and the explanation.”<sup>14</sup> The letter *resh* (ר) does not appear in the explanation. It is a flexible “literary” etymology, which takes no account of linguistic differences between the name and the proposed explanation.<sup>15</sup> The expansion of the name

9. For a discussion of the names Sarai/Sarah, see, e.g., Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, 42; Wenham, *Genesis*, 30.

10. On the significance of the penalty of *kāret*, see below.

11. See, e.g., J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London–Copenhagen, 1926), 1.213–24; R. Abba, “Name,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York–Nashville, 1962), 3.500–502; G. W. Ramsey, “Is Name Giving an Act of Domination in Genesis 2:23 and Elsewhere?” *CBQ* 50 (1988), 24–35; Sarna, *Genesis*, 124; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 463–64; Wenham, *Genesis*, 21. The importance which the Bible ascribes to names finds its best expression in the comprehensive study of M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names* (Ramat Gan, 1991).

12. See, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London, 1984), 185; Skinner, *Genesis*, 244; L. Hicks, “Abraham,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York–Nashville, 1962), 1.15; A. R. Millard, “Abraham,” *ABD* (New York–London, 1992), 1.39; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 464; T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, BZAW 133 (Berlin–New York, 1974), 22–36; Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, 40–42.

13. See W. F. Albright, “The Name Shaddai and Abram,” *JBL* 54 (1935), 193–204; J. J. Stamm, *Die akkadische Namengebung*, MVAG 44 (Darmstadt, 1932), 54–56; K. van der Toorn, “Ancestors and Anthroponyms: Kinship Terms as Theophoric Elements in Hebrew Names,” *ZAW* 108 (1996), 3–4.

14. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 464.

15. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 18. There are scholars who maintain that the letter *he* (ה) here might be some type of internal plural. See J. A. Montgomery, “The hemzah-*h* in Semitic,” *JBL* 46 (1927), 144–46; J. Huehnergard, “Three Notes on Akkadian Morphology,” in D. M. Golomb, ed., *Working with No*

Abram might create a direct link to God's promise in Gen. 12:2: "I will make your name great."<sup>16</sup>

Scholars maintain that the names of Abram and Sarai were changed in order to mark the promise of many descendants.<sup>17</sup> We suggest another reason for the name change.

The explanation for the new name of Abraham defines his destiny. The purpose of Abram's election was already revealed in the first revelation when God told him, "Go forth from your native land and your kindred and from your father's house" (12:1a), namely, he was told to detach himself from all frameworks to which he previously belonged.<sup>18</sup> The graduated formulation of the frameworks he was to leave, was apparently intended not only to stress that God was aware of Abraham's personal difficulty in fulfilling this command,<sup>19</sup> but also Abram's intimate connection with these frameworks. The reader learns that he did not willingly and easily detach himself from them; neither did he do so because of conflicts like the separation from Lot (chap. 13). An absolute physical separation was necessary to enable him to detach himself from his former culture. Only after such detachment was he to receive the seven promises related in 12:2–3. These promises are of great importance for understanding the relations between God and humanity in Genesis in general, Abram's destiny in particular,<sup>20</sup> and especially the seventh promise, which was the *grand finale* of the promises and the announcement of God's program.<sup>21</sup> As von Rad has noted: "This prophecy in chap. 12.3b reaches far out toward the goal of God's plan for history . . . It is enough that the goal is announced, and that it suggests the meaning of the road that God has taken by calling Abraham."<sup>22</sup>

This promise contains within it the first hint of the universality of Israel's belief that was afterwards developed by the teachings of the prophets.<sup>23</sup>

The selection of Abraham is the turning point not only in the story of humanity, but also in God's plan to redeem humanity from its current situation through Abraham and his descendants, that is, Israel. As Wright explains:

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*Data: Semitic and Egyptian Studies Presented to Thomas O. Lambdin* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1987), 181–82; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 464. Ibn Ezra proposes to see here a notariqon (*ABiR* (mighty one) + *HaMon* (multitude) + *goyim* (nations); cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 124.

There are a number of key words in vv. 4–8, such as *ברית רבה, פרה, רבה, ברית*, which contain consonants that are similar to the consonants in the name Abraham. See A. Strus, *Nomen-Omen: La stylistique sonore dans noms propres dans le Pentateuque* (Rome, 1978), 106–7; Wenham, *Genesis*, 210, considers that the phraseology in Gen. 17:1, "I will greatly increase your seed," is an anagram of the name Abraham.

