

**GENESIS *for* EVERYONE**

**PART II**  
**Chapters 17–50**



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Chapters 17–50

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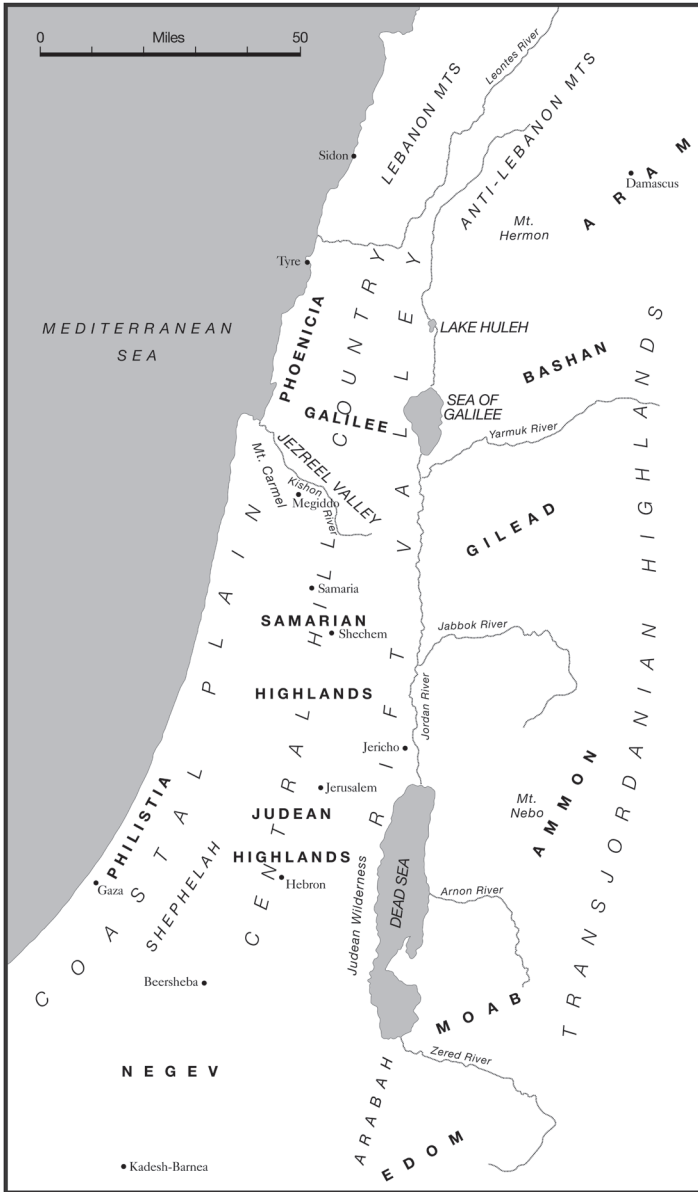
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The translation at the beginning of each chapter is my own. I have tried to stick closer to the Hebrew than modern translations often do when they are designed for reading in church, so you can see more precisely what the text says. Although I prefer to use gender-inclusive language, I have let the translation stay gendered if inclusivizing it would involve considerable paraphrasing of exactly what the text says.

At the end of the book is a glossary of some key terms that recur in the text (mostly geographical, historical, and theological terms). In each chapter (though not in the introduction), these terms are highlighted in **bold** the first time they occur.

I am grateful to Cheryl Lee for giving much of this book a nontheologian's read and telling me which bits didn't make sense. If they still don't make sense, it's my fault. I am also grateful to Tom Bennett for checking the proofs.

There are many stories in it about my friends as well as my family. None are made up, but where necessary to be fair to people, they are heavily disguised. Sometimes I have disguised them so well that when I came to read them again, it took me time to remember who it was they were describing.



