

Genesis 17
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Overview

In the context of the book

This chapter corresponds to ch. 15. In both cases:

	Ch. 15	Ch. 17
The Lord makes himself visible to Abram	1 "in a vision"	1 "appeared" (cf. 12:7)
The Lord promises Abram a seed	4-5	4-6, 15-21
The Lord promises Abram the land	7	8
Symbolic emphasis	Land, 9-21 (Feudal covenant)	Seed, 9-14 (circumcision)

Thus the two chapters are the formalization of the covenant.

Of this chapter

See chart. There are two dominant characteristics:

1. The chapter is chiastic, with five speeches by God.
 - a. First and last emphasize that a covenant is in view.
 - b. Second and fourth are renaming speeches, and describe the nations and kings to come from Abram and Sarai.
 - c. The central speech is the command to circumcise.
2. The last paragraph of the chapter, 23-27, fulfills two roles.
 - a. Its reference to the ages of Abraham and Ishmael links back to v.1.
 - b. It summarizes Abraham's obedience to the command to circumcise. Thus at the highest level the chapter is what Longacre calls an "execution paragraph," consisting of a command (1-22) and the corresponding obedience (23-27).

Lessons

We continue to see Abraham's weakness, in his desire to let Ishmael be the promised son.

God now requires Abraham and Sarah to act on his promises:

- He describes himself using a new name: El Shaddai
- He gives them new names, which will force them to redefine their relationships with their contemporaries. (e.g., Abraham has to reintroduce himself to Mamre.)
- He commands a specific act of obedience, circumcision

In spite of his weakness, Abraham obeys the command.

Setting, v.1

Comparing v.1 with the previous verse shows that 13 years have passed in silence. During these 13 years,

- Ishmael becomes a strong youth;
- Sarai continues to be barren;
- Abram is no longer exercised over his son (as he was in 15:2), but is content with the son of the flesh.

In spite of this, God still blesses him with the son of promise, an example of how God does “exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think,” Eph 3:20.

First Divine Speech, 1-2

The first speech has three utterances:

Identification	I <i>am</i> the Almighty God;
Command	walk before me, and be thou perfect.
Promise	2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

Identification: “I am Almighty God,” El Shaddai

This is the predominant name for God in the patriarchal period, used more times in Genesis than anywhere else (17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25), and described in Exod 6:3 as the dominant patriarchal name. What does it mean? Two broad families of meaning have been suggested.

The first emphasizes God’s personal care for his people.

- LXX in Genesis translates it “your God” or “my god,” depending on the speaker, suggesting a close personal relation.
- This same sense may inform Scofield’s derivation from \$D “female breast,” thus “the breasted God,” God as the tender, nourishing, caring one. But this translation is not sound; \$D is from \$DH, while this form must be from \$DD, a different root.
- Early Jewish etymology: \$e + DaY “the one who suffices” (but is \$e this old?)

The second family of meanings emphasizes God’s power. The derivation here would be from \$DD “deal violently with, despoil, ruin,” → “Almighty God,” thus LXX in Job *pantokrator* (cf. LL, used in good sense of God but in bad sense of men).

Where etymology is so obscure, it may profit us to consider usage (which ought always to take priority). Consider the instances in Genesis: what common thread do they carry?

- 17:1, to Abram, on the occasion of promising that Sarai will bear the promised son.
- 28:3, Isaac’s blessing to Jacob in sending him to Padan Aram: “May El Shaddai bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people.”

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- 35:11, God's blessing to Jacob when he changes his name to Israel: "I am El Shaddai: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins."
- 48:2,3, Jacob recounting his pilgrimage to Joseph: "And Jacob said unto Joseph, God Almighty appeared unto me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, 4 And said unto me, Behold, I will make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, and I will make of thee a multitude of people; and will give this land to thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession."
- 49:25, Jacob's blessing to Joseph, as he is dying: "Shaddai, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb."

By this point, it should be clear that they are dominated by the idea of fruitfulness, sometimes in the face of severe opposition. How about the last?