16. Sarna, *Genesis*, 124.

17. E.g., Hamilton, *Genesis*, 463; Wenham, *Genesis*, 17, 28. Kunin (*The Logic*, 65, 76) maintains that this is an indication of the divine birth of Abraham. We will discuss this thesis below.

18. Driver, *Genesis*, 145; Skinner, *Genesis*, 243; Speiser, *Genesis*, 86; von Rad, *Genesis*, 154; P. D. Miller, "Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII 3a," *VT* 34 (1984), 472–75.

19. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 154; Sarna, *Genesis*, 88.

20. See, e.g., *Midrash Rabba* 39:11; Skinner, *Genesis*, 243; Wenham, *Genesis*, 274–77; J. B. Wells, *God's Holy People, JSOT* Supp. 305 (Sheffield, 2000), 185–204.

21. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 374.

22. *Genesis*, 156.

23. M. D. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem, 1974), 215 [in Hebrew]; Westermann, *Genesis*, 151–52. See also Skinner, *Genesis*, 243; Speiser, *Genesis*, 86; von Rad, *Genesis*, 156.

The creation of the nation of Israel was God's answer to the fall of mankind. This is apparent in the opening of the redemption history with the call of Abraham in Gen. 12 coming immediately after the "global" effects of mankind's sin and arrogance, as typified in the story of Babel with which the "primal history" closes. Abraham's seed will be the nation among the nations for the nations, the vehicle of God's redemptive purpose, the "prototype" of God's redeemed mankind.<sup>24</sup>

Abraham immediately acted upon God's command: he left Mesopotamia, taking with him his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot. By taking along Sarai and Lot, he did not disobey God's command to completely detach himself from his relatives, for they were an integral part of the household he headed.<sup>25</sup>

According to the meaning of the term **שם**, "name," in the Bible, and according to the definition of Abram's goal, it is possible to propose a reason for the name change at this particular stage of his life. The name Abram indicates that the bearer of the name has not yet achieved adequate separation from his former religious-cultural milieu. God did not nullify Abram's original name, as a master was accustomed to doing in similar situations (e.g., 2 Kgs. 23:34; 24:17). Nor did God continue to use the original name after the new one was given, as God did in the case of Jacob after naming him "Israel" (Gen. 32:28; 35:10).<sup>26</sup> God simply added one letter to Abram's name, thereby taking him out of the cultural-religious milieu he had been living in, yet having him preserve a certain affinity with his past, so that Abraham could fulfill his destiny to become "the father of a multitude of nations." The name change for Abraham was thus a further, not yet final stage, in dissociating him from his former heritage. The final stage, it is suggested, is the observance of the commandment of circumcision.

Kunin offers an interesting explanation for the connection between a name change and circumcision. In his opinion:

The Covenant of Circumcision is the third "divine birth" text. It contains structural elements that join it with the other two . . . It contains a symbolic sacrifice, circumcision (which also may be a symbolic castration). The element of "new beginning" is also emphasized through the change in Abram's name to Abraham.<sup>27</sup>

Kunin's thesis raises a number of questions—such as why was there a need for three "divine birth" stories regarding one person—but that is beyond the realm of this study. Circumcision is specifically defined in chap. 17 as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and the latter's descendants.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, one can understand the essence of the circumcision, as well as the connection between the name change and circumcision in the light of the term "covenant" that in ancient Near Eastern writings and in the Bible defines a binding obligatory and mutual

24. C. J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land* (Grand Rapids—Exeter, 1990), 174–75.

25. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 157. Apparently, Abram did not understand that leaving the other frameworks he was commanded to leave (12:1) obligated him to cease all relations with the family, as can be concluded, for example in the story in Genesis 24.

26. This issue will not be discussed in the present study.

27. Kunin, *The Logic*, 63, 72. He is of the opinion that Gen. 12:1–3 and chap. 16 are "divine birth" texts. For his definition of "divine birth," see p. 36, n. 1.

28. "My covenant" is mentioned nine times (vv. 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 19, 21); "everlasting covenant," three times (vv. 7, 13, 19); "sign of the covenant" once (v. 11).

relationship between two parties.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in passages in Genesis that are attributed by source critics to P, the term “covenant” marks a promise of God to man that is conditional upon fulfilling God’s commandments.<sup>30</sup> Likewise in chap. 17 God’s promises depend upon fulfilling the covenant of circumcision. Consequently, it seems to us that the story in chap. 17 should not be understood within the framework of “divine birth,” but rather within the framework of the special covenantal relations between God and Abraham.

