
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.

In the ninety-ninth year of Abram's life God again appears to him, announces his name as God Almighty, and commands him to walk perfectly before him, Gen 17:1; proposes to renew the covenant, Gen 17:2. Abram's prostration, Gen 17:3. The covenant specified, Gen 17:4. Abram's name changed to Abraham, and the reason given, Gen 17:5. The privileges of the covenant enumerated, Gen 17:6-8. The conditions of the covenant to be observed, not only by Abraham, but all his posterity, Gen 17:9. Circumcision appointed as a sign or token of the covenant, Gen 17:10, Gen 17:11. The age at which and the persons on whom this was to be performed, Gen 17:12, Gen 17:13. The danger of neglecting this rite, Gen 17:14. Sarai's name changed to Sarah, and a particular promise made to her, Gen 17:15, Gen 17:16. Abraham's joy at the prospect of the performance of a matter which, in the course of nature, was impossible, Gen 17:17. His request for the preservation and prosperity of Ishmael, Gen 17:18. The birth and blessedness of Isaac foretold, Gen 17:19. Great prosperity promised to Ishmael, Gen 17:20. But the covenant to be established not in his, but in Isaac's posterity, Gen 17:21. Abraham, Ishmael and all the males in the family circumcised, Gen 17:23-27

Verse 1

The Lord appeared to Abram - See note on Gen 15:1.

I am the Almighty God - אני אל שדי ani El shaddai, I am God all-sufficient; from שדה shadah, to shed, to pour out. I am that God who pours out blessings, who gives them richly, abundantly, continually.

Walk before me - היתהלך לפני hithhallech lephanai, set thyself to walk - be firmly purposed, thoroughly determined to obey, before me; for my eye is ever on thee, therefore ever consider that God seeth thee. Who can imagine a stronger incitement to conscientious, persevering obedience?

Be thou perfect - והיה תמים veyeh thamim, and thou shalt be perfections, i.e., a together perfect. Be just such as the holy God would have thee to be, as the almighty God can make thee and live as the all-sufficient God shall support thee; for he alone who makes the soul holy can preserve it in holiness. Our blessed Lord appears to have had these words pointedly in view, Mat 5:48 : Ἐσεσθε ὑμεῖς τελειοὶ, ὡςπερ ὁ Πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς τελειὸς ἐστὶ· Ye Shall Be perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. But what does this imply? Why, to be saved from all the power, the guilt, and the contamination of sin. This is only the negative part of salvation, but it has also a positive part; to be made perfect - to be perfect as our Father who is in heaven is perfect, to be filled with the fullness of God, to have Christ dwelling continually in the heart by faith, and to be rooted and grounded in love. This is the state in which man was created, for he was made in the image and likeness of God. This is the state from which man fell, for he broke the command of God. And this is the state into which every human soul must be raised, who would dwell with God in glory; for Christ was incarnated and died to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. What a glorious privilege! And who can doubt the possibility of its attainment, who believes in the omnipotent love of God, the infinite merit of the blood of atonement, and the all-pervading and all-purifying energy of the Holy Ghost? How many miserable souls employ that time to dispute and cavil against the possibility of being saved from their sins, which they should devote to praying and believing that they might be saved out of the hands of their enemies! But some may say, "You overstrain the meaning of the

term; it signifies only, be sincere; for as perfect obedience is impossible, God accepts of sincere obedience." If by sincerity the objection means good desires, and generally good purposes, with an impure heart and spotted life, then I assert that no such thing is implied in the text, nor in the original word; but if the word sincerity be taken in its proper and literal sense, I have no objection to it. Sincere is compounded of sine cera, "without wax;" and, applied to moral subjects, is a metaphor taken from clarified honey, from which every atom of the comb or wax is separated. Then let it be proclaimed from heaven, Walk before me, and be Sincere! purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump unto God; and thus ye shall be perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. This is sincerity. Reader, remember that the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin. Ten thousand quibbles on insulated texts can never lessen, much less destroy, the merit and efficacy of the great Atonement.

GENESIS 17:2 I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

GENESIS 17:3 Abram fell on his face. God talked with him, saying,

Verse 3

And Abram fell on his face - The eastern method of prostration was thus: the person first went down on his knees, and then lowered his head to his knees, and touched the earth with his forehead. A very painful posture, but significant of great humiliation and reverence.

GENESIS 17:4 "As for me, behold, my covenant is with you. You will be the father of a multitude of nations.

