

Commentary Highlights

Genesis 17:1-27

NAC	New American Commentary
PTW	Preaching the Word
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
GIG	Gleanings in Genesis
CAL	Genesis: Calvin's Commentary
SOG	The Story of God Bible Commentary
BKW	Genesis by Bruce K Waltke
KUR	Genesis by Abraham Kuruvilla
REC	Reformed Expository Commentary
APR	Creation and Blessing

****The views presented in these commentary excerpts may not reflect the general understanding of these passages as expressed by Faith Bible Church, but are presented to help us better understand the Scriptures and how various scholars have interpreted them****

Genesis 17:1-8

(PTW) – “The final verse of chapter 16 indicates that “Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram,” whereas the opening verse of chapter 17 emphasizes that he was “ninety-nine years old” when the Lord appeared to him. Moses intends that the reader understand that for some thirteen years now a cloud of domestic gloom and growing darkness about the promise had hung over the tents of Abram...It had been some twenty-three years since the initial promise. And now, with the bleakness of the last thirteen years, the promise seemed more distant than ever...Chapter 17 is about how God came to Abram and elevated his faith by confirming the promise with the covenant of circumcision, which was then sealed by Abram’s obedience. Abram’s covenant faith and obedience were encouraged by God’s revelation of four new names: “God Almighty” (v. 1), “Abraham” (v. 5), “Sarah” (v. 15), and “Isaac” (v. 19).”

(APR) – “The epithet (El Shaddai) occurs forty-eight times in the Old Testament, thirty-one of them in Job. In the passages in Genesis (17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3), the name occurs with the promise of posterity.”

(BKW) – “El Shaddai may signify his universal dominion...modern scholarship has reached no consensus on the basis of philology. The most probable suppositions are (1) “The Powerful Strong One” and (2) “The One Who Suffices.” Whatever its exact meaning, the contextual uses suggest, as Wenham states, that “Shaddai evokes the idea that God is able to make the barren fertile and to fulfill his promises.””

(NAC) – Concerning the history of the name of God used in verse one, El Shaddai, Mathews says, “Although its etymology is obscure, the epithet conveys in context the majesty and

power of the divine person. Shaddai is associated in Genesis with the divine promise of children and nations (see Gen 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25; Ruth 1:20; Ps 22:10)."

(PTW) – "El Shaddai signifies God's power (omnipotence) and sovereignty...It is the name by which the patriarch came to know God. As God later explained to Moses, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty" (Ex. 6:3)...Here in Genesis the name regularly occurs with the divine promise of descendants."

(SOG) – Longman suggests that "the best explanation" for El Shaddai "means God of the mountains, with the mountains representing his great strength."

(NAC) – "The commands [to walk before me and be blameless] require a spiritual preparation for receiving the covenant sign."

(BKW) – "To walk before God means to orient one's entire life to his presence, promises, and demands...The Hebrew word (blameless) signifies wholeness of relationship and integrity rather than no sin."

(APR) – "'To walk before any one is to live and move openly before him.'" Concerning the term "blameless" Ross quote another author saying, "this word does not refer to moral conduct, for that would be too insignificant in this situation and is self-understood. The high demand corresponds to God's, "Be mine, and I will be yours." Ross continues elaborating on the word "blameless" by saying, "More can be said about the meaning of "perfect". A study of this word is essential, for its meanings include "without fault" and "complete" and "whole." Westermann adopts the view that the text says that "belonging to God is in proper order only when it is without reservation and unconditional.""

(KUR) – The commands to walk before the Lord and to be blameless are the same descriptors used to characterize Noah in 6:9. The word "blameless" (תָּמִים) means to be "undivided, simple, complete, perfect, wholehearted, blameless." Kuruvilla continues, "considering the two imperatives as a parallelism, one could reckon that "walk before Me" was being equated to "be blameless." Abram was to be "in his heart and soul, wholly oriented with the Lord and wholly committed to His way," with no subsidiary loyalties adulterating his commitment."