God made two everlasting promises to Abraham: a) “to be God to you and to your offspring to come” (Gen. 17:7b); b) to “give the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession” (17:8b). Both promises are conditioned upon the observance of the command of circumcision, by which loyalty to the covenant with God is expressed. Anyone who does not observe the command is to be cut off from his people (v. 14).<sup>31</sup>

It is well known that the act of circumcision is not unique to Abraham and his descendants. Many peoples at different times, in the Near East and in other parts of the world, have required male circumcision.<sup>32</sup> Circumcision in the ancient Near East was performed in one of two ways: either by making a cut in the foreskin so that it remained hanging freely, or by entirely removing the foreskin.<sup>33</sup> There are differences of opinion as to the origins of the practice. Some scholars maintain that the custom arose in Egypt and spread from there to various other cultures.<sup>34</sup> However, according to Sasson the source of the custom was Northwest Semitic and the Egyptians adopted it from there.<sup>35</sup> There is also no consensus regarding the reason that circumcision developed in the various cultures. The principal views are: a) circumcision was a ritual whose purpose was to guarantee fertility, or it was part of the marriage ceremony thus being linked to fertility; b) it had apotropaic functions; c) it was a symbol of covenant confirmation.<sup>36</sup> Fox seems to be correct that one cannot be certain of the original reason for the practice among the Semitic peoples and among the non-Semitic peoples who practiced circumcision,<sup>37</sup> but it is very likely

29. See, e.g., G. E. Mendenhall and G. H. Herion, “Covenant,” *ABD* (New York–London, 1992), 1.1179–1202.

30. Knohl, *The Sanctuary*, 141–42, and nn. 65–66. For a similar conditional grant, see M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970), 184–203.

31. The instances of this formula in the Torah are listed in Mishnah Keritot 1:1. For exegesis which analyzes the *kāret* in the Torah see, e.g., B. A. Levine, *Leviticus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia–New York–Jerusalem, 1989), 241–42 (= Excursus 1); J. Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia–New York–Jerusalem, 1989) 405–8 (= Excursus 36). See also W. Horbury, “Extirpation and Excommunication,” *VT* 35 (1995), 13–38, esp. 31–34; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 473–74 and the literature listed in nn. 20–23; G. F. Hasel, “כרת, karat,” *TDOT* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995), 7.347–49.

32. See Jer. 9:24–25; Ezek. 28:10; 32:21–30. M. V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” *RB* 81 (1974), 551, 589, 592; Westermann, *Genesis*, 265; Sarna, *Genesis*, 125; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 469, and see list of scholarly literature in notes 11–12; R. G. Hall, “Circumcision,” *ABD* (New York–London, 1992), 1.1025–31. For a comprehensive survey of circumcision in various cultures and possible reasons for it, see R. Romberg, *Circumcision* (Massachusetts, 1985), 4–13; H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington–Indianapolis, 1990), 141–49.

33. Hall, “Circumcision,” 1025.

34. Loc. cit. On circumcision in Egypt and its purposes, see Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 592.

35. J. M. Sasson, “Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” *JBL* 85 (1966), 473–76.

36. Hall, “Circumcision,” 1026. For more studies on the practice and meaning of circumcision, see Hamilton, *Genesis*, 469, n. 12.

that the act of circumcision was performed on the male sexual organ because it was thought to have some link to fertility.

Circumcision as commanded to Abraham differs from circumcision rites of other cultures in that the male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 17:12),<sup>38</sup> and it symbolizes a covenant with God. Thus in Genesis 17 circumcision serves as a “sign of the covenant,” namely, a fixed sign in the sexual organ of all male descendants of Abraham whose aim was to mark the covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham.<sup>39</sup>

There are those who maintain that circumcision is a “sign of the covenant” much like the rainbow (Gen. 9:12–17) whose aim is to remind God, not man, of the covenant with the descendants of Abraham or with respect to all humanity. This opinion maintains that P believes in the need for reminders to God.<sup>40</sup>

It is highly doubtful that the aim of the sign of the rainbow is to remind God not to bring a flood upon humanity. The rainbow does not appear at the beginning of the storm but at its end.<sup>41</sup> Fox is compelled to admit, “at any rate P is not always strictly logical in his explanations of the function of the *'otot*.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, nowhere does it state that the sign of circumcision is to remind God of his promises.<sup>43</sup>

Goldberg argues convincingly that in the Bible there is a significant connection between circumcision and the education of future generations.<sup>44</sup> He writes:

At the most general level, the link between circumcision and cultural reproduction is entailed in the mutual implication of alliance and patrilineal descent. Just as a *berit* between individuals from distinct *bate-'abot* is perpetuated in their descendants, so the meaning of the “sign” of alliance, circumcision, must become incorporated into collective memory . . . The *bet-'ab*, including its female members, is central in this process of education.<sup>45</sup>

However, since the sign of the covenant was enjoined to be on the male sexual organ,<sup>46</sup> it seems that this sign serves a special mnemonic sign function.<sup>47</sup> It is pos-

37. “The Sign of the Covenant,” 592–93.