GENESIS 17:5 Neither will your name any more be called Abram, but your name will be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

Verse 5

Thy name shall be Abraham - Abram אַבְרָם literally signifies a high or exalted father. Ab-ra-ham אַבְרָהָם differs from the preceding only in one letter; it has ה he before the last radical. Though this may appear very simple and easy, yet the true etymology and meaning of the word are very difficult to be assigned. The reason given for the change made in the patriarch's name is this: For a father of many nations have I made thee, אֲבִי הַמְּוֹנִים גוֹיִם ab-hamon goyim, "a father of a multitude of nations." This has led some to suppose that אַבְרָהָם Abraham, is a contraction for אֲבִי רַב הַמְּוֹנִים ab-rab-hamon, "the father of a great multitude."

Aben Ezra says the name is derived from אֲבִיר הַמְּוֹנִים abir-hamon, "a powerful multitude."

Rabbi Solomon Jarchi defines the name cabalistically, and says that its numeral letters amount to two hundred and forty-eight, which, says he, is the exact number of the bones in the human body. But before the ה he was added, which stands for five, it was five short of this perfection.

Rabbi Lipman says the ה he being added as the fourth letter, signifies that the Messiah should come in the fourth millenary of the world.

Clarius and others think that the ה he, which is one of the letters of the Tetragrammaton, (or word of four letters, יהוה YeHoVaH), was added for the sake of dignity, God associating the patriarch more nearly to himself, by thus imparting to him a portion of his own name.

Having enumerated so many opinions, that of William Alabaster, in his Apparatus to the Revelation, should not be passed by. He most wisely says that ab-ram or ab-rom signifies father of the Romans, and consequently the pope; therefore Abraham was pope the first! This is just as likely as some of the preceding etymologies.

From all these learned as well as puerile conjectures we may see the extreme difficulty of ascertaining the true meaning of the word, though the concordance makers, and proper name explainers find no difficulty at all in the case; and pronounce on it as readily and authoritatively as if they had been in the Divine council when it was first imposed.

Hottinger, in his Smegma Orientale, supposes the word to be derived from the Arabic root rahama, which signifies to be very numerous. Hence ab raham would signify a copious father or father of a multitude. This makes a very good sense, and agrees well with the context. Either this etymology or that which supposes the inserted ה he to be an abbreviation of the word המון hamon, multitude, is the most likely to be the true one. But this last would require the word to be written, when full, אב רם המון ab-ram-hamon.

The same difficulty occurs, Gen 17:15, on the word Sarai, שרִי which signifies my prince or princess, and Sarah, שָׂרָה where the whole change is made by the substitution of a ה he for a י yod. This latter might be translated princess in general; and while the former seems to point out her government in her own family alone, the latter appears to indicate her government over the nations of which her husband is termed the father or lord; and hence the promise states that she shall be a mother of nations, and that kings of people should spring from her. See Gen 17:15, Gen 17:16.

Now as the only change in each name is made by the insertion of a single letter, and that letter the same in both names, I cannot help concluding that some mystery was designed by its insertion; and therefore the opinion of Clarius and some others is not to be disregarded, which supposes that God shows he had conferred a peculiar dignity on both, by adding to their names one of the letters of his own: a name by which his eternal power and Godhead are peculiarly pointed out.

From the difficulty of settling the etymology of these two names, on which so much stress seems to be laid in the text, the reader will see with what caution he should receive the lists of explanations of the proper names in the Old and New Testaments, which he so frequently meets with, and which I can pronounce to be in general false or absurd.

GENESIS 17:6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you. Kings will come out of you.

GENESIS 17:7 I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you.

Verse 7

An everlasting covenant - ברית עולם berith olam. See note on Gen 13:15. Here the word olam is taken in its own proper meaning, as the words immediately following prove - to be a God unto thee,

and thy seed after thee; for as the soul is to endure for ever, so it shall eternally stand in need of the supporting power and energy of God; and as the reign of the Gospel dispensation shall be as long as sun and moon endure, and its consequences eternal, so must the covenant be on which these are founded.

GENESIS 17:8 I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land where you are travelling, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. I will be their God."

Verse 8

Everlasting possession - Here עולם olam appears to be used in its accommodated meaning, and signifies the completion of the Divine counsel in reference to a particular period or dispensation. And it is literally true that the Israelites possessed the land of Canaan till the Mosaic dispensation was terminated in the complete introduction of that of the Gospel. But as the spiritual and temporal covenants are both blended together, and the former was pointed out and typified by the latter, hence the word even here may be taken in its own proper meaning, that of ever-during, or eternal; because the spiritual blessings pointed out by the temporal covenant shall have no end. And hence it is immediately added, I will be their God, not for a time, certainly, but for ever and ever. See the note on Gen 21:33.

