



Abraham... Genesis 17:1-27

Now last week in our initial lesson, I made the point that a covenant is oath bound promise.¹

There are three major covenants outlined in the Bible. Now, in coming to that number I am obviously subsuming some of the covenants mentioned in Scripture under those three titles. For example, I am including the covenant with Noah, the one with Abraham, the one with David and the new covenant all under the Covenant of Grace. I'll try to flesh that out as we go along. But for now you might try to think of these three covenants I am about to describe as broad, major categories.

Anyway, there are three major covenants revealed in the scripture and they are: (1.) the Covenant of Redemption, (2.) the Covenant of Works, and (3.) the Covenant of Grace. Now sometimes, commentators and theologians call them by other names and that adds to the confusion. But even though other names are sometimes used...the basic idea of three covenants is generally maintained.²

Now generally speaking those three covenants are understood to have occurred in the following chronological order: redemption, works, and grace.

The first of those three covenants is the Covenant of Redemption.

Theologians and Bible scholars understand this covenant to have been made by the Father and the Son in eternity past...that is, they view it to have been made before Creation. In it, the Father and the Son determined together to save the elect through the work of redemption that the Son would accomplish.

The second covenant is the Covenant of Works.³

The Covenant of Works is understood to have been the covenant made between God and Adam in which God promised life to Adam on condition of his perfect obedience in the Garden of Eden. But Adam did not obey and hence the promise was never confirmed and as a result sin and death entered the world through the sin of one man.⁴

Finally there is the Covenant of Grace and it is understood to be that gracious covenant in which God communes with the elect and promises them the forgiveness of sin and eternal life on the condition of their faith in Christ's redemptive work.⁵

Some theologians find it easier to think of simply two covenants because they see the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace inextricably bound up together in the elective and saving purposes of God. I do understand the point but it tends to become confusing because when they do that they then tend to insert another covenant name...the Covenant of Mercy by which they mean the

two covenants of Redemption and Grace combined. One such theologian is the incomparable R.L. Dabney.⁶

Now you would expect for a teacher to explain the three covenants from Scripture chronologically and I have to tell you I thought about doing it that way. But our real interest is in the Covenant of Grace...not just because it deals with us and our children but also because most of the controversies that arise...arise just there.

So I have started media res.⁷

That is I have started in the middle with the Covenant of Grace and have actually started even in the middle of that...with Abraham. Last week I began by taking in a narrative manner the crucial aspects of Abraham's life and covenant with God. I did that by reminding you of how God sovereignly chose Abraham and appeared to him and made promises to him. In last week's lesson I focused on Genesis 15 and in particular on God's gracious promise to Abraham to make his name great and to grant him a seed. I started there because understanding the covenant with Abraham is absolutely essential to understanding the Reformed notion of covenant theology. It is like skeleton on which the muscles and flesh of Covenant Theology hang.

Now this morning, I want to look at Genesis 17.

Thirteen years passed from the time that God made the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 to the scene before us this morning in Genesis 17. Those thirteen years were not uneventful.

It was in those thirteen years, that Abraham and Sarah had grown weary of waiting for God to fulfill His promise.⁸ They had decided, rather Sarah had decided and Abraham had agreed, to fulfill God's promise using human wisdom and invention.⁹ They decided to use Sarah's Egyptian maidservant Hagar to produce the promised heir. The custom was not a new one.

In the ancient Semitic world, if a wife could not bear a child, she was sometimes obligated to provide a suitable slave girl to produce an heir. One such actual contract reads:

(Miss) Kelim-ninu has been given in marriage to (Mr.) Shennima...If Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu shall acquire a woman of the land Lulu (i.e., a slave girl) as wife for Shennima.¹⁰

In the case of Abraham and Sarah, Sarah may have thought that since she was barren, she had an obligation to provide just such a girl to carry Abraham's seed. But after Hagar had consorted with Abraham and bore him a son, Sarah became deeply resentful. Sarah treated Hagar so harshly that she fled into the wilderness. There, God rescued Hagar and the child and told them to return and submit to Sarah's authority.

Apparently, after she and Ishmael returned, there was a measure of peace.

Apparently, Abraham's affection toward Ishmael grew and was genuine.

Apparently, Abraham and even Sarah had grown accustomed to the idea that Ishmael would be the one through whom the covenant would be fulfilled.

But all of that was about to change. In Genesis 17:1, God reappeared to establish His covenant with Abraham.

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:1...**When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "**I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,**

The first thing that I should point out is that Abraham was actually ninety-nine years old. He was not fifty or even sixty; he was genuinely ninety-nine years old. I think sometimes we reinterpret the clear words of the text to conform to mental images that we have gained from either film or literature. Abraham was genuinely ancient and no doubt the nomadic life that he had lived had taken its toll.