- 43:14, Jacob to his sons when allowing them to take Benjamin after he thinks Joseph and Simeon are already dead: "May El Shaddai give you mercy before the man, that he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin. If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

Here the fruitfulness idea is less clear, but still present. Jacob sees his offspring dying off one by one, and entrusts the care of his sons in the face of this threat to the God who has promised him those sons in the first place.

Thus it really combines the concepts suggested by etymology: El Shaddai is the almighty God, but not in an abstract sense. He deploys this power to bring blessing to his people. Delitzsch in Wenham: "El Shaddai is the God who so constrains natures that it does his will, and so subdues it that it bows to and serves grace."

Command: "Walk before me and be perfect"

The command is reminiscent of the description of Noah in 6:9: "Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God." Genesis nowhere calls Abraham "righteous," but this verse can be understood as a call to Abraham to do those things that were characteristic of righteous Noah.

We explained 6:9 as showing two aspects of Noah's righteousness: before men ("perfect in his generations") and before God ("walked with God"). The call to Abram is stronger.

- He is to walk, not just "with," but "before" God.
 - Walking with someone implies agreement with them (Amos 3:3, "can two walk together except they be agreed?").
 - Walking before someone implies a constant awareness of their presence, submitting to their review and approval.
- His perfection is not just "in his generations," but before God, before whom he walks.

Walk before me.—The command is repeated later to Israel’s kings (1 Kings 2:4, re. David’s offspring; claimed by David and Hezekiah, see notes on Gen 5). Abraham is to be the father of kings (v.6.), and must come up to their standard.

Be perfect.—The expression does not imply moral perfection, for David claims this (2 Sam 22:24) even after his adultery and murder in the case of Bathsheba. The Hebrew word literally means “complete,” and it describes “wholehearted commitment and wholeness of relationship” (Waltke p. 133).

Leopold: “Therefore says Yahweh: “Walk before me and be thou perfect.” The one command demands a God-conscious life of the best type; the other, faithful observance of all duties. The one is sound mysticism; the other, conscientious conduct. The one is the soul of true religion; the other, the practice of it.”

Promise: A covenant of multiplication

The AV, “I will make my covenant,” is misleading. The verb for initiating a covenant is “cut,” which we saw in 15:18. Here the verb is “give.” The emphasis is not on the initiation of the covenant, but on the conveyance of its benefits to Abraham. Up to this point he has had only words. Now he is to receive tangible evidence: the sign of circumcision, and the promise of a son within the year.

Compare the other two places where “give” governs “covenant”:

- 9:12, where Noah is given the rainbow
- Num 25:12, where Phinehas is given the priesthood.

In both cases, the emphasis is on the tangible, visible evidence of the relation implied in the covenant.

- “Cutting” a covenant establishes the relationships between the parties;
- “Giving” a covenant makes it tangible; it enables the recipient to be more fully conscious of it.

The point is that this is not another, different covenant from that of 15:18, but the same one, now made more concrete. The previous chapter shows how necessary such a gift is. Ch. 16 demonstrates that Abram is *not* trusting God to provide the promised offspring. Thus God must make this aspect of his promise, already articulated in chs. 12, 15, more clear.

Application: Compare these two stages in God’s covenant with Abraham, with our relation to him. That relation also rests on covenant, the new covenant of Jer 31.31ff.

1. God *made* that covenant at the cross, in the sacrifice of his son. That sacrifice purchased forever and completely God’s people, and delivered them from damnation. “God will not payment twice demand, once from a bleeding surety’s hand, and then again from mine.”
2. God *gives* us this covenant at the time of our salvation, when it becomes tangible to us. The covenant we receive at salvation is not a different one than the one made at the cross, but we become conscious of it and live in relation to it.

The point of emphasis is, “I will multiply thee exceedingly.” While this chapter and 15 both include both land and seed, this one emphasizes the seed, just as 15 did the land.

Abram's Response, 3a

He falls on his face at the appearance of the Lord. Compare the response implicit at the beginning of ch. 15, where God said to him, "Fear not." Consider the influences that Abram feels at this point:

- the appearance of God;
- his self-declaration to be El Shaddai, the God who bends nature to do his will;
- the assurance of his grace toward Abram, in conveying to him tangible evidence of the covenant between them.