38. For the reason why circumcision took place on the eighth day, see, e.g., Sarna, *Genesis*, 125; W. H. Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” *HAR* 11 (1987), 355–70.

39. Fox maintains that defining circumcision as a “covenant (Gen. 17:13), is a synecdoche for the totality of all aspects of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants.” For a discussion of various aspects of “sign,” such as its meaning, purpose, and especially an analysis and discussion of the etiologies in those verses assigned by source critics to P, as well as for the significance of circumcision, see Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 557–96; M. Fishbane, “The Sign in the Hebrew Bible,” *Shnaton* 1 (1975), 213–34 [in Hebrew with an English abstract]; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 469.

40. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 595–97; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 470–71.

41. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 596, is aware of this problem.

42. *Ibid.*, 597.

43. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis*, 23–24.

44. Goldberg, “Cambridge,” 26–31.

45. *Ibid.*, 30.

46. Though circumcision is performed only on the male sexual organ and not on the female organ as is the case in some cultures, it appears that this sign serves as a cognition sign for the married couple. According to the view of Gen. 2:24 (P?), the couple is “one flesh” so that there is no need to circumcise the woman. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 470. On female circumcision in various cultures, see Romberg, *Circumcision*, 17–32. Circumcision involves cutting the body, the only instance where this is permitted according to the Torah. See C. M. Carmichael, *Law and Nature in the Bible* (Ithaca–London, 1985), 67.

47. Compare Hall, “Circumcision,” 1027.

sible that it was meant to remind the descendants of Abraham of the importance of preserving their sexual moral values which, according to P, constitute the basis for Israel's uniqueness and the main condition for its existence on its land.<sup>48</sup>

Such a mnemonic sign is essentially different in various periods of a man's life. The act of circumcision that is carried out on the eighth day after birth, which is the first day of the second week after a birth, might be a didactic means for the generation of the fathers who circumcise their male children. But it is reasonable to assume that the primary function of this didactic sign is to direct the sign bearer and help him remember his special obligations in connection with sexual ethical values that derive from the covenant with God. If this explanation is valid, one can say that the circumcision of a male on the eighth day is a sort of latent polemic against prevalent morals of the "Others," especially those of the Canaanites.

The people of Israel had to strive to be a "holy people," that is, a people whose conduct distinguishes it from neighboring peoples. This is the motto of the material in Leviticus attributed by source critics to the Priestly works.<sup>49</sup> The most important means to achieve this goal was through the laws limiting sexual activity.<sup>50</sup> According to the testimony of various Biblical texts, the sexual conduct of the Canaanites and the Egyptians was an abomination.<sup>51</sup> The text of the prologue and the epilogue of the laws on sexual conduct in Leviticus 18 (which like Genesis 17 is attributed by source critics to P)<sup>52</sup> bears explicit testimony to this fact. The prologue reads: "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws: I the Lord am your God" (Lev. 18:3–5).<sup>53</sup>

The epilogue of Leviticus 18 states:

Do not defile yourselves in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants. But you must keep My laws and My rules, and you must not do any of those abhorrent things, neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you (vv. 24–26).

According to the prologue, the Egyptians and the Canaanites practiced abhorrent sexual practices; vv. 7–23 concern primarily the sexual contacts that are prohibited in Israel. The epilogue states that the Canaanites sinned by engaging in such practices, and the land therefore spewed them out, i.e., God negated their right to live in the land of Canaan.<sup>54</sup> There are two important relevant facts that one learns

48. Especially according to Lev. 18:20. See below the brief discussion on the prologue and epilogue of chap. 18.

49. Wenham, *Genesis*, 18–25, 264.

50. See, e.g., von Rad, *Genesis*, 250; E. A. Goodfriend, "Prostitution," *ABD* (New York–London, 1992), 5.506.

51. For the historical reality of these statements see below.

52. For comprehensive literature on this matter, see Knohl, *The Sanctuary*, 1, n. 3; 70–71; 102, n. 145. Also see B. J. Schwartz, *The Holiness Legislation* (Jerusalem, 1999), 17–24 [in Hebrew].