## GENESIS 17:1-6

### Your Name Will Be Abraham

<sup>1</sup>Abram was ninety-nine years old. Yahweh appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shadday. Live your life before me and be a person of integrity, <sup>2</sup>and I will make my covenant between me and you, and make you very, very numerous.” <sup>3</sup>Abram fell on his face; and God spoke with him: <sup>4</sup>“Here is my own covenant with you. You will be the ancestor of a horde of nations, <sup>5</sup>and you will no longer be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham, because I have made you the ‘ancestor of a horde’ of nations. <sup>6</sup>“I will make you very, very fruitful and make you into nations. From you kings will come.”

Names are important. My middle name is Edgar, which was my father’s first name. When I was being baptized, family legend says my grandmother leaned over to my mother and asked why it was not also to be my first name. My mother allegedly replied, “Because they will call his father Big Ed and him Little Ed” (which would be fine in the United States but would not work in Britain where “big head” suggests having too big an opinion of yourself). I don’t think my parents realized that John is ultimately a shortened version of Johanan, “Yahweh showed grace,” which is a neat name to be given. If they had realized, they would have been glad, because they had waited a while for the gift of a child. Names can suggest people’s destinies or significance, or say something important about their parents’ prayers for them.

So far, Genesis has been talking about “Abram.” In Genesis 17 the name changes to the familiar form “Abraham.” God brings about this change in connection with another reaffirmation of the promise to make Abraham into a numerous people, which God now expresses in a different way by declaring that Abraham will be the “ancestor” of a “horde” of nations. The first part of the name (*ab*) is the word for an ancestor or a father (in the New Testament, *abba* is the **Aramaic** equivalent). Now, if anyone wondered about the meaning of the earlier name Abram, they would probably conclude it meant “exalted father/ancestor.” In a sense it already thus constitutes a promise of what Abram will be (there was nothing particularly exalted

about him in his beginnings). And if you asked someone back in Harran what the name Abraham meant, they would probably say it meant the same as Abram (that is, these are two different spellings of the same name, like John and Jon or Ann and Anne). But in Hebrew, a “horde” is a *hamon*, so that within the name Abraham you can see most of that word (it is the business part of the name, too; *-on* is simply an ending, like the *-ing* on “ending”). On the basis of that, God can give a new significance to the longer, more familiar version of the name.

There are other significant aspects to what God says to Abraham. Genesis tells us that “Yahweh” appeared to Abram, but God’s own self-introduction to Abraham is “I am El Shadday.” **Yahweh** is the name God will reveal to Moses and the name by which God will be known to Israel. While Genesis knows that Yahweh is also acting and speaking in Abraham’s day and is thus quite happy to use the name Yahweh, it also knows Abraham himself would not have used it. Names such as **El Shadday** correspond more to the way Abraham would have spoken. This usage signifies that the real God is involved here, the God who will be involved with Israel, but it preserves the distinctiveness of the way God would later speak to Moses.

God gives Abraham two significant biddings. First, he is to live his life before God. “Live your life” in Hebrew is the word literally meaning “walk,” but it is a form of that verb that suggests walking about rather than simply making a single walk from A to B. It is the verb used of Noah’s and Enoch’s walking about or living their lives “with” God. Abraham is to walk his walk or live his life “before” God, which makes a different point. Abraham’s walk will be one that God is watching and watching over, which is both an encouragement and a challenge. Both are significant in the context. God will be watching over Abraham protectively, as God has been doing through Abraham’s ill-advised Egyptian adventure and his expedition to rescue Lot (Genesis 12–14), as he promised in Genesis 15 and will promise again here. God will also be watching to see what kind of person he is. Like Noah (Genesis 6:9), Abraham is to be a person of integrity. The word is usually translated “blameless,” which makes it sound impossibly demanding.

But the word God uses suggests not the absence of any faults but the presence of a positive quality (which is, in a way, at least as demanding an expectation). More literally, God wants Abraham to be “whole,” though in our context that would have psychological overtones. God wants Abraham to be wholly committed to God’s ways. God doesn’t expect him to be sinless; God is realistic and can cope with people making moral mistakes. Rather, God looks for a certain direction in people’s lives, a certain cast to their lives, a fundamental moral wholeness or straightness.