Well might Abram prostrate himself, and so should we, when we consider the Lord's great goodness toward us.

Second Divine Speech, 3b-8, "As for Me..."

Each of the next three speeches begins with an emphatic noun or pronoun. Our version captures this in the first and third with the phrasing, "As for me,..." and "as for Sarai thy wife" (15). The middle speech also begins this way, and it might better be translated, "as for thee" (v.9). The *creation* of the covenant was unilateral, on God's side alone, but its *execution* involves Abram and Sarai as well as God.

God's covenant with Abraham has three main components: the land, the seed, and the blessing of a special relation with God. The different records of the promise combine and emphasize these differently.

- The bipartite structure of chapter 15 emphasized the seed and the land; the blessing is implicit in the fact that God is engaging Abram personally.
- Here the emphasis is on the seed and the blessing, with the land in the background. There are two paragraphs, each introduced with a reference to the covenant:
 - 4-6, fruitfulness of Abram ("This is my covenant with thee")
 - 7-8, God's special relation to Abraham and his descendants, focusing on the land ("I will establish my covenant between me and thee")

The promise concerning the land is included in the second paragraph, but sandwiched between two references to the blessing ("I will be their God").

4-6, Fruitfulness

My covenant is with thee.—Better, "Here is my covenant with thee." Cf. the use of *hinneh* in 22:7; 12:19; Ex 24:8. The word order is strange for "my covenant is with thee"; as a descriptive rather than identifying clause, we would expect "with thee is my covenant." The phrase introduces the paragraph as describing the content of God's covenant with Abram.

Three times Abram's attention is directed to the multitude of nations that will issue from him.

- v.4 makes the simple statement. To what "nations" does this promise refer?
- V.5 makes this promise the basis for a change in his name. "Ab-ram" means "exalted father." By adding an "h", it becomes a pun for "father of a multitude," *ab-hamon*.

- V.6 appends the promise that his offspring will be not only numerous, but also powerful and influential (“kings”). The emphasis here is probably on the kings of Israel, culminating in the Lord Jesus when he reigns as king over all the earth.

To what “nations” does this promise refer?

- According to Genesis, Abraham is the father not only of the Israelites, whose twelve tribes had a high degree of political autonomy in themselves, but also of the Edomites, the Ishmaelites, and the descendants of Keturah (25:1f). This process makes him the father of nations by *division*. Note that these nations spin off and are separated; while they trace their ancestry to him, there is no other unity among them. To the extent that we can trace them today, their descendants form the Arab peoples, who are contentious even among themselves. They do not enjoy the promise to Abraham’s seed outlined in vv. 7-8 following.
- But the OT expects that other nations will come to Abraham by *fusion*. One noteworthy passage is Ps 87:4, which reckons Rahab (e.g., Egypt, cf. Psa 89:10; Isa 30:7; 51:9), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia as “born there,” i.e., in Zion. They will be reckoned the offspring of the city and of Abraham. This interpretation is repeated by our Lord (Matt 8:11), and expressed in its most complete form by Paul: Rom 4:11,16; Gal 3:16, 28, 29; 4:22-31. This aspect of the blessed seed is adumbrated in the fact that circumcision is enjoined not only for Abraham and his children, but also for purchased slaves, who would not be his offspring.
- This same dualism is reminiscent of the nature of the “seed” described in 3:15. Though all of humankind is descended from Eve, yet her “seed” is distinguished from the seed of the serpent. From the outset there is a difference between the seed according to the flesh and the seed according to promise: Rom 9:6-8.

How gracious God is! This aspect of the promise appears to be the one closest to Abraham’s heart. It is the first one about which he inquires in ch. 15, and it is the one concerning which he takes matters into his own hands in ch. 16. In spite of his impetuosity, God graciously grants him the longing of his heart.