53. For the reason that Egypt is mentioned in the prologue, see, e.g., M. Noth, *Leviticus, OTL* (London, 1965), 134.

54. Noth, *Leviticus*, 134.



from chap. 18, especially from the epilogue, which is apparently an etiological explanation for the Canaanite defeat by the Israelites and the latter's conquest of Canaan: 1. Israel's sexual morals distinguish it from the other nations, especially the Canaanites.<sup>55</sup> 2. The very existence of Israel in the land given to it by God (within the framework of a covenant with Israel), is conditional upon obeying the laws concerning sexual taboos.<sup>56</sup>

The Biblical view is that the Canaanites, especially, are "Others" who are to be kept at a distance, and neither their culture nor their social mores should be imitated or adopted.<sup>57</sup> In presenting the Canaanites as "Others," the Biblical view of the Canaanites and their different cultural values in contrast to Biblical values can be discerned. In the words of Cohn:

The Other is less an objective reality than a product of our own naming and classification system . . . That is, we create the Other as a way of defining our cultural boundaries, as an exemplar of everything that we do not want or cannot be.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore,

Recognition of difference is crucial for the maintenance of a stable sense of self . . . Our stereotypes of the Other thus give shape to our own anxieties and vulnerabilities. When those anxieties are projected onto the Other, we can more easily identify and control them.<sup>59</sup>

The corrupt sexual practices of the Canaanites, rather than those of the Egyptians or Mesopotamians,<sup>60</sup> are an important motif in various narratives in Genesis.<sup>61</sup>

55. In chapter 18 the exhortation not to act like the Canaanites appears seven times: vv. 3 (twice), 24, 26, 27, 29, 30. See Wenham, *Leviticus*, 250; E. S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus, OTL* (Louisville, 1996), 248–50, 255–57.

56. The phrase "I am the Lord" that is mentioned six times in the chapter (vv. 2, 4, 5, 6, 21, 30) is similar to the opening words of the Ten Commandments. This brief formula is intended to remind Israel of their uniqueness and their obligations to God. See Wenham, *Leviticus*, 250–51; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 255–57.

57. See, e.g., Exod. 23:23; Deut. 7:1, 16–19.

58. R. L. Cohn, "Before Israel: The Canaanites as Other in Biblical Tradition," in L. J. Silberstein and R. L. Cohn, eds., *The Other in Jewish Thought and History* (New York, 1994), 74.

59. Loc. cit.

60. The Bible does not contain any direct testimony as to the sexual mores of the people of Mesopotamia. However, there are non-biblical sources from which one can learn about their ethical values. See W. G. Lambert, "Morals in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Jaabericht van het vooraziatich-Egyptisch Genootschap, Ex Oriente Lux* 14–15 (1955–58), 194–96; H. A. Hoffner, "Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East," *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to C. H. Gordon* (Kevelaer, 1973), 81–90; E. M. Yamauchi, "Cultic Prostitution," *ibid.*, 213–22; G. Learner, "The Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Signs* 11 (1986), 236–54; J. Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, trans. Z. Bahrani and M. van de Mieroop (Chicago–London, 1987), 185–98; J. S. Cooper, "Enki's Member: Eros and Irrigation in Sumerian Literature," in H. Behrens et al., eds., *DUMU-E<sub>2</sub>-DUB-BA-A: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg* (Philadelphia, 1989), 87–88; M. V. Fox, "The Cairo Love Songs," *JAOS* 100 (1980), 101–9; *idem*, "Egyptian Literature (Love Songs)," *ABD* (New York–London, 1992), 2.393–95. G. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London, 1994). For a summary, see K. R. Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Mesopotamia* (Westport, 1998), 132–40.

On prostitution and the status of the prostitute, see B. Foster, "Gilgamesh: Sex, Love and the Ascent of Knowledge," in J. H. Marks and R. M. Good, eds., *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of M. H. Pope* (Guilford, Conn., 1987), 21–41; W. G. Lambert, "Prostitution," in V. Haas, ed., *Aussenseiter und Randgruppen, Xenia* 32 (Konstanz, 1991), 132.