GENESIS 17:9 God said to Abraham, "As for you, you will keep my covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations.

GENESIS 17:10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Verse 10

Every man - child - shall be circumcised - Those who wish to invalidate the evidence of the Divine origin of the Mosaic law, roundly assert that the Israelites received the rite of circumcision from the Egyptians. Their apostle in this business is Herodotus, who, lib. ii., p. 116, Edit. Steph. 1592, says: "The Colchians, Egyptians, and Ethiopians, are the only nations in the world who have used circumcision απ' αρχης, from the remotest period; and the Phoenicians and Syrians who inhabit Palestine acknowledge they received this from the Egyptians." Herodotus cannot mean Jews by Phoenicians and Syrians; if he does he is incorrect, for no Jew ever did or ever could acknowledge this, with the history of Abraham in his hand. If Herodotus had written before the days of Abraham, or at least before the sojourning of the children of Israel in Egypt, and informed us that circumcision had been practiced among them απ' αρχης, from the beginning, there would then exist a possibility that the Israelites while sojourning among them had learned and adopted this rite. But when we know that Herodotus flourished only 484 years before the Christian era, and that Jacob and his family sojourned in Egypt more than 1800 years before Christ, and that all the descendants of Abraham most conscientiously observed circumcision, and do so to this day, then the presumption is that the Egyptians received it from the Israelites, but that it was impossible the latter could have received it from the former, as they had practiced it so long before their ancestors had sojourned in Egypt.

GENESIS 17:11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. It will be a token of the covenant between me and you.

Verse 11

And it shall be a token - **לְאוֹת** leoth, for a sign of spiritual things; for the circumcision made in the flesh was designed to signify the purification of the heart from all unrighteousness, as God particularly showed in the law itself. See Deu 10:16; see also Rom 2:25-29; Col 2:11. And it was a seal of that righteousness or justification that comes by faith, Rom 4:11. That some of the Jews had a just notion of its spiritual intention, is plain from many passages in the Chaldee paraphrases and in the Jewish writers. I borrow one passage from the book Zohar, quoted by Ainsworth: "At what time a man is sealed with this holy seal, (of circumcision), thenceforth he seeth the holy blessed God properly, and the holy soul is united to him. If he be not worthy, and keepeth not this sign, what is written? By the breath of God they perish, (Job 4:9), because this seal of the holy blessed God was not kept. But if he be worthy, and keep it, the Holy Ghost is not separated from him."

GENESIS 17:12 He who is eight days old will be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he who is born in the house, or bought with money from any foreigner who is not of your seed.

Verse 12

He that is eight days old - Because previously to this they were considered unclean, Lev 12:2, Lev 12:3, and circumcision was ever understood as a consecration of the person to God. Neither calf, lamb, nor kid, was offered to God till it was eight days old for the same reason, Lev 22:27.

GENESIS 17:13 He who is born in your house, and he who is bought with your money, must be circumcised. My covenant will be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

Verse 13

He that is born in thy house - The son of a servant; he that is bought with thy money - a slave on his coming into the family. According to the Jewish writers the father was to circumcise his son; and the master, the servant born in his house, or the slave bought with money. If the father or master neglected to do this, then the magistrates were obliged to see it performed; if the neglect of this ordinance was unknown to the magistrates, then the person himself, when he came of age, was obliged to do it.

GENESIS 17:14 The uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant."

Verse 14

The uncircumcised - shall be cut off from his people - By being cut off some have imagined that a sudden temporal death was implied; but the simple meaning seems to be that such should have no right to nor share in the blessings of the covenant, which we have already seen were both of a temporal and spiritual kind; and if so, then eternal death was implied, for it was impossible for a person who had not received the spiritual purification to enter into eternal glory. The spirit of this law extends to all ages, dispensations, and people; he whose heart is not purified from sin cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Reader, on what is thy hope of heaven founded?

GENESIS 17:15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but her name will be Sarah."

Verse 15

Thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah - See note on Gen 17:5.

GENESIS 17:16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. Yes, I will bless her, and she will be a mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her."

Verse 16

I will bless her, etc. - Sarah certainly stands at the head of all the women of the Old Testament, on account of her extraordinary privileges. I am quite of Calmet's opinion that Sarah was a type of the blessed Virgin. St. Paul considers her a type of the New Testament and heavenly Jerusalem; and as all true believers are considered as the children of Abraham, so all faithful holy women are considered the daughters of Sarah, Gal 4:22, Gal 4:24, Gal 4:26. See also 1Pet 3:6.