7-8, Blessing

4-6 focused on the seed; this paragraph focuses on the land and the blessing. These are grouped together because both of them apply not only to Abraham but also “to thy seed after thee,” and thus build on the first promise. Note that these promises thus help define who the seed is: not the physical descendants (who did not inherit the land or the special relation with God), but the seed according to the promise.

8a repeats the promise of the land, the most common aspect of the promise so far: 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7,18.

It is surrounded with the promise of the blessing, couched in terms of the special relation between God and Abraham’s family.

I will establish my covenant

Like the verb “to give” used in v.2, this verb refers not to the creation of a new covenant, but to the confirmation of an existing one, in this case the covenant made (“cut”) in ch. 15. This verb is used to emphasize that the covenant will extend beyond the individual with whom it was originally made. Examples:

- God uses the verb with Noah in 6:18; 9:9,11,17. The terms of the covenant show that God has in mind the promises he made to Adam and Eve, which are now extended to the generation after the flood.
- Here, the verb is used because the emphasis is on Abraham’s seed. God’s covenant is not only with Abraham personally, but will extend to his offspring.
- Looking back, the verb is used in passages such as Deut 8:18, to Israel in the plains of Moab, “that he may establish his covenant which he swore unto thy fathers,” again emphasizing the intergenerational character. This same covenant will be firm and sure to Abraham and his seed.

An everlasting covenant

This expression emphasizes the duration of the covenant, and informs Paul’s argument in Gal. 3:16,17. (Off-line query: why are certain aspects of Sinai represented as eternal, specifically the showbread, Lev 24:8, and the role of the Levites, Jer 33:17-22.)

To be a God unto thee

More idiomatically, this might be translated (as it is elsewhere in the AV), “to become your God and your seed’s.” This is the heart of the covenant: the special relation between the Lord and Abraham. This phrase is picked up in 8b to round off the paragraph with this same thought. This relation echoes down through the pages of scripture:

- Deut 7:6, Lev 26:12, to Israel under Sinai
- Jer 31:33, the new covenant
- Rev 21:3, in the new heavens and the new earth.

This is at first glance a strange expression. Many nations believed in local deities, powerful in a region but impotent far away, cf. Judges 11:24. What sets the God of the Bible apart from many other deities is that he is global, the creator of everything that is, to whom everyone owes allegiance, “the God of the whole earth,” Isa 54:5. What then does it mean for him to be distinguished as belonging to Abraham and his offspring? Why, in fact, in the one place where he is called “the God of the whole earth,” is his special relationship to Israel mentioned? To understand this better, let’s consider the Need for such a special relationship and its Nature.

The Need for the relation: widespread apostasy. The problem is not that God is limited in his access to people, but that they have cut off their own access to him by sin. Against this context, we can understand three motives that the Scriptures assign to God’s making this special appointment: his reputation, our holiness, and his love.

- His *reputation*, 2 Sam 7:23-24, “to make him a name.” Throughout Scripture, God is preoccupied with his own glory, an attitude that would be considered proud for a human,

but is perfectly appropriate for him. The angels are watching: Eph 3:10; Psa 148:2; 1 Pet 1:12; Rev 5:11,12; 1 Tim 3:16. An apostate population doesn't do much for God's reputation. He wants to show the watching universe that he can create a godly seed.

- And that's the second motive: the *holiness* of those whom he calls to himself, Deut 26:16-19. Recall men's discussion Weds evening. God undertakes it as his responsibility that his people will keep his commandments and be holy! This end was not achieved under Sinai's covenant, but is in the New Covenant: Ezek 36:27,28; Jer 31:31-34. In fact, our holiness is all the more striking against the backdrop of an apostate world. One important answer to the problem of sin is that it makes God's glory shine brighter, as black velvet does a diamond.
- But this very contrast raises a question. Given that God makes some people holy but not others, why does he choose those whom he does choose? It's not because of anything in them—they're all apostate to start with. The motive uniformly attested throughout the Scriptures for this choice is God's *love*. The great passage on this truth is Deut. 7:6-10. It is echoed in the phrase "brethren beloved of God" used to describe the elect in 2 Thes 2:13,14. God's love is elective. He does not love everybody, and in fact is said to hate the wicked, Psa 5:5; 11:5. At its very foundation, God's election of Abraham is rooted in his own unexplained love for Abraham.