Secondly, I should point out that he and Sarah had long since passed the time where there was any human possibility that they could conceive and bear children. When Abraham had first heard the voice of God, he had been seventy-five years old. Eleven years later, he had received an additional promise. Now a full twenty-four years later Abraham was nearly one hundred years old and his wife was nearly ninety.

I am emphasizing their ages because it is important that you understand the nature of their inability in order to understand the importance of the name God used to introduce Himself. That name occurs in chapter 17, verse 1.

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:1...** "**I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,**

Now the term that we read in English as **“God Almighty”** is the exact same term most of us have grown accustomed to singing in the praise chorus, **“El-Shaddai”**. It is hard to know with certainty what the underlying Hebrew words meant. Some Hebrew scholars think the word comes from the word **“mountain”**; others think it comes from the word **“breast”**. But either way, almost everyone sees it as a term signifying strength or protection. The word is used 48 times in the Old Testament. Thirty-one of those instances occur in the book of Job. It is used five times in Genesis and three of those times occur in the Joseph stories. It is also used at the beginning of Ruth and that makes perfect sense. **“El Shaddai”**, you see, is the God of the weak, the oppressed, the helpless.¹¹

The significance here is that God is referred to by the one of His names, **El Shaddai**, that focuses on one of His attributes...His strength. He is strong and a He is a fortress and He is able to provide strength and succor for one overtaken by human frailty. It doesn't matter whether it is the pitiful Job, or the helpless Naomi, or the hopeless Joseph, this God is one who presents Himself as a source of strength and courage and He gives his name as **“El Shaddai”**. He is the God who is promising to be Abraham's shield. He is the God who is promising to be Abraham's strength.

Now, of course, there is one notable difference between what we read in chapter fifteen and what we read here in chapter seventeen. The difference is that now God attaches a command. And the way the command is linked to verse two certainly makes it seem like a condition.

What God says is, **“Walk before me, and be blameless...”**

The real question is, **“What does God mean by blameless?”**

It is a word that comes up earlier in Genesis 6:

^{ESV} **Genesis 6:9**...These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.

In Genesis 6, the word **righteous** is used as a comparative term. It is a man-ward comparison. Noah was a **righteous** man compared to those around him. The second term **blameless** is a God-ward term. Usually it means something akin to being **wholehearted**. Sometimes, the term is attached to sacrifices and when it is it means something like **“without blemish”**. Here, however, it is the first use in view. Notice also that just like Genesis 17; it is linked to the word **“walk”**. That is a biblical way of saying, **“Let this be the pattern of your life.”**¹²

God is saying, **“Abraham, I am the Lord God Almighty. Let your life be a life of constant, wholehearted devotion to me...”**

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:2**...**“that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”**

Now literally, the phrase **“and I will establish”** is something more akin to **“that I may grant”**. The point is that God will establish His covenant in Abraham’s obedience, not in spite of it.

Now, you may be asking, **“But I thought you said last week that the covenant that God established with Abraham was unconditional.”** Actually, there is a sense in which that is true. Anytime God reveals Himself to fallen man, it is an

act of God's unconditional grace and kindness.¹³ You remember the scene I trust where God came down and walked through the severed animals alone. Abram was lying in a state of exhaustion or terror, depending on how you understand the passage, and God walked through the sacrificial animals alone.

But now in establishing His covenant with Abraham, God is applying conditions. He has accepted Abraham's faith as righteousness but now He is demanding that Abraham do as He commands. Listen to James Montgomery Boice.

There is a question that arises at this point, however, in part because of the way Genesis 17 is written. The question is this: What is the role of the individual human being with respect to the covenant? It is one thing to say that the covenant is unilateral, that is, that God initiates it and establishes the terms. But granting that, it is still true that he establishes his covenants with us and that we must therefore relate to them in some way. How do we relate to them? And is there any sense in which the covenant is ultimately contingent upon our response?

When God says "you must," he is not saying "My will is dependent on your action." God does not say, "You must do this, and if you don't, I won't do what I've promised." God does not act like that. God is sovereign. God is going to do what he will do. But it is no less true and no less important—though it is not a prerequisite for God's acting—that we must do something.