GENESIS 17:17 Then Abraham fell on his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to him who is one hundred years old? Will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?"

Verse 17

Then Abraham - laughed - I am astonished to find learned and pious men considering this as a token of Abraham's weakness of faith or unbelief, when they have the most positive assurance from the Spirit of God himself that Abraham was not weak but strong in the faith; that he staggered not at the promise through unbelief, but gave glory to God, Rom 4:19, Rom 4:20. It is true the same word is used, Gen 18:12, concerning Sarah, in whom it was certainly a sign of doubtfulness, though mixed with pleasure at the thought of the possibility of her becoming a mother; but we know how possible it is to express both faith and unbelief in the same way, and even pleasure and disdain have been expressed by a smile or laugh. By laughing Abraham undoubtedly expressed his joy at the prospect

of the fulfillment of so glorious a promise; and from this very circumstance Isaac had his name. יצחק yitschak, which we change into Isaac, signifies laughter; and it is the same word which is used in the verse before us: Abraham fell on his face, וַיִּצְחַק vaiyitschak, and he laughed; and to the joy which he felt on this occasion our Lord evidently alludes, Joh 8:56 : Your father Abraham Rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was Glad. And to commemorate this joy he called his son's name Isaac. See note on Gen 21:6.

GENESIS 17:18 Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!"

Verse 18

O that Ishmael might live before thee! - Abraham, finding that the covenant was to be established in another branch of his family, felt solicitous for his son Ishmael, whom he considered as necessarily excluded; on which God delivers that most remarkable prophecy which follows in Gen 17:20, and which contains an answer to the prayer and wish of Abraham: And as for Ishmael I have heard thee; so that the object of Abraham's prayer was, that his son Ishmael might be the head of a prosperous and potent people.

GENESIS 17:19 God said, "No, but Sarah, your wife, will bear you a son. You shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him.

GENESIS 17:20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He will become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

Verse 20

Twelve princes shall he beget, etc. - See the names of these twelve princes, Gen 25:12-16. From Ishmael proceeded the various tribes of the Arabs, called also Saracens by Christian writers. They were anciently, and still continue to be, a very numerous and powerful people. "It was somewhat wonderful, and not to be foreseen by human sagacity," says Bishop Newton, "that a man's whole posterity should so nearly resemble him, and retain the same inclinations, the same habits, and the same customs, throughout all ages! These are the only people besides the Jews who have subsisted as a distinct people from the beginning, and in some respects they very much resemble each other 1. The Arabs, as well as the Jews, are descended from Abraham, and both boast of their descent from the father of the faithful. 2. The Arabs, as well as the Jews, are circumcised, and both profess to have derived this ceremony from Abraham. 3. The Arabs, as well as the Jews, had originally twelve patriarchs, who were their princes or governors. 4. The Arabs, as well as the Jews, marry among themselves, and in their own tribes. 5. The Arabs, as well as the Jews, are singular in several of their customs, and are standing monuments to all ages of the exactness of the Divine predictions, and of the veracity of Scripture history. We may with more confidence believe the particulars related of Abraham and Ishmael when we see them verified in their posterity at this day. This is having, as it were, ocular demonstration for our faith." See Bp. Newton's Second Dissertation on the Prophecies, and See note on Gen 16:12.

GENESIS 17:21 But my covenant I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this set time next year.”

Verse 21

My covenant will I establish with Isaac - All temporal good things are promised to Ishmael and his posterity, but the establishment of the Lord's covenant is to be with Isaac. Hence it is fully evident that this covenant referred chiefly to spiritual things - to the Messiah, and the salvation which should be brought to both Jews and Gentiles by his incarnation, death, and glorification.

GENESIS 17:22 When he finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Verse 22

God went up from Abraham - Ascended evidently before him, so that he had the fullest proof that it was no human being, no earthly angel or messenger, that talked with him; and the promise of a son in the course of a single year, at this set time in the next year, Gen 17:21, which had every human probability against it, was to be the sure token of the truth of all that had hitherto taken place, and the proof that all that was farther promised should be fulfilled in its due time. Was it not in nearly the same way in which the Lord went up from Abraham, that Jesus Christ ascended to heaven in the presence of his disciples? Luk 24:51.

GENESIS 17:23 Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house, and all who were bought with his money; every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the same day, as God had said to him.