The Nature of the relationship: reciprocal, with obligations and benefits on both sides.

- The initiative is clearly the Lord's. We are dealing here with the notion of divine election. Election is intrinsic in the division of the woman's seed from Satan's seed. Man has made his choice: to follow Satan. Now God moves to choose the woman's seed. If there is to be a godly seed at all, it must be at God's initiative, because man's initiative has turned away from him wholeheartedly.
- Just as clearly, we must respond: Psa 48:14. And the benefits to us are obvious; cf. Deut 4:7-8, 32-38.
- This symmetry is emphasized in Deut 26:16-18.
- This relationship is similar to marriage, and lies at the foundation of the biblical metaphor of Israel as the Lord's wife, and the church as the bride of Christ. It also provides the basis for the notion that God is jealous when his people devote themselves to rival deities. Exod 2:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24.

Third Divine Speech, 9-14, "As for thee..."

In the central speech of the chapter, God tells Abraham what his responsibilities are under the covenant. This is the most "covenantal" paragraph in Genesis, based on uses of the word.

- It occurs 27 times in all. 5 chapters have one occurrence, one has two, one (ch. 9) has seven, and this chapter has 13.
- All 13 in this chapter appear in God's speeches. The first speech has 1, the second 3, and the fifth 3, but the third speech has six, within the scope of six verses.

This paragraph introduces three new ideas.

1st New Idea: Abraham has a covenant obligation.—This paragraph introduces two new verbs with “covenant.” Here’s an inventory of the verbs in Genesis; refs after 17:8 are in **bold**.

- “make” (lit. cut, institution), 15:18; **21:27,32; 26:28; 31:44**
- “establish” (extending beyond original recipient), 6:18; 9:9,11,17; 17:7,**19,21**
- “give” (communicate tangibly), 9:12; 17:2;
- “remember,” 9:15,16
- “keep,” **17:9,10**
- “break,” **17:14**

v.9 is the first time we have met the clause, “to keep a covenant,” just as v.14 is the first instance of “to break a covenant.” Up until now Abraham has showed his faith by his works, but those works have not been part of the formal covenant. At this point, God brings him under obligation to a specific duty. By observing or “keeping” it, he preserves his participation in the covenant; by neglecting it, he “breaks” the covenant and brings sanctions on himself.

v.19 in particular says that one who breaks the covenant will be “cut off from his people.” This expression appears frequently in the Torah, and has provoked much discussion. Wenham suggests that it means the person is exposed to sudden, unexpected death at the hand of the Lord. He has removed himself from the protection and blessing enjoyed by those under the covenant. (Note that a person’s breaking the covenant does *not* invalidate the covenant; it simply brings sanctions on that individual.)

This insight is extremely important in understanding the nature of salvation. Paul presents Abraham as the archetype of one justified by faith: Rom 4:1-12. Paul bases his argument on the historical sequence: the faith and declaration of righteousness (15:6) precede the command to circumcise (17:9-14). But we should not miss the corollary: once declared righteous, Abraham *does* have duties to perform, and ignoring those duties brings serious consequences. The NT analogs are Eph 2:8-9 followed by v.10, and Titus 3:5-7 followed by v.8. Heb 12:4 says that without holiness, we will not see the Lord. Salvation is

- **by** grace
- **through** faith
- **unto** good works.

Let’s not forget the third in our excitement over the first two.

2nd New Idea: The obligation is circumcision.—The ritual focuses attention on the importance of the seed in the promise. It is identified as the “token” *’ot* of the covenant. Compare

- the rainbow as token of the renewed edenic covenant with Noah;
- the Sabbath as token of the covenant at Sinai, Ex 31:13,17.

What is our obligation today, as the spiritual seed of Abraham?

- The early church logically thought that circumcision continued to be the required sign. The pharisaic party in Acts 15 actually had logic on their side. But God’s explicit intervention

in the case of Cornelius indicated that though the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant extend to Gentiles, the sign does not.