In connection with that, God will make a **covenant** commitment to Abraham. Actually God has already done that, and Genesis 15 was clear that making the covenant did not issue from Abraham’s being a person of integrity. He had not been that when they went down to Egypt. If Abraham made a contribution at all to the making of the covenant, it was simply by trusting in God’s promise. Nor was the making of that covenant conditional on any acts Abraham would do. Yet God’s commitment to Abraham was designed to involve Abraham’s integrity, and if that integrity is not forthcoming, it is not clear that God’s purpose in relating to Abraham can be fulfilled. Abraham’s integrity was not the basis of the covenant, but it was essential to its working. In this sense, God can only go on affirming the covenant commitment if Abraham does the same. Otherwise (as with a marriage relationship) things will simply not work. It takes two to tango.

God repeats earlier promises about flourishing and about nations coming from him, and also adds the note about “kings.”

## GENESIS 17:7–8

### Aliens and Strangers

<sup>7</sup>“I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, as an age-long covenant, to be God for you and for your offspring after you.

<sup>8</sup>I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the country in which you stay as aliens, all the country of Canaan, as an age-long holding, and I will be God for them.”

There is a world of difference between being an alien and being a citizen. The *New York Times* has an ethical agony page where the columnist discusses some dilemma. Last week a reader was taking his family on vacation in Holland, where smoking pot is legal. Would it be okay to let his son do so there when it is illegal in the United States? he asked. Is it okay to smoke pot illegally in the United States if you think the ban on pot is a silly law? If I were looking at that question as an alien, a big consideration would be, “What would happen if I were found out?” A citizen risks a fine or imprisonment; I might risk deportation. I am in the United States only on sufferance. Taxation without representation is fine; as long as I behave, I am secure. But I do not have the security of a citizen. Aliens in the United States (or anywhere else) have even less security if they lack the right papers, and/or if citizens stop needing aliens to pick their lettuce or blow their leaves.

Genesis 12–16 has twice referred to the status Abraham and his people have as aliens in describing his position in Egypt and the position his descendants will eventually have in Egypt. In both contexts they will be aware of the insecurity attached to this status. It makes Abraham nervous about what will happen to Sarah (and to him!), and it will lead to his descendants being ill-treated by their hosts, as can happen to aliens in any country.

Solemnly, being an alien is also the position Abraham’s family has in **Canaan** itself, and the position it will continue to have for generations. While things generally work out OK for them as aliens there, they have to live in areas that don’t interest the Canaanites, and they have to go and find food elsewhere in a famine. So it is a significant promise that they will not always be aliens. One day the country will be their agelong or perpetual holding, and it cannot then simply be taken away from them. “Holding” most often refers to the tract of land that an individual family occupies; God allocates the country as a whole to the clans, and the clans allocate it to individual families, and no one can appropriate it. It is each family’s secure possession. That is the position God promises that Israel will eventually have in relation to the whole country of Canaan. Genesis 15:16 has made clear it will be a long time before this

can happen, because there is no basis at the moment for throwing the Canaanites out of the country. But when God can justifiably do so, it can become Israel's holding.

Given that eventually people in **Ephraim** and then many people in **Judah** will be **exiled** from the country, hearing about God's giving it to Abraham's descendants as an age-long or perpetual holding would raise questions and possibilities in the minds of listeners. The question would be how this loss of the country could have happened, though they should have little difficulty working that out; it is implicit in that comment about the Canaanites' losing the country because of their waywardness. If that can happen to the Canaanites, it can surely happen to the Israelites, as the **Torah** makes explicit. The possibility issues from that word "age-long" or "perpetual." English translations often use the word "everlasting," which may suggest too much. In the Old Testament, how long is age-long or how perpetual is perpetual depends on the context. The word can mean "through all your life." Maybe God simply means, "The country will be theirs as long as they live with integrity, but if they give themselves up to waywardness and fail to turn from that waywardness, they could totally lose it." But then, if in the context of exile people do turn back, this promise offers them hope. Maybe their exile is not the end. In the context of twenty-first-century politics, the implication would be that we can see the Jewish people's freedom to live unhindered in the country as an outworking of this promise that goes back to Abraham. But Genesis 15:16 would imply that God can hardly reckon that the Palestinian people can simply be thrown out of the country without reason in order to make that possible and that the Jewish people would be unwise to assume that God's real commitment to them excludes the possibility of their losing the country again.