Verse 23

And Abraham took Ishmael, etc. - Had not Abraham, his son, (who was of age to judge for himself), and all the family, been fully convinced that this thing was of God, they could not have submitted to it. A rite so painful, so repugnant to every feeling of delicacy, and every way revolting to nature, could never have sprung up in the imagination of man. To this day the Jews practice it as a Divine ordinance; and all the Arabians do the same. As a distinction between them and other people it never could have been designed, because it was a sign that was never to appear. The individual alone knew that he bore in his flesh this sign of the covenant, and he bore it by the order of God, and he knew it was a sign and seal of spiritual blessings, and not the blessings themselves, though a proof that these blessings were promised, and that he had a right to them. Those who did not consider it in this spiritual reference are by the apostle denominated the concision, Phi 3:2, i.e., persons whose flesh was cut, but whose hearts were not purified.

The contents of this chapter may be summed up in a few propositions: -

1. God, in renewing his covenant with Abram, makes an important change in his and Sarai's name; a change which should ever act as a help to their faith, that the promises by which God had bound himself should be punctually fulfilled. However difficult it may be for us to ascertain the precise import of the change then made, we may rest assured that it was perfectly understood by both; and that, as they had received this name from God, they considered it as placing them in a new relation both to their Maker and to their posterity. From what we have already seen, the change made in Abram's name is inscrutable to us; there is something like this in Rev 2:17 : To him that overcometh will I give a white stone, and a New Name - which no man knoweth, saving he that receiveth it. The full import of the change made in a soul that enters into covenant with God through Christ, is only known to itself; a stranger intermeddeth not with its joy. Hence, even men of learning and the world at large have considered experimental religion as enthusiasm, merely because they have not understood its nature, and have permitted themselves to be carried away by prejudices which they have imbibed perhaps at first through the means of ignorant or hypocritical pretenders to deep piety; but while they have the sacred writings before them, their prejudices and opposition to that without which they cannot be saved are as unprincipled as they are absurd.

2. God gives Abraham a precept, which should be observed, not only by himself, but by all his posterity; for this was to be a permanent sign of that covenant which was to endure for ever. Though the sign is now changed from circumcision to baptism, each of them equally significant, yet the covenant is not changed in any part of its essential meaning. Faith in God through the great sacrifice, remission of sins, and sanctification of the heart, are required by the new covenant as well as by the old.

3. The rite of circumcision was painful and humiliating, to denote that repentance, self-denial, etc., are absolutely necessary to all who wish for redemption in the blood of the covenant; and the putting away this filth of the flesh showed the necessity of a pure heart and a holy life.

4. As eternal life is the free gift of God, he has a right to give it in what way he pleases, and on what terms. He says to Abraham and his seed, Ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and he that doth not so shall be cut off from his people. He says also to sinners in general, Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; Repent, and believe the Gospel; and, Except ye repent, ye shall perish. These are the terms on which he will bestow the blessings of the old and new covenants. And let it be remembered that stretching out the hand to receive an alms can never be considered as meriting the bounty received, neither can repentance or faith merit salvation, although they are the conditions on which it is bestowed.

5. The precepts given under both covenants were accompanied with a promise of the Messiah. God well knows that no religious rite can be properly observed, and no precept obeyed, unless he impart strength from on high; and he teaches us that that strength must ever come through the promised seed. Hence, with the utmost propriety, we ask every blessing through him, in whom God is well pleased.

6. The precept, the promise, and the rite, were prefaced with, "I am God all-sufficient; walk before me, and be thou perfect." God, who is the sole object of religious worship, has the sole authority to prescribe that worship, and the rites and ceremonies which shall be used in it; hence he prescribed circumcision and sacrifices under the old law, and baptism and the eucharist under the Gospel; and to render both effectual to the end of their institution, faith in God was indispensably necessary.

7. Those who profess to believe in him must not live as they list, but as he pleases. Though redeemed from the curse of the law, and from the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish Church, they

are under the law to Christ, and must walk before him - be in all things obedient to that moral law which is an emanation from the righteousness of God, and of eternal obligation; and let it ever be remembered that Christ is "the author of eternal salvation to all that obey him." Without faith and obedience there can be no holiness, and without holiness none can see the Lord. Be all that God would have thee to be, and God will be to thee" all that thou canst possibly require. He never gives a precept but he offers sufficient grace to enable thee to perform it. Believe as he would have thee, and act as he shall strengthen thee, and thou wilt believe all things savingly, and do all things well.

GENESIS 17:24 Abraham was ninety-nine years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

GENESIS 17:25 Ishmael, his son, was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

GENESIS 17:26 In the same day both Abraham and Ishmael, his son, were circumcised.

GENESIS 17:27 All the men of his house, those born in the house, and those bought with money of a foreigner, were circumcised with him.