- The doctrine of infant baptism is based on a supposed parallel between baptism, as the sign of the new covenant, and circumcision, as the sign of the old. But baptism is *nowhere* called a “sign” or “seal” of the covenant.
- What in fact was the sign that persuaded the early church that Cornelius and other Gentiles were in the covenant? The outpouring of the HS, Acts 10:44-48. Note the following linguistic detail:
 - a. Paul calls circumcision a “seal” of the Abrahamic covenant, Rom 4:11. (Gk “seal” can mean either instrument or impression; Heb must distinguish the two, and so uses “sign.”)
 - b. He uses the same word to describe the Holy Spirit as seal of the New Covenant, Eph 1:13,14; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:22, which corresponds with God’s promise in Ezek 36:24-27.

So our seal is the HS. Thus injunctions not to grieve (Eph 4:30), tempt (Acts 5:9), resist (Acts 7:51), or quench (1 Thes 5:19) the Spirit are tantamount to the command to Abraham not to neglect circumcision. The penalty now, as then, is temporal death through divine cutting off: cf. Acts 5:9.

3rd New Idea: The covenant extends to all in his house.—Not only Abraham’s offspring, but his purchased servants as well come under the covenant. This is the first indication that the “many nations” to be included in the covenant result from inclusion rather than division.

Some argue on this basis that children of believing parents are “in the covenant,” and should be baptized. This argument becomes much weaker when we realize that the NT seal is the HS. When he works to generate saving faith, it is appropriate to recognize the child as in the covenant. But let’s not miss the clear implication that it is the duty of parents to enforce godly living in their homes. Calvin:

“In the person of Abraham, he has prescribed it as a law to all his servants, that they should endeavor to bring all who are subject to them, into the same society of faith with themselves. For every family of the pious ought to be a church. Therefore, if we desire to prove our piety, we must labor that every one of us may have his house ordered in obedience to God.”

Fourth Divine Speech, 15-16, “As for Sarai...”

This speech finishes out the trio that focus on individuals in the transaction: “As for me [YHWH]” (3), “as for thee [Abraham]” (9), “as for Sarai” (15). The theme is clear from the repetition of the phrase, “I will bless her.” She is not left on the sidelines.

Structurally, the paragraph corresponds very clearly to the second paragraph:

- Sarai, like Abram, receives a new name. Both versions mean “princess”; the emphasis is not on the meaning of the new name, but on the fact that she, like her husband, has a new identity as a result of God’s covenant.
- She is to be the mother of Abraham’s son, not just the sponsor of a surrogate mother.
- As Abraham is to be the father of nations, so she is to be the mother of nations.

- Kings will come of her as well as of him.

The parallels are more than superficial. Recall our analysis of 1:26-28,

- The likeness of God consists of the duality within the one flesh union, man and wife together in one.
- God’s blessing there is on them together, not on one or the other.

The error of ch. 16, at root, was a failure to understand that God’s covenant with Abraham included his wife. She is not just an accessory. The promise that Abraham will have a seed necessarily includes her. The two of them haven’t fully grasped this up to this point, so here God makes it explicit.

Abraham’s Response, 17,18

There is a division among the commentators as to whether Abraham’s laughter and comments to himself show incredulity and doubt, or joy at the blessing that has been given him.

	<i>Doubt</i>	<i>Joy</i>
<i>Commentators</i>	<i>Waltke, Wenham</i>	<i>Calvin, KD, Leupold</i>
<i>Prayer for Ishmael</i>	<i>Outward humility: please take Ishmael. He’s enough.</i>	<i>Prayer that Ishmael wouldn’t be left out.</i>
<i>Arguments</i>	<i>The most natural sense of the verse God’s response begins with adversative <i>abal</i>, v.19. Sarah’s rebuke is because the two of them should have sorted it out after God’s initial revelation to Abraham.</i>	<i>Abraham is not rebuked for his laughter, as Sarah is in 18:13ff. Paul’s comments in Rom 4:19. Jesus’ comments in John 8:56</i>

This paragraph shows two contrasting pairs, emphasizing a tension within Abraham:

- Abraham fell on his face (faith), and laughed (doubt)
- He spoke in his heart (doubt), and spoke to the Lord (faith)

(The strongest evidence that Abraham is incredulous rather than overjoyed is the Lord’s response to him, beginning with an adversative. “Indeed” should be translated “But,” or “Rather,” or even “No, you’ve got it wrong.” Clines lists only this and 42:21 as evidence for an asseverative meaning, and Waltke-O’Connor show that 42:21 can also be understood restrictively, thus removing the case for asseverative *abal*.)