We may express this theologically. Speaking in New Testament thought forms, we may say that God justifies the ungodly by grace alone—that the work is entirely of him. But God never does that apart from regeneration. God justifies us by grace on the basis of the work of Christ. But since God never justifies without regenerating, the one who is justified *will, must, and shall* respond in ways that are glorifying to God. This is what we find in the case of Abraham. The Lord said, "I am going to bless you and your descendants through my Son, Jesus Christ. And now, because I am doing this, because I am applying my grace to your life, you must live for me." If we are not living for God, we prove by our actions that we have never been regenerated or justified. If we do, there is a certain sense in which we add our seal to the seal of God and acknowledge that his word is truth.¹⁴

That notion sometimes causes difficulty for modern believers. We sometimes think that God has no right to impose any conditions on us at all.

We sometimes think, and are usually wise enough not to say, **“God has no right to stick His nose into this particular corner of my life”**. What we usually want from God is something more akin to relief. We want relief from the consequences of our sin or from desperate circumstances. What we are often surprised to find is that God is much more obtrusive than that.

I particularly like the way C.S. Lewis puts it in *Mere Christianity*. Allow me to read you a short passage:

When I was a child I often had toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something which would deaden the pain for that night and let me get to sleep. But I did not go to my mother—at least, not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this. I did not doubt she would give me the aspirin; but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist next morning. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain: but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists; I knew they started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth, which had not yet begun to ache. They would not let sleeping dogs lie; if you gave them an inch they took an ell.

Now, if I may put it that way, Our Lord is like the dentists. If you give Him an inch, He will take an ell. Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of (like masturbation or physical cowardice) or which is obviously spoiling daily life (like bad temper or drunkenness). Well, He will cure it all right: but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked; but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment.¹⁵

You see, when God intervenes in our life, He does give us relief. But He doesn't just leave us there. He imposes His own set of obligations. They are not the reason that He intervenes, but once He does He makes demands. He hems us in. He drives us forward in our sanctification. We are His slaves. Oh, we are slaves of righteousness to be sure, but we are His slaves nevertheless.

Now, in case you find the idea of the covenant obligations uncomfortable, I want you to look at the repetition of a particular phrase. It is the phrase "**As for...**" It occurs in Genesis 17:4, 9, and 15. And in each of those particular uses it has a different person in mind. Look at verse 4. I am reading from the New International version here simply because the ESV doesn't do a very good job of keep the contrast in front of our eyes.

^{ESV} Genesis 17:4..."Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:4..."As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations.

Obviously, what follows is God's statement of all that He will do. In verse 9, however, God turns to Abraham's obligation.

^{ESV} Genesis 17:9...And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

Finally, in verse 15, God explains Sarah's role.¹⁶

^{ESV} Genesis 17:15...And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

You see God is laying out for Abraham all that His covenant means. He is telling Abraham what He Himself will do. He is telling Abraham what He expects Abraham to do. He is even telling Abraham what will occur with Sarah. And Abraham has the only response imaginable.

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:3**...Then Abram fell on his face.

I love that. I love Abraham's response. But even more than that, I love the fact that God tells Abraham what He will do. Look at verse 4-8.

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:4**..."Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

Now, when you look at the list, you cannot help but see the extraordinary nature of the promises. God promises to:

- 1) To make Abraham the father of many nations...
- 2) To make Abraham the father of kings.
- 3) To establish the covenant with him and his descendents...
- 4) Give his descendents the land...

But, God doesn't stop there. He goes onto make demands of Abraham and He gives Abraham a sign or a seal of the covenant He has made.

^{ESV} Genesis 17:9...And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Now lets take a minute and see what Abraham's obligations are.

The first question is, **"What is Abraham supposed to do?"**

The second question is, **"How is Abraham supposed to do what he is commanded to do?"**

The third question is, **"When is this sign to be applied?"**

The fourth question is, **"To whom is it supposed to be applied?"**

The fifth question is, **"What happens if it is not applied?"**

If nothing else, I want you to see this morning that there was a sign of the covenant.¹⁷ That should not be such an unusual concept for you. Almost every covenant that we see around us has an attending sign. We see it when men shake hands. We see it when couples exchange wedding vows. On the one hand there is the covenant; on the other hand there is the sign of the covenant. The sign of the covenant is physical reminder of the truth of the covenant.¹⁸

Once, after my wife and I were married, someone asked her if she was married. Instead of saying yes, she simply held up her left hand and showed them her wedding ring. She showed them the symbol that represented her being married but the sign and what the sign represented were so closely related that holding up her ring answered the question.

Now, notice what God says to Abraham in Genesis 17:9.

^{ESV} Genesis 17:9...And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations."

Next, I want you to notice what He says to Sarah through Abraham in Genesis 17:15.