(NAC) – Mathews sees four features of the covenant listed here in Genesis 17: "God will make Abram the father of many nations," "the Lord will grant him numerous progeny," "this covenant is multigenerational, even an everlasting covenant for Abraham's generations to come," and "it combines the key elements of descendants and land."

(KUR) – "All the elements of God's earlier promises—regarding land, seed, and divine blessing/relationship—are found in this chapter and are intimately related to the covenant...The land was "this land" in 12:7; "all the land which you see" promised "to you and your descendants forever" in 13:15; and "this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the

great river, the river Euphrates” in 15:18. However, in 17:8, for the first time the land is identified by Yahweh as “the land of your sojourns, all the land of Canaan.” In 12:2, Abraham is promised that he will become a “great nation”; in 13:16, he is told his descendants will be as innumerable as the “dust of the earth”; in 15:5, they are promised to be as countless as the stars in the sky. But in 17:5-6, 16, Abraham and Sarah would be the progenitors of a “multitude of nations” as well as of “kings.” Moreover, the mother of the chosen descendant is finally specified as being Sarah. As for the relationship between God and Abram and his descendants, 12:3 asserted that the patriarch would be blessed, that he himself would be a blessing, and that, in turn, others would be blessed through him. In Gen 13-14, the one who removed himself from Abram’s presence (Lot) ended up in trouble as a POW, suggesting that divine blessing was experienced only by association with Abram. In Gen 15, the covenant blessing between Abram and Yahweh is inaugurated with a ceremony. In Gen 16, again, the one who remains in relationship with Abram is blessed (Hagar). However, it is in 17:1-2, 9-14 that conditions are explicitly stated for the formalizing of the relationship between deity and patriarch: the one to be blessed would have to walk with God and be blessing.”

(SOG) – “In 12:2, God promised him that his descendants would become “a great nation,” but now we learn that he will be “the father of many nations.”

(KUR) – “The fatherhood of Abraham over a multitude of nations likely signifies his status as a mediator of divine blessing to many outside Israel.”

(PTW) – Quoting Nahum Sarna, “In the psychology of the ancient Near Eastern world, a name was not merely a convenient means of identification but was intimately bound up with the very essence of being and inextricably intertwined with personality.” Kent Hughes continues himself by saying, “And more, the Bible itself views name-giving as symbolizing the transformation of character and destiny. The Bible also presents name-giving as an exercise of sovereignty or lordship.”

(APR) – “Abram was a good, old West Semitic name made from two elements, *ab* (father) and *ram* (exalted).” When God changed his name the meaning changed to father of nations. “The patriarch thus originally bore a name that spoke of his noble lineage. But when the Lord confirmed the promise of posterity without number, he signaled it by the new name.”

(BKW) – “His former name spoke of his noble God, of his noble ancestry, or of his own eminence; his new name speaks of his many offspring. Abram composed of *ab* (father) and *ram* (to be high), means “Exalted Father,” a reference to God, Terah, or himself. His new name Abraham, by word play of *ab* (father) plus *ham* (*hamon*, “crowd”), sounds like “father of a multitude.””

(PTW) – “Abram’s name meant “exalted father” and referred not to the patriarch but to God as exalted Father. But when Abram’s name was changed to Abraham, it referred to the man

himself as “father of a multitude.” The effect was that every time people called him “Abraham,” they reiterated God’s promise that he would be a father of a multitude.”

(KUR) – After his name change, “Now Abraham’s identity is intertwined with Yahweh’s promise: the change of his name signified a break with the past; it was also an adumbration of the multitude of nations that would come from him in the future...Abraham’s very identity is now inextricable from God’s promise of abundant offspring. His being depends on God’s speech. If God breaks his promise, Abraham ceases to be Abraham.”

(NAC) – “Reference to kings among Abrahams’s descendants indicates that autonomous nations will result; Abraham, though not a king himself, is the ancestor of multiple royal houses. Genesis shows the progressive realization of this promise by including genealogical lists of Ishmael’s tribal rulers and Edom’s kings; allusion to future rulers in Jacob’s household is the blessing of Judah’s “scepter.”