As in v.3, Abraham falls on his face, but the motive may have been different. There, it was to *show* his humility before the Lord who had graciously appeared to him. Here, it may be more to *hide* his incredulity at the promise he has just heard, for we are told next, “he laughed.” We see Abraham here in real tension. He is committed to serve the Lord; he would never laugh in God’s face. Yet the promise seems so outrageous that he cannot repress this sign of surprise. His bowing is like the gesture of turning aside and covering your mouth when you sneeze. At the moment the flesh is overwhelmed with doubt, he forces himself into a posture of belief.

Similarly, his words to himself are different from those to the Lord.

- To himself, he questions how a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman can have a child.
- To the Lord, he asks for Ishmael. His request has two motives, both laudable:
 - a. He expresses contentment what he has already.
 - b. He loves his first-born, and does not want him to be removed from the Lord's blessing.

In Rom. 4:19, Paul appears to refer to this verse. (Links: “about a hundred” and the pairing of Abraham and Sarah.) But at first glance he seems to contradict it. What does Paul mean in saying that he did not consider the deadness of his body or of Sarah's womb?

- He cannot mean that Abraham did not recognize these obstacles: this very verse says that he did (whether we understand Abraham to be perplexed or exulting).
- The word “consider” in the NT often emphasizes focusing on something, paying close attention to it. Acts 7:31,32 is a good example: Moses sees the bush, but dares not consider it (E.T. “behold”). These thoughts forced themselves to Abraham's mind, but after recognizing them, he refuses to yield to them or dwell on them. He “did not stagger [delay]”, but immediately obeys the command to circumcise, showing his trust in God's word over his own doubts.

Note added 11 Dec 2005: See notes on John 8:56, and Hendriksen on that text. Jewish tradition held that Abraham is rejoicing at this promise concerning his seed.

Application: We must recognize the important difference between faith and blindness. There is much in the world around us that seems at first glance inconsistent with the Bible. We should expect this, given the activity of the prince of this world. Faith does not consist in denying these observations, but rather in refusing to dwell on them as a challenge to God's explicit word. “Fully persuaded” (Rom 4:21) implies that one has overcome the opposition, not ignored it.

Fifth Divine Speech, 19-21

This speech corresponds to the first. God initiates and closes the conversation with an emphasis on the covenant, here making it explicit that this covenant is vested, not in Ishmael, but in Isaac.

The Lord structures his fifth and final speech chiastically.

19 And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed;	which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.
and thou shalt call his name Isaac:	with Isaac,
and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.	21 But my covenant will I establish
20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.	

We observed two contrasts in Abraham's response:

- Prostration vs. laugh
- Question in his heart vs. spoken request.

God responds to both of them.

- He responds to the question in Abraham's heart
 - a. with a gentle rebuke, marked in the conjunction *abal* "but" with which the verse begins,
 - b. and with an explicit statement that he and Sarah will be the parents ("Sarah shall bear unto thee," at the extremes of the chiasm."
- He responds to the laugh by naming Isaac after Abraham's action: "Isaac" is exactly the same word as "he laughed" in v.17.
- He also responds to Abraham's request for God's favor on Ishmael.
 - a. God agrees to bless him with a numerous progeny and nationhood.
 - b. Since the command to circumcise includes all in Abraham's house, Ishmael is already included within the blessings of the covenant.
 - c. But the heir of the covenant will be Isaac, not Ishmael.

The close correspondence between God's speech and Abraham's questions is important. God never leaves us in the dark about what he wants us to do. Deut 29:29—his revelation, though partial, is plain and practical. When we think we are confused about his direction, we should examine our own motives and the influence of our flesh.