^{ESV} Genesis 17:15...And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Now you will notice that with regard to Sarah, there are no stipulations. Instead there is only the promise of blessing. Why was that? I think it was because God viewed Sarah to be **"in Abraham"** and considered them **"one flesh"**. It was not

necessary to give Sarah any additional stipulations. She received those in Abraham just as she did the promise and blessing.

Now, the promise made to Abraham was wonderful. Of course, there were stipulations but they were no terrible that Abraham buckled under their weight. Instead, Abraham responded to them with laughter. It was not the laughter of cynicism either; it was the laughter of faith and wonder.

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:17**...Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "**Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?**"

Now, I want you to notice what happened next in verse 18.

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:18**...And Abraham said to God, "**Oh that Ishmael might live before you!**" ¹⁹ God said, "**No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.**" ²⁰ **As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.** ²¹ **But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.**"

Abraham is asking God to let Ishmael enjoy the fullness of the covenant that God had made with him. He is asking God to let the fullness of covenantal blessing rain down on Ishmael.

The reason I am making the point here is that Ishmael would have the sign of the covenant but not the full blessing of the covenant.¹⁹ Nevertheless, he enjoyed

favor from God. He enjoyed physical benefits with being associated with Abraham even though the fulfillment of the covenant would be through Isaac.

How hard that must have been for Abraham. Apparently, he had come to love Ishmael truly. He wanted the fullness of God to be upon Ishmael but he purposed nevertheless to obey God.

^{ESV} **Genesis 17:22**...When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. ²³ Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. ²⁷ And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Now to sum up, we have seen that God initiated a gracious covenant with Abraham. In that covenant, he promised Abraham wonderful blessings. We have also seen that the covenant imposed things upon Abraham and his seed. We have seen that the imposition of those commands was not grievous to Abraham; rather they brought Abraham great joy. We have also seen that just because someone had the sign of the covenant did not necessarily mean that they enjoyed the full blessing of the covenant. Obviously, Ishmael did not have the full blessing that Isaac was going to enjoy. We have also seen that the sign of the covenant was given to young and old, bond and free alike. It was given to those that believed and those who did not believe but the sign was always related to the promise God had made to Abraham, who believed God and had his faith counted to him as righteousness and thereby became the friend of God.

I love that idea...that idea of being God's friend. I love the imagery of two friends of different standing covenanting together to a steadfast, loyal love and friendship.

And you know when I think of the kind of loyalty, I cannot help but think of my grandfather and his best friend Bidy Nipp. When I used to spend time at my grandfather's house in the summer, my grandfather and my cousin Buddy and I would almost invariably wind up at Bidy's house two or three times a week. My cousin and I used to dread going there. The frame of Bidy's house was made of tall Bois'Darc fence posts. Tarpaper was stretched around the posts to form an outer wall for the house. The roof was made of galvanized tin. The floor was dirt. There was no electricity, no water, no plumbing. Now, my grandfather didn't have indoor plumbing either but he did have electricity and his house had actual floors. So we were pretty much uptown. Inside Bidy's house there were lots of kids and lots of old worn out stained mattresses strewn about on the dirt floor.

When we would visit, we would go inside and my grandfather who was pretty feeble would just plop right down on one of those mattresses like it was a fine leather sofa. There were no chairs. My cousin and I always stood keeping a careful lookout for ticks or scorpions or other nasty critters. We always spent the whole time trying to leave.

But my grandfather would act like he and Bidy were drinking Mint Juleps out on the veranda. We always dreaded him getting comfortable because if we lingered we knew that there was a chance that we might be asked to eat with Bidy and that was the worst thing we could imagine. You see at Bidy's everything was

cooked outside on an open fire and there was absolutely no way of telling, from our point of view, what actually might be on the plate we were offered.

One of the last times I visited Bidy with my grandfather, the thing we dreaded most happened. Bidy invited us to eat. My cousin and I made excuses like, "We just ate" but my grandfather just dug in like he was eating at the Carlton Hotel in downtown Tyler. Later, when we left and were driving home my cousin and I asked my grandfather,

"Papa, how on earth could you eat with Bidy?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean how could you eat with him? Didn't you see how dirty that place was? I mean there could have been anything in the world in that stuff?"

My grandfather hesitated for a minute and then stopped the car and turned and looked us both right in the eye and said with a very soft voice something I have never forgotten.

"Boys, Bidy is my friend. He will always be my friend. I don't care what he puts on the plate, and I would rather die than insult him and I won't have you insulting him either. If you are going to come and spend time with me you need to understand how things are. Now I know this may be hard to understand but I would eat whatever he fixed even if he spit in it."