(PTW) – “Another astounding revelation – “and kings shall come from you.” It was beyond tent-dwelling Abraham’s dreams that such a thing could be!...ultimately [this promise would be] fulfilled another thousand years later in the advent of Jesus Christ.”

(KUR) – “In Gen17, we are told for the first time that it would be a perpetual covenant: “everlasting” and “throughout their generations.””

(BKW) – “God’s covenant endures forever because he is faithful and does not change.”

(SOG) – In reference the everlasting nature of this covenant Longman, wrongly in my opinion, suggests that “this covenant is called everlasting, and indeed it will be, though perhaps not in the way one might have imagined at the time.” Longman here is suggesting that Jesus is and was always the end goal of the Abrahamic covenant. While we may say that the Abrahamic Covenant was expanded in Christ, what seems hard to say, as Longman does, is that what Abraham thought the covenant to mean was not what God’s promise truly included.

Genesis 17:9-14

(NAC) – “In v.10 the shift to the plural pronoun “you are to keep” refers to future generations. Throughout the second speech, an emphasis on future generations and the plural “you” reflects the association of the sign with procreation.”

(CAL) – “God’s covenant was engraved on the bodies of males...It is probable that the Lord commanded circumcision for two reasons: first, to show that every person who is born is polluted, and, second, that salvation would stem from the blessed seed of Abraham.”

(KUR) – “Circumcision, itself, was not a new rite being introduced; Egyptians and certain West Semitic peoples were known to have practiced it.”

(PTW) – Quoting Ronald Youngblood, “As the rainbow is the sign of the Noahic covenant, and as the Sabbath is the sign of the Sinaitic covenant, so circumcision became the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. The rainbow and the Sabbath already existed prior to the institution of the covenants they came to signify. So also, circumcision did not originate with Abraham. It was practiced in Egypt and elsewhere centuries before his time, but it received new meaning in Genesis 17. Similarly, thousands of people were crucified before the time of Jesus, but the cross took on a vastly new and different meaning when our Lord was crucified.”

(SOG) – “The Noahic covenant had a sign, the rainbow. These signs of the covenant function as a brand, reminding the covenant people of the relationship that they have with God...The focus of God’s promise to Abraham is presently on descendants or “seed.” Thus, it is appropriate that the sign of this covenant is connected to the male reproductive organ.”

(SOG) – “We should also point out, contrary to some popular understandings, that Abram and his descendants are not the first people to employ a ritual of circumcision. We know that other ancient Near Eastern people practiced some form of circumcision. God’s institution of the ritual of circumcision is innovative in terms of its theological significance.”

(PTW) – “Circumcision involved Abraham’s powers of procreation—the area of life in which he had resorted to fleshly expediency—and had so failed. Man’s best plans and strength of will would never bring about the promise. For Abraham circumcision was an act of repentance and a sign of dependence upon God for the promise. The rite of circumcision itself is a reminder that covenants are solemnized through blood. Circumcision inflicts blood and pain. Every Hebrew male from Abraham to Isaac to Moses to Jesus underwent the operation. Every instance symbolized the enduring, irrevocable nature of the covenant.”

(APR) – “The fact that circumcision existed in the ancient world before it was instituted as the covenant sign does not detract from its meaning...The sign of circumcision would be a reminder to God of the promises that he had made, and it would be a reminder to the seed of Abraham to live in loyalty to the covenant”...In regards to why circumcision as the mark of the covenant, Ross says “The covenanters would be reminded (1) that human nature alone was unable to generate the promised seed if God was not willing to grant such fruitfulness, and (2) that impurity must be laid aside, especially in marriage.”

(SOG) – “When the foreskin is cut off, the implicit significance of the ritual is that it indicates that if this child breaks the covenant, he will be cut off from God and the community and thrown away.”

(NAC) – Concerning the Lord’s instruction to circumcise male infants on the 8th day, Mathews says, “the eighth day held special meaning as the day of atonement or dedication to the Lord.”

