

THE OLD TESTAMENT LIBRARY

General Editors

G. ERNEST WRIGHT, The Divinity School, Harvard University
JOHN BRIGHT, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia
JAMES BARR, Princeton Theological Seminary
PETER ACKROYD, University of London

GERHARD VON RAD

GENESIS

A Commentary

REVISED EDITION

The Westminster Press
Philadelphia

ologies. One cannot really say that the narrative has the special intention of explaining how the shrine "Beer-lahai-roi" ("of the living one who sees me") arose. And the Ishmaelites? Were they so important to the narrator's contemporaries that people wished to know about their origin? Was there during Solomon's day or later still a separate tribe of Ishmaelites? The aetiology itself breaks down, by the way, when Ishmael is not born in his native desert region in the south. No, the exposition of the present narrative must proceed from the context into which it is incorporated; then its effect is to retard the action of the main narrative and to heighten the suspense. The reader who, with Abraham, is expecting the fulfillment of the great promise is put off; for Ishmael is not the heir of promise but a secondary descendant who retires from the line of promise. The reader, therefore, has experienced a very strange incident which contains a special significance. The question about why Ishmael is not the son of promise must be answered by the reader himself on the basis of what has gone before. Abraham had to assume and did assume (v. 1) that Sarah would be the mother of the heir of promise. But there is an obstacle which in human terms is insuperable. This hard fact sets free human activity; human discretion takes control of the matter; impatience helps and finds a way out. But how uncannily complicated the circumstances now become, ending finally in a cul-de-sac! Everything is now complicated, not least by the resort to legal regulations. The question of guilt is also complicated, for Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. But the narrator's great reticence in this respect shows that he does not want the reader to judge or condemn but rather simply to see and hear. There can be no doubt that in such stories the original narrative has been enlarged by a kind of typical universality, i.e., situations, temptations, problems, decisions, are described in which the reader can discover himself and his relation to God. Chapter 12.10 ff. told of the jeopardy of the promise, a disregard of the kind that springs from unbelief; the story of Hagar shows us to some extent the opposite; a fainthearted faith that cannot leave things with God and believes it necessary to help things along. All persons of the drama appear in a bad light. The narrator seems to be most sympathetic toward Hagar, although she offended most obviously against right and custom. But the reader understands that a child so conceived in defiance or in little faith cannot be the heir of promise. He becomes what he must, free and rebellious, going forth to a battle of all against all. But a primary point in the narrative is that God follows the one

who goes forth from Abraham's house too; and it is a great wonder that his eyes are also open to mankind, that he includes it in his plans for history and that he established oases in the desert for Hagar and Ishmael too. "O thou God who seest!" (Del.)

6. GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM. INSTITUTION OF CIRCUMCISION. Ch. 17.1-14

¹⁷ ¹When 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. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁴No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. ⁶And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. ⁷And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

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

Chapter 17 belongs to the Priestly document. But it does not have a unified structure and continuity. A series of seams can be recognized, from which one may infer that various Priestly traditions about the covenant with Abraham have been combined into a large unit. In the first part (vs. 1-14) Abraham's call is essentially parallel to the Yahwistic report (ch. 15.7 ff.). But what a difference in the presentation of essentially the same material! The Yahwist set God's call in the midst of Abraham's human situation which became psychologically clear in Abraham's answer and in the delineation of his fear. The Priestly document, on the other hand, reduces Abraham's call to the purely theological, i.e., it speaks in vs. 1-14 of God only. Not a single word is said about Abraham, only the gesture of reverence

in v. 3. The actual call and promise in the Yahwist's representation required only a single verse (ch. 15.7). Here, on the other hand, we read a long, ponderous, and detailed speech by God in which the theological substance of the covenant with Abraham is defined, not without repetitions or variants. The making of the covenant, therefore, consists for this document only in God's address, which is severe and solemn, almost in a vacuum. How dramatically the Yahwist told of God's coming! Here "the Lord appeared" in v. 1 and the "God went up" in v. 22 are completely ungraphic.