I remember that like it was yesterday...loyal covenantal love. He couldn't speak any unkind words to Bidy because he loved him and he wouldn't let us do it

either. And here's the thing, it is the same for us. In Christ and the covenant of grace we are God's friends and that is a glorious thing.

Let's pray.

¹ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 6. See also: Lee Irons and his series on covenant theology especially "The Abrahamic Covenant Pt. 2 (Genesis 15)" available at <http://www.upper-register.com/mp3s.html>.

² I realize that sometimes theologians combine covenants that I am separating and I intend to clarify that point later on.

³ Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2 "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience."

⁴ The state into which sinful men and women are born is often referred to as "original sin" not because of its creativity but rather because of its origin in the first man. Cf. Berkhof, 244.

See also, ^{ESV} Romans 5:12...Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned--

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith 7.3 "Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe."

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1941, reprint 1992), 244.

⁷ A term often associate with epic poetry. It means to start in the middle. Most epic poems...the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, *Paradise Lost* start in the middle and then work backwards. I am not claiming the status of an epic.

⁸ We know that thirteen years had passed since Ishmael's birth because of Genesis 16:16 which says: ^{ESV} Genesis 16:16...Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

⁹ ^{ESV} Genesis 16:1...Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ² And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (Shoken Books: New York, 19710), 128.

¹¹ Laird Harris, Gleason Archer and Bruce Waltke, "Shaddai" in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament V. 2* (Moody Press: Chicago, 1980), 907. "In recent times these earlier suggestions have been all but rejected and new ones have been put in their place. We need to mention only some of the more tenable suggestions. One is that shadday is to be connected with the Hebrew verb shadad "to destroy," hence "my destroyer." A second possibility, and this is the most widely accepted today, is that shadday is to be connected with the Akkadian word, šadu "mountain." Thus El Shaddai would translate into English something like "God/El of the mountain," i.e. God's abode. The ending - ay is to be understood as an adjectival suffix (and thus the translation "of the.... "), a morphological feature now demonstrated by Ugaritic: for example, one of El's three daughters is called 'rsy ('arsi) and means, "she of the earth." Also related etymologically, in addition to Akkadian šadu is Ugaritic ¾d, (Cross, see bibliography pp. 248-250).

¹² See "Tammam" (2522) in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament V.2*, 973.

¹³ Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1 "The distance between God and the creature is go great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant."

¹⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: A New Beginning V.2* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 2006), 581-2.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan Company: New York, 1967), 171.

¹⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Gran Rapids, 1990), 469-470. Noting that Sarah is not given a sign Hamilton writes, "This lack may be attributed either to the heavily patriarchal structure of OT society, or to the OT teaching about the "one flesh" principle in marriage. If two have become one there is need for a mark only on one."

¹⁷ Hamilton, 470. "This lack may be attributed either to the heavily patriarchal structure of OT society, or to the OT teaching about the "one flesh" principle in marriage. If two have become one there is need for a mark only on one.

The designation of circumcision itself as a covenant is a synecdoche for covenantal obligation: "this is [the aspect of] my covenant you must keep."

Circumcision is designated as a sign of the covenant, but a sign for whom? The one who is circumcised (and his family)? God? The outsider? This is the fourth passage in Genesis that mentions a sign. In 1:14 the luminaries serve as signs to identify the seasons. In 4:15 the sign on Cain identifies him to the outsider as one under divine protection. He belongs to that category. Along with these two identity signs we have the mnemonic sign of the rainbow (9:8–17, "when I see it, I will remember"), put in the heavens by God to remind him of his promise to Noah not to destroy the world by a deluge again.

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

May the act of circumcision be a sign for the benefit of the one circumcised? Every time he looks at his body he is reminded that he is part of Yahweh's covenant. Thus interpreted, circumcision is a mnemonic sign, reminding God's people of who they are (as in Exod. 13:9, 16; 31:12–17; Num. 15:37–40; Deut. 6:8; 10:16; Josh. 4:6–7), from what they have been delivered, and by whom they have been delivered.

It is equally possible that circumcision is a sign to God, as was the rainbow in ch. 9. God will see the circumcised penis of the Israelite before and during sexual congress, and will then "remember" his promise to Abraham and to all his descendants to make them very fertile.¹⁸

One factor that militates against the idea of circumcision as a sign for the one circumcised and favors the idea of circumcision as a sign for God is the lack of an explanation of the sign. In other instances where a sign is given to the Israelites, the function or purpose of that sign is also given.¹⁹

¹⁸ O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1980), 149. "A sign gives a witness. It testifies to the reality of the relationship that has been established. Circumcision offers its perpetual witness to the reality of the covenantal bond."

¹⁹ The connection to baptism is obvious.