(BKW) – “By the eighth day the baby has completed the cycle of time corresponding to the course of creation.”

(NAC) – The text continues to comment on the act of circumcision by saying ““in your flesh” indicates the permanency of the mark and hence the perpetuity of the covenant.”

Genesis 17:15-22

(NAC) – “Remarkably, the Lord announces blessing directly upon the woman, usually reserved in Genesis for the male progenitors.”

(SOG) – “God tells Abraham that his wife will no longer be called “Princess” (Sarai), but now will be called “Princess” (Sarah). While there does not appear to be a change in the meaning of her name, perhaps we are to see significance in the fact that Sarai is an east Semitic pronunciation and that Sarah is a west Semitic pronunciation of “princess.” If so, the God is saying that she no longer is a part of their old world in Mesopotamia, but both she and Abraham are now part and parcel of their new world in the promise land.”

(APR) – Sarah’s new name would be a “modernization to mark this new beginning” for the aged couple...“The Septuagint doubles the r for Sarah (Sarrah) but not for Sarai (Sara), which would suggest that the name Sarai was related to the verb “strive” or “persist”, and Sarah to the verb “rule.”

(BKW) – “Sarah’s importance to salvation history is borne out by the fact that she is the only woman in the Bible whose name is changed and whose age at death is detailed...Though the LXX associates the new name *Sarah* with the Hebrew word meaning “strife,” both *Sarai* and *Sarah* are probably dialectical variants meaning “princess”...*Sarai*, her birth-name, probably looks back on her noble descent, whereas *Sarah*, her covenantal name, looks ahead to her noble descendants.”

(KUR) – “Falling on one’s face before the Creator and laughing is almost oxymoronic...All he (Abraham) can do as he responds in speech is to scoff and offer God a more credible alternative, a counter proposal: Ishmael. First, he had though the chose descendant would be Lot [and] now he recommends Ishmael.”

(PTW) – “Was Abraham disbelieving the Almighty? Evidently not, because God voiced no disapproval of his laughter. In contrast, in the next episode when Sarah laughed at the same promise, the Lord rebuked her— “Why did Sarah laugh?” (18:13)...The absence of any correction for Abraham implied not that he lacked faith, but rather that his faith was limited. He was believing, but his faith pushed to the limits of credulity.”

(PTW) – In evidencing his opinion of Abraham’s laughter, Kent Hughes uses Romans 4:18-21 to prove that Abraham was still acting in faith.”

(SOG) – “God calls him Isaac, a name that, as we will later hear, is connected to the laughter elicited by the fact that a couple of such advanced age actually gave birth to a son.”

(PTW) “Laughter would ironically engulf Isaac’s existence, beginning with his birth. The laughter was an expression of God’s blessing and their joy, and also a reminder of the aged couple’s doubts.”

(BKW) – “Both Abraham and Sarah first laugh in disbelief, but at Isaac’s birth Sarah will laugh with joy at the supernatural work of grace.”

(NAC) – ““Make fruitful” and “greatly increase” recall prepatriarchal procreation and combine the promissory language of vv. 1 and 6 made to Abraham in chiastic order: “increase” (v. 2), “fruitful” (v.6), “fruitful” (v. 20), “increase” (v. 20).”

(NAC) – ““God went up” indicates a visible ascension; it is the language of theophany.”

Genesis 17:23-27

(NAC) – “Abraham’s obedience was immediate; “on that very day” he carried out the circumcision in exact accord with divine direction.”

(NAC) – “Reference to their ages at ninety-nine and thirteen show further the extent of Abraham’s obedience, which involved personal pain and vulnerability...Abraham’s prompt action signaled a faith that indeed a child will be born to Sarah, as preposterous as it was to ponder. The writers of the New Testament recognized that Abraham believed that the Lord would intervene and provide a son from the aged couple.”

(SOG) – “The chapter ends describing Abraham’s obedience to the divine command to circumcise his household. Abraham’s obedience in this matter contributes to God’s assessment of him at the end of his life as one who “obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions.” (26:5).”

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