The New Testament takes up the image of life as an alien to describe the position of Christians in the world. We are aliens there (1 Peter 1:1, 4, 17; 2:11–12). The idea is not that God's created world is not our home in the sense that we are just passing through it on the way to heaven. It is that we could not be citizens of the "world" because it works on a basis that has little to do with Christ. If we feel at home in *that* world, something worrying has happened to us.

Another basis for hope here is the link between the agelong or perpetual possession of the country and God's agelong or perpetual **covenant** with Abraham. God has described the covenant with Noah as a perpetual one; now that expression is used of this covenant. The expression again raises the question of the cash value of the word "agelong" or "perpetual." In making this commitment God might presuppose, "But of course all this assumes you stay faithful to me. If you do not do that, all bets are off." God will not terminate the covenant arbitrarily, but if Abraham's offspring withdraws, God will feel free to do so.

Christians have sometimes assumed that this is what God did when the Jewish people as a whole did not recognize Jesus, reckoning that the new covenant of which the New Testament speaks is made with the church rather than the Jewish people and that it replaces God's covenant with the Jewish people. In effect Romans 9–11 asks whether that might have happened. Paul's response is horror at the idea. How could the faithful God do that? It is as well God could not, he implies, because if God could terminate that commitment to the Jewish people because of its waywardness, then the church could be cast off in the same way. Actually God has not allowed the Jewish people to disappear, and they have been free to reestablish themselves in the country. This sign of God's faithfulness can make the church sleep easier in its bed.

In other words, God will continue to be God for Abraham and his offspring. God uses that expression three times.

## GENESIS 17:9–14

### A Sign of Grace, Commitment, and Discipline

<sup>9</sup>God said to Abraham, "And you, you are to guard my covenant, you and your offspring after you, through their generations. <sup>10</sup>This is the covenant that you are to guard, between me and you and your offspring after you: the circumcising of every male you have. <sup>11</sup>You are to be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. It will be a covenant sign between me and you. <sup>12</sup>As a child of eight days, every male among you is to be circumcised,

through your generations. The person born in the household and acquired for money from any foreigner, who does not belong to your offspring: <sup>13</sup>he is definitely to be circumcised, the one born in your household and the one acquired for money. My covenant in your flesh will be an agelong covenant. <sup>14</sup>But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin: that person will be cut from his kin. He has thwarted my covenant.”

As was once the custom in Britain, my parents had me baptized when I was a baby, even though this was the only involvement they had with the church apart from weddings and funerals. I don't know exactly what they thought baptism was about, though I doubt if they regarded it as simply a social occasion. Given that they had waited a few years during which they had not been able to have a baby, they were thankful for my birth, and having me baptized would be a sign of this gratitude. When theologians seek to provide some further theological rationale for baptizing people as babies rather than waiting until they make their own profession of faith, they often emphasize that baptizing a baby reflects and testifies to baptism's being a sign of God's grace expressed in God's **covenant** with Israel that is then extended to the church. Yet baptism is indeed also a sign of someone's personal profession of faith, and baptizing people when they are in a position to make that profession matches that other aspect of its significance. Thus when I was a teenager and belonged for a while to a church that baptized people on the basis of their profession of faith, I was “rebaptized.” (A bishop I know blows a fuse at that expression, because really you can be baptized only once and being “rebaptized” implies renouncing your first “baptism.” So when someone who subsequently comes back to the Church of England wants to be ordained, he presses them to renounce their second “baptism.” I don't think I have ever before come out with this shady event from my youth, so I may be in trouble.)