[1] Of the Pentateuch sources only P has a chronological framework (cf. chs. 5; 11), and all other chronological dates in the Abraham story derive from P: chs. 12.4; 16.3, 16; 21.5; 23.1; 25.7, 20. Regarding God's self-introduction by name, see exposition of ch. 15.7. The meaning of the name *'ēl šaddai* has not yet been explained satisfactorily. Frequently (but not here), LXX translates it with "the Almighty." In the theology of our source, God's revelation as *'ēl šaddai* designates a definite and, moreover, temporary stage of God's revelation to the patriarchs (Ex. 6.3, "By my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them"). Strangely enough, the Priestly document does not define the theological distinction between the older stage of revelation and the one that was final for Israel. It may be, then, that everything was already expressed in the revelation of the name Yahweh. But it is interesting to see that even the latest of the documentary sources knows about the difference between the patriarchal faith and the later belief in Yahweh. In fact, it is even more accurate in this respect in that it consciously takes account of this break in the history of the cult in its theological plan, whereas the Yahwist frankly calls Abraham's God Yahweh.

The actual address to Abraham contains two imperatives. P is more concerned than the Yahwist with the obligation which falls to Abraham in the moment of revelation. It is the constraint of his whole life which is henceforth to be lived in the presence of this revealed God (life is a "walk," a "walking about"). This change of prepositions marks the difference in the relationship to God from that of the first world epoch, for Enoch and Noah walked "with" God. (Chs. 5.22, 24; 6.9.) The word that one usually translates "devout" (*āmīn*), following Luther, actually means "whole" or "perfect," not, to be sure, in the sense of moral perfection but rather in relationship to God. It signifies complete, unqualified surrender. The demand, shortened here, is more fully stated in Deut. 18.13, "Be whole with

your God." Similarly, i.e., with reference to a communal relationship among men, this "whole" occurs in ch. 20.5 in the sense of "without ulterior motives," "unreserved."

— [2-3a] And now God proceeds to announce the covenant he has established. A "covenant" among men or groups of men serves to order a legal situation between two parties, in some way unclarified, by the assumption of particular obligations. It changes what is dangerous and unexplained into a salutary communal relationship by means of a legal ordinance which binds the two members. There is not necessarily a relationship of parity between those who subscribe to the covenant; on the contrary, it often happens that the more powerful member extends the covenant relationship to the weaker (Josh. 9.6, 11; I Sam. 11.1; II Sam. 3.12; I Kings 20.34). The Hebrew word is more appropriately translated "obligation," "promise." This obligation can be taken up one-sidedly by one party toward another, but it can also be enjoined on one party by the other; finally, it can be adopted mutually by both parties. Here (and in Gen. 15.18) we have the first of the three possibilities. God binds himself; Abraham remains the dumb recipient of the promise. To enter into such a communal relationship a special ritual was customary, about which we learn something from Jer. 34.18 and Gen. 15.9 ff. But whereas the Yahwist thought that God too concluded his covenant with Abraham in such human forms, P gives no suggestion. Indeed, the verb that indicates the completion of the ceremony (*kāṭal*, "cut") is avoided; God "gives," "establishes," the covenant, and its completion is only in the word directed to Abraham.

[3b-6] One has the impression that a paragraph ends with v. 3a. The word of covenant has been given, and Abraham has expressed his submission by a silent gesture. The substance of God's address, which begins in v. 4, is parallel to the preceding; it describes the divine promise further by combining a change of name with the making of the covenant and explaining it with a somewhat artificial pun ("father of a multitude of nations"). Here P has certainly theologized a double tradition of the first patriarch's name, for the name "Abraham" is linguistically nothing else than a "lengthening" of the simpler "Abram," which means "my father [the god] is exalted." Originally only the Priestly tradition contained this change in the name. But in weaving together the sources, the redactor found it necessary to change every Jehovistic mention of "Abraham" before

ch. 17 into "Abram." The promise of a great posterity is here supplemented by a double statement: Abraham will be the father of nations, and kings will come forth from him. One does not grasp the meaning of this promise if one thinks primarily of the Ishmaelites, Edomites, and sons of Keturah (ch. 25.1 ff.); for the descendants about whom these words speak are not to be sought among those who are outside God's covenant, even less since later the same promise is made to Sarah (v. 16). As the Yahwist shows, Abraham's call was connected with the hope of a universal extension of God's salvation beyond the limits of Israel (ch. 12.3). The Priestly document also contains this element of tradition; but even though it is formulated more programmatically (chs. 17.16; 28.3; 35.11), P's real theological interest is much more in the inner circle of Israel's cultic regulations. The almost prophetic element, therefore, because it was anchored in the tradition, is given by P conscientiously but as though under seal.