The reader of Genesis is first made aware of the corrupt sexual practices of the Canaanites in the narrative relating the curse of Canaan by Noah. The enigmatic episode in Gen. 9:20–27 relates what occurred when Noah became drunk and unaware of what was happening, after drinking wine produced from the vineyard he had planted. His son, Ham (or Canaan), took advantage of the situation. He apparently committed an act so dishonorable to Noah, that when Noah learned of the deed, he retaliated with a curse: “cursed is Canaan; the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers” (9:25), which reflects distaste at the sexual corruption of the Canaanites.<sup>62</sup>

The sexual corruption of the Canaanites is also alluded to in the story of the “covenant between the pieces” (Genesis 15). In this story God reveals to Abraham the future history of his descendants, their emigration and subjugation (vv. 13–16). He promises, “And they shall return here in the fourth generation for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (v. 16). The phrase “iniquity of the Amorites” apparently hints at the sexual behavior of the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land.<sup>63</sup> The Canaanites (the current inhabitants of the land which was promised to Abraham) had not yet corrupted their ways to the extent that would justify their expulsion. God revealed to Abraham that in three generations they would be ripe for the punishment of losing their land.

Fathers Abraham and Isaac, as well as Mother Rebekah, objected most strongly to a marriage of their sons to Canaanite women. Abraham therefore sent his servant to find a wife for his son in Mesopotamia as is narrated in chap. 24. He compelled the servant to take an oath with regard to two points: first, “that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell” (Gen. 24:3); second, “On no account must you take my son back there” (24:6). In what way were the daughters of Harran better than the daughters of Canaan?

In the view of many scholars, Abraham wanted his son to marry endogamously.<sup>64</sup> It is, however, difficult to accept this explanation because according to Gen. 12:1–3 the blessings that God promised Abram depended on his cutting himself off absolutely from all family frameworks to which he previously belonged. Thus endogamous marriage contradicts this command.

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61. Against A. Van Selms, “The Canaanites in the Book of Genesis,” *OTS* 12 (1958), 182–213. At this point we cannot treat all the difficulties of these narratives, such as their source and the time of composition. Our purpose is to show the negative approach towards the Canaanites, an important motif in various narratives as they are now extant.

62. Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis*, 102–4; Speiser, *Genesis*, 61–62; von Rad, *Genesis* 133.

63. See, e.g., von Rad, *Genesis*, 182; Westermann, *Genesis*, 227. For the use of the term Amorite to define the population of Canaan, see Van Selms, “The Canaanites in the Book of Genesis,” 203–4; G. E. Mendenhall, “Amorites,” *ABD* (New York–London, 1992), 1.201–2.

The Mesopotamian sources from the different periods do not describe people from cultures other than Mesopotamian as subhuman, except for two instances: the Gutians and the Amorites. See J. S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore–London, 1983), 30–33. Does the author of Genesis 15 use the term “Amorite” in order to describe the Canaanites as subhuman?

64. Skinner, *Genesis*, 342; von Rad, *Genesis*, 250; N. Wander, “Structure, Contradiction, and ‘Resolution’ in Mythology: Father’s Brother’s Daughter Marriage and the Treatment of Women in Genesis 11–50,” *JANES* 13 (1981), 75–99.

Other scholars maintain that the purpose of sending the servant to Mesopotamia was to prevent religious assimilation.<sup>65</sup> However, since the women of Mesopotamia were as polytheistic as the women of Canaan, they too were a source of danger for religious assimilation. Our contention is that Abraham did not want his son to marry a Canaanite woman because of their presumed immoral behavior.<sup>66</sup> This reason is alluded to in the information that the narrator provides the reader by an exposition concerning Rebekah. The narrator informs the reader in Gen. 24:15–16 of two important facts concerning Rebekah—one, that she is of the family of Abraham (v. 15); two, “The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin, whom no man had known” (v. 16).

The Biblical narrator does not customarily describe the outer appearance of a person unless that description is necessary for the development of the narrative.<sup>67</sup> It is possible that the narrator wanted us to know that Rebekah was beautiful so that we could expect Isaac to desire her. But what is the importance of the statement that she was “a virgin, whom no man had known”? Perhaps by means of the remark that Rebekah was a “virgin,” i.e., of marriageable age,<sup>68</sup> and a maiden “whom no man had known,” the narrator wishes to inform us that this girl was suitable for Isaac. She is the woman worthy of Isaac, the heir of Abraham, because, despite her beauty and the fact that she had reached the age of sexual maturity, she did not have any sexual experience.<sup>69</sup> We therefore infer that this exposition was intended to suggest to the reader that this was also Abraham’s intention when he sent his servant specifically to Mesopotamia to find a wife for his son. In this manner the narrator would seem to present a woman whose sexual behavior differed from that of the typical Canaanite woman.