Both the baptism of babies and the baptism of people on profession of faith can thus have some theological rationale, and denominations that practice one or the other do not need to dismiss as misguided those that practice the other. In

Israel, whereas the later practice of bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah signifies a person's taking up a personal commitment to the **Torah**, the practice of circumcision testifies to God's grace. Male circumcision was a common custom among Middle Eastern peoples, as has been the case in many other societies, but it was generally applied to boys on the verge of adulthood, not at birth. Applying it when they are born reflects the fact that they do nothing to earn it. It was God who made the covenant with Abraham, which in this way comes to apply to them.

In another sense the rite of circumcision (like infant baptism) does indicate the need for response to God's grace. Paradoxically, this acceptance of responsibility is undertaken by the community as a whole, and in particular by the baby's family. They must guard or keep or protect God's covenant, and accepting the rite of circumcision is a way they do that.

While circumcision is the distinctive and exclusive sign of a distinctive and exclusive commitment to Abraham's family, God's instructions also emphasize that it does not apply to Abraham's birth family alone but to everyone in his household—to all those who are part of the family business, whether they have always belonged to it or whether they are like those further members of the household whom Abraham and Sarah acquired in Egypt or might have acquired as a result of the adventure in Genesis 14. While they are “only” servants, they belong so firmly to the family that the covenant also applies to them. It is another expression of the way God's involvement with Abraham and Sarah brings blessing through them to other people.

For us, some ethical questions are raised by the description of these people. It simply assumes it is okay for Abraham to have people in his household who count merely as long-standing “servants” (that word does not come here, but it is the status of many of the people “born in his household”). Indeed, it assumes it is OK for Abraham to buy people, but such people are not “slaves” in the sense of possessions you can do what you like with. Their being included in the covenant and thus given the covenant sign indicates that they are not treated as less than human. God's approach to their position is similar to the one the New Testament takes to actual slavery. God does not simply declare that the difference between masters and servants must be abandoned,

but God does transform the status of servants (home-born or bought) in their eyes and in the eyes of Abraham.

Receiving the sign will be the way to keep the covenant rather than breaking it, to guard the covenant rather than thwarting it. It is something important and valuable, so it needs guarding. The problem is not that someone else might steal it but that its “owners” might neglect it. It is fragile in the sense that disregarding it could imperil it, and declining to accept the sign of the covenant would indicate people were doing that. Those who do so do not imperil the existence of the covenant; but they do imperil their own share in it and risk being “cut” from their kin. You either accept one kind of cutting, or you experience another kind of cutting; you either get cut into the covenant that God has “cut” (Genesis 15:18), or you get cut out. God does not say that a person’s kin are responsible for expelling a person who refuses the sign of the covenant, because Genesis is not laying down laws with sanctions. God’s commands are more often the “Don’t even think about it” kind of imperatives. To start thinking about penalties is to presuppose that people will disobey, which is unthinkable. On the other hand, while the covenant is radically inclusive, it is in another sense radically exclusive. Anyone can join, but those who decline to accept the covenant sign signify they want to stay outside the covenant family. If their kin accept the sign and thereby join, and they do not, they lose their place with their own kin as well as forgoing the chance to join this new kin. Only those who receive the sign are marked as within the covenant, but there is no ethnic or class bar to anyone receiving it. (We will consider its gender exclusivity in connection with 17:20–27.)

## GENESIS 17:15–19

### Sarai Becomes Sarah

<sup>15</sup>And God said to Abraham, “Sarai, your wife: she is not to be called Sarai, because her name is to be Sarah. <sup>16</sup>I will bless her and, yes, I am giving you a son from her. I will bless her and she will become nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

<sup>17</sup>Abraham fell on his face, laughed, and said to himself, “Can a