[7-8] In v. 7, a new paragraph begins with another covenant declaration. What is new is the express statement that the covenant is made not only with Abraham but also with all his descendants. It is therefore a reference to its timeless validity. But the saving gifts mentioned here are also changed, namely, the new relationship to God and the land. To exhibit the regulations of this relationship to God, to show its cult forms, will be later the chief task of the Priestly document. But as an element of tradition, this "I will be God to you" does not belong originally to the ancient patriarchal promise, but is, rather, an antedating of the substance of the covenant at Sinai, for the two really old patriarchal promises are posterity and land (cf. the epilogue to ch. 15). The Priestly document could not leave the curiously broken relation of the patriarchs to the saving gift of the land (it was promised to them but not yet their possession) undefined theologically or conceptually; it calls it "the land of your sojournings" (chs. 21.23; 28.4; 35.27; 37.1; cf. the epilogue to ch. 23).

[9-14] The sections vs. 1-3a, 3b-6, and 7-8 have communicated what God will "accomplish"; now vs. 9-14 turn to the human side, i.e., to the observance which now falls to Abraham with the inauguration of the communal relationship. This section is the logical continuation to one of the previous covenant declarations, probably to vs. 7-8 because of the continual inclusion of the "descendants." God "establishes" the covenant (v. 7), man "keeps" it (v. 10). Here, therefore, an attitude is demanded of Abraham toward God's act, an attitude which he is to make explicit by circumcising every male of

his house. Human covenants also were accompanied by an external sign that obligated the parties to keep the agreement (cf. ch. 31.44 ff.). Thus, according to the sense of this passage, circumcision is only the act of appropriation, of witness to the revelation of God's salvation, and the sign of its acceptance. This distinguishes this covenant from the covenant with Noah; it is for a definite circle of men and demands their obedience. This obedience, however, does not consist in performing definite legal acts, but only in the recognition and affirmation of God's offer. To this extent Abraham and his seed are not free partners to the covenant. Whoever refuses the sign of this recognition is to be "cut off from his people." This scarcely means the death penalty, which is expressed by P in a different way, but rather exclusion from the sacred community, a kind of excommunication, which also meant ruin for the one concerned. This emphasis on the conscious attitude of the individual toward the covenant, which required of the individual Israelite personal decision and responsibility, appears only in a later phase in the history of the Old Testament cult; for all older rites were collective, and the individual participated in them only as a member of the group. This change must be related to Israel's situation in the Babylonian exile. Because of the abolition of the great cultic regulations, the feasts, sacrifice, etc., which were binding on the national community, the individual and the family were suddenly summoned to decision. Each family with all its members, each of them personally, was bound to Yahweh's offer, and since the Babylonians (like all eastern Semites) did not practice circumcision, the observance of this custom was a *status confessionis* for the exiles; i.e., it became a question of their witness of Yahweh and his guidance of history. The significance that circumcision thus received was unknown to ancient Israel. It was a rite which was practiced from earliest times, but it was not yet connected in such a way with the center of faith. It was felt to be a mark of distinction from the "uncircumcised" (i.e., the Philistines, I Sam. 14.6; 17.26, 36; etc.), but there were other ancient interpretations as well (e.g., Josh. 5.2 ff.). (The extremely old story in Ex. 4.24 ff. cannot be properly understood at all.) The idea of circumcision as an act of bodily purification and dedication must also have played a role at times, otherwise the spiritualizing demand for a "circumcision of the heart" could not have been made (Lev. 26.41; Deut. 10.16; Jer. 4.4; 9.25; Ezek. 44.7). But this conception is far from our text. Here circumcision is understood quite formally, i.e., without significant reference to the procedure itself, as a sign of the covenant, as an act of confession and an appropriation of the divine revealed will.