Similarly, the stories of the marriages of Jacob and Esau reflect the opposition of Isaac and Rebekah to marriage with Canaanite women. Esau had married local women who were “a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah” (26:35).<sup>70</sup> Apparently, Isaac and Rebekah were unable to prevent Esau from marrying these women, but they did all in their power to prevent Jacob from marrying a local woman. Rebekah, who wanted to convince Isaac to send Jacob to Paddan Aram, says to him: “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?” (27:46). Isaac summoned Jacob and told him, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Go up to Paddan-Aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take a wife there from the daughters of Laban, the brother of

65. See, e.g., von Rad, *Genesis*, 250.

66. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 170.

67. E.g., S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOT Supp. 70 (Sheffield, 1989), 48–53.

68. G. J. Wenham, “Betulah, A Girl of Marriageable Age,” *VT* 22 (1972), 326–48; M. Tsevat, “בתולה בתולים,” *TDOT* (Grand Rapids, 1975), 2.338–43.

69. Various Mesopotamian sources also indicate that a virgin bride had a special value: e.g., *ša lā lam-dat* “who has not been known”; *ša zikaram lā idū* “who has not known a man”; *ša lā petât* “who has not been opened.” See Jean-Jacques Glassner, “Hospitality and the Honor of the Family,” in B. S. Lesko, ed., *Women’s Earliest Records*, Brown Judaic Studies 166 (Atlanta, 1989), 75–76.

70. The Hittite women were Canaanites; e.g., Skinner, *Genesis*, 368.

your mother” (28:1–2). The words of the father express his firm conviction that Jacob, whom he has chosen to be his successor (28:3–4), should not marry a Canaanite woman.<sup>71</sup> Esau, whose ear was attuned to all that was happening in his father’s house, realized that the “Canaanite women displeased his father, Isaac. So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael the son of Abraham, the sister of Nabaioth” (28:8–9). While Esau’s image was now more positive, nevertheless, it is still clear that only Jacob was worthy to inherit the blessing of Abraham.

This approach to Canaanite wives changes with regard to the sons of Jacob. Jacob did not send his sons to Mesopotamia to look for wives. Apparently they married Canaanite women, as did Judah and his sons, as related in chap. 38. It is not within the scope of this article to deal with this significant change in attitude.<sup>72</sup>

Albright wrote the following concerning the sexual behavior of the Canaanites as found in the non-Biblical sources:

We have not found in any early mythological literature such an overwhelming amount of bloodshed and sexual libertinism as that found in Canaanite literature; and the picture that arises from the collections of Philo from Byblos (the first millennium B.C.E.) is even more extreme than that which we find in the epic literature.<sup>73</sup>

Other scholars maintain that an objective analysis of Canaanite sources does not support Albright’s view.<sup>74</sup> Greenstein argues:

The main sources for scholars’ views about the Canaanites were the polemical claims of a handful of passages from the Torah and the Prophets; the writings of the authors from the Greek and the Roman periods; and the books of W. F. Albright. Canaanites tended to be characterized as depraved pagans who were obsessed with fertility rites and steeped in the practices of sacred prostitution and human sacrifice.<sup>75</sup>

Even if we accept the view that the Biblical description of the sexual conduct of the Canaanites as overly permissive was in reality exaggerated, it is enough for the interpretation of Biblical narrative to indicate that in the Bible their behavior is characterized as an “abomination.”<sup>76</sup>

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71. According to some scholars, this reason for Jacob’s journey to Paddan Aram reflects a different tradition from the stories of Jacob and Esau from that found in the story of the theft of the blessing (27:1–45), according to which Jacob was forced to flee so that his brother would not kill him. See Speiser, *Genesis*, 169–70; von Rad, *Genesis*, 268. However, there are many possible reasons for any particular event and a skilled narrator knows how to present them together.

72. For a discussion of the dispute between Jacob and his sons regarding Dinah’s marriage to Shechem son of Hamor, see our study, “Towards Understanding the Significance of Jacob’s Statement: ‘I will divide them in Jacob, I will scatter them in Israel’ (Gen. 49:7b),” in A. Wénin, ed., *Studies in the Book of Genesis* (Leuven, 2001), 541–59.

73. W. F. Albright, “Canaan,” *Encyclopedia Biblica* 4 (Jerusalem, 1962), 200–201 [in Hebrew]; see also idem, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London, 1968), 152.

74. D. R. Hillers, “Analyzing the Abominable: Our Understanding of Canaanite Religion,” *JQR* 75 (1985), 253–69; E. L. Greenstein, “The God of Israel and the Gods of Canaan: How Different Were They?” *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1999), 47\*–58\*, esp. 50\*–53\*.

75. *Ibid.*, 48.