Epilog, 22-25

The Lord's Ascent

Now God leaves, and Abraham is left to decide what he will do. The image here recalls the disciples on the Mount of Olives, having received the command to go and teach all nations, watching the Lord ascend. We can imagine two emotions in those who have passed this way:

- Elation at seeing him mount up to heaven, in confirmation of his authority and power.
- A twinge of despair: the thrill of the direct encounter is over, and the responsibility remains. This is something like a test. The teacher walks the student through one exercise after another, but finally the teacher must stand back and see what the student has learned in an exam. The time has come for Abraham to face an examination in the school of piety.

Who among us has not felt this way? Yet consider the assurance that the Lord gives in such cases.

- In Matt. 28, "Lo, I am with you always." In the coming of the Spirit we have the Lord's presence among us.
- But also in Gen 17, before the age of the Spirit, we have God's explicit promise in vv.7, 8, "to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee." In the very next chapter God appears to him, and again in ch. 22 at the offering of Isaac. Indeed, the Lord's command to him in 17:1, "walk before me," implies the Lord's constant oversight.

So let us not be discouraged. The Lord is with us. Sometimes he grants us experiences of tangible intimacy; at other times he is less visible, but he is our God, and he will not forsake us. Only let us be diligent to obey his word at all times.

Abraham’s Obedience

Abraham gets an A+ on his exam. He immediately obeys the command that God gave him at the center of the chapter, to circumcise his family. The description is chiasitic, echoing terms from the command in 9-14.

- The outer members state the comprehensiveness, “every male of Ab’s house,” and emphasize the two categories that exhaust the male population, “born in his house” and “bought with his money.” This comprehensiveness is the first indication that others than Abraham’s seed could have access to the blessings of the covenant, by being joined with him.
- The central member emphasizes that Abraham and Ishmael (his only offspring at this point) are also circumcised, and gives their ages. There is no delay from the time notice in 17:1. Abraham did not procrastinate. The deed was done in that very year, and probably that very week.

Note on Naming: Who does it?

Naming someone asserts control and ownership over them. By naming Abraham and Sarah, the Lord emphasizes that they are not their own, but are his.

Ref	♂	♀	God Cmd	God Direct	Namer	One Named	Re-Name	Place
2:19, 20	X				Adam	The animals		
3:20	X				Adam	Eve		
4:17	X				Cain	His city Enoch		X
4:25		X			Eve	Seth		
4:26	X				Seth	Enos		
5:2				x	God	Humans (“Adam”)		
5:3	X				Adam	Seth (cf. 4:25)		
5:29	X				Lamech	Noah		
16:11			X		Angel of Lord	Ishmael		
16:15	X				Abram	Ishmael		
17:5				X	God	Abraham	X	
17:15				X	God	Sarah	X	
17:19			X		God	Isaac		
19:37		X			Lot’s elder daughter	Moab		
19:38		X			Lot’s younger daughter	Benammi		
21:3	X				Abraham	Isaac		
22:14	X				Abraham	Jehovah-Jireh		X
25:25f		?			Midwives?	Esau, Jacob		
26:18, 20-22	x				Isaac	wells		X
28:19	x				Jacob	Bethel		X
29:32-35		x			Leah	Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah		
30:6,8		X			Rachel	Dan, Naphthali		

Genesis 17

30:11, 13, 18, 20, 21		X			Leah	Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah		
30:24		X			Rachel	Joseph		
32:2	X				Jacob	Mahanaim		X
32:28				X	Angel	Israel	X	
32:30	X				Jacob	Peniel		X
35:10				X	God	Israel	X	
35:15	X				Jacob	Bethel		X
35:18		X			Rachel	Benoni		
35:18	X				Israel	Benjamin		
38:3	X				Judah	Er		
38:4, 5		X			Shuah	Onan, Shelah		
41:45	X				Pharaoh	Zaphnath-paaneah	X	
41:51,52	X				Joseph	Manasseh, Ephraim		