76. E.g., Lev. 18:26, 27, 29. For the meaning of the term תועבה “abomination,” see H. D. Preuss, “תועבה to’ebah,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Stuttgart–Berlin–Köln, 1995), 8.580–91.

It is also possible to understand more deeply the significance of circumcision in light of the importance ascribed to the male sexual organ in Israel as well as in other cultures.<sup>77</sup>

The special importance ascribed to the male sexual organ is to be found in two narratives in Genesis. When Abraham sent his servant to find a suitable bride for his son, he said to him: “Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell” (Gen. 24:2–3). At the conclusion of the conversation it is said: “So the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham and swore to him as bidden” (24:9).

Jacob, on his deathbed, “summoned his son Joseph and said to him, ‘Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty; please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial place’” (47:29–30). Joseph responded to his father’s request, “I will do as you have spoken” (47:30). But Jacob was not satisfied with the promise, so he said: “‘Swear to me’. And he swore to him” (47:31a).

Scholarly literature has long recognized that the word “thigh” is a euphemism for the sexual organ.<sup>78</sup> It thus appears that Abraham and Jacob required that people who swore that they would execute these two important requests should do so by placing their hand very near the sexual organ or perhaps even holding it. In both cases the text concerns the final requests of Abraham and Jacob just before their deaths. It implies that one swears by one’s vitality.

The result of the circumcision, namely, the removal of part of this important organ, finds its full expression when the sexual organ is in erection, i.e., during sexual intercourse. Thus the unnatural appearance of the sexual organ at the time of sexual contact was intended to be a mnemonic sign to remember the covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants that requires one to act in this area differently from the “Others.”

Hamilton argues:

One significance of the patriarch’s new name is that it universalizes Abraham’s experience with God. This point contrasts with the later emphasis in the chapter on circumcision, which particularizes Abraham’s relationship with God. His circumcision identifies him as father of the Israelites. His new name identifies him as the father of the faithful, regardless of what particular ethnic group they represent. He is to be the father of many *goyim*, not many *yehudim*.<sup>79</sup>

It appears to us that there is no contradiction between the meaning and aims of the name change and circumcision; indeed they complement one another. Abraham’s destiny finds expression in his new name whose midrashic explanation is “I have made you a father of a multitude of nations” and whose meaning, as Hamilton rightfully argues, was to universalize Abraham’s experience with God.<sup>80</sup> This goal was to be realized by the seed of Abraham. The seed of Abraham is the nucleus of

77. E.g., Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (Berkeley, 1985), 66.

78. E.g., M. Malul, “More on Paḥad Yiṣḥaq (Genesis XXXI 42, 53) and the Oath by the Thigh,” *VT* 35 (1985), 198; Pope, “Euphemism,” 720.

79. *Genesis*, 464.

80. *Loc. cit.*

the “multitude of nations” that will view Abraham as their father. Circumcision thus serves to fulfill the aim of becoming “the father of a multitude of nations.” As Wenham says: “God’s original purpose for mankind, thwarted by the fall and faltering again in the post-Noah period, is eventually achieved by Abraham’s descendants.”<sup>81</sup>

After the birth of Ishmael as recorded in Genesis 16, Abram and the readers could assume that Ishmael would be the heir of Abram. But according to Gen. 17:19, God promised that only a son born to Sarah would be his heir. Before the birth of Isaac, Abraham had to undergo an actual change from his state at the time of God’s first revelation until the revelation in chap. 17. The changing of his name and the act of circumcision thus symbolized the necessary separation from that of the “Others.”

The metamorphosis of Abraham (and also of Sarah to a certain extent) does not occur as a result of extraordinary changes. God just adds one letter to (or changes one letter of) the original name. The addition or change enables one, by special interpretation of the new names, to comprehend the purpose of the act of renaming and the destinies of those renamed. Likewise God, who commands Abram to undergo circumcision, demands that he perform an act that was apparently familiar to him and his household. However, he is obligated to perform the circumcision in a way that differs significantly from what was known. The circumcision had to be performed specifically on the eighth day of the birth of a son (and not at the age of sexual maturity, as was the case with Ishmael), and its purpose was to serve as a sign of an eternal covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. This metamorphosis regarding Abraham is characteristic of his destiny. He is not removed from his surroundings to become a completely different person. He departs, but maintains a certain affinity toward it which enables other nations to view him more easily as their father.

To summarize: at the age of 75, Abraham began undergoing a process of separation in order to be worthy of fulfilling his destiny, but only at the age of 99—after the name change and circumcision—did the long process come to an end. Only now could he become the father of Isaac, who was designated to be his heir.

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81. *Genesis*, 22.