Expository Articles

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Genesis 17:1–22

THE *CANONICAL PLACEMENT* of Genesis 17 is at the center of the Abraham-Sarah narrative. At the outset of that narrative, Sarah is barren (11:30), Abraham is summoned and promised land and a great name (12:2), and an heir (15:4–5). At the conclusion of the narrative, the son is given (21:1–7), and almost lost (22:1–14). The shape of the narrative is from the *promise of an heir* to the *birth of an heir.* Our text is situated in that long, uncertain season before fulfillment, where faith in the promise wrestles with loss of confidence in the promise.

The *critical placement* of Genesis 17, according to conventional source analysis, is in the Priestly tradition, that is, in an exilic tradition that faces the displacement of the community and seeks to establish stability and continuity through socio-cultic institutions. Thus, cultic gestures are enacted as signs of God's continuing care in a context of seeming abandonment.

In large sweep, then, we may correlate the critical placement and canonical function of our text:

canonical: barrenness ———> Genesis 17 ———> heir
critical: exile ———> Genesis 17 ———> well-being

The narrative of Genesis 17 affirms faith "into the future," in the face of experience that denies such a possible future. Canonically, Sarah and Abraham have no son and therefore no future; this text asserts a future rooted only in God's faithful intention. Critically, Israel in exile can see no way out; this text asserts a future, even a royal future, against present helplessness. Thus the text is a powerful, uncompromising act of hope, rooted in God, aimed precisely against Israel's despair. God's resolve to work a good future overrides all data to the contrary. The text intends that the community of Abraham and Sarah should not succumb to the despair-generating circumstance in which it finds itself. With only a few interruptions, the text is simply the speech of God, the unfettered decree of the sovereign God whose decree will not be denied by the recalcitrance of circumstance.

I

The introduction of the chapter establishes the main themes (vs. 1–3*a*). The narrator situates us in the story (v. 1*a*). (1) Abraham is old, ninety-nine years, and beyond child begetting, "as good as dead" (Heb. 11:12). Abraham

has within himself no capacity for a future. (2) Yahweh "appeared to Abraham." We are not told how, and the narrator has no curiosity about Yahweh's coming. These two features give the dynamic of the narrative: Abraham is hopeless; God is powerfully present. The story lives in the intensity of that tension.

As the narrator completes the introduction, God speaks (vs. 1*b*–2). The speech is abrupt and magisterial. God utters the inscrutable name, "El Shaddai." The name is construed by God through two consequent assertions. First, *a command:* "Walk before me, be complete," that is, be uncompromised and undivided in obedience and loyalty. God's first word to Abraham is an imperative. All that follows depends on the singular devotion of Abraham to this awesome God. Second, *a promise,* a unilaterally established covenant which binds Abraham to the purpose and power of God: "You will multiply exceedingly." This is the same promise spoken over creation (Gen. 1:22, 28). God's promise is uttered imperviously, in the face of Abraham's exhausted old age. The command and promise together create a wholly new situation for Abraham. God's appearance massively counters Abraham's despairing old age.

Abraham responds silently but wholly and dramatically (v. 3*a*). He submits physically. He withholds nothing of himself, reiterating earlier responses of faithful obedience (12:4*a*; 15:6). God's word of command and promise has been uttered and heard; nothing will ever be the same again for Abraham and his community.

II

This inscrutably appearing and uttering God issues *a dominical claim* over Abraham's future (vs. 3*b*–8). The covenant now enacted is unilateral. There is no verb: "I, behold, my covenant with you." Abraham does not vote or assent; he is in covenant. God's claim on Abraham and God's commitment to Abraham issues in a new future:

(1) "I will cause you to be exceedingly fruitful" (v. 6). By the double use of *me'od,* the phrase intensifies "exceedingly." The escalated language makes the contrast to present barrenness extreme.

(2) "I will establish my covenant . . . forever" (v. 7). The covenant is not only here and now, it will be renewed and reliable in all thinkable successive generations. The narratives of Genesis tell of the reenactment to the next generations (Gen. 26:4; 28:13–14). The notion of "everlasting" covenant is one voiced especially in exilic texts, just when the covenant seemed voided (cf. Gen. 9:16; Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 37:26).

(3) "I will give . . . land . . . for an everlasting possession" (v. 8). Again the adverb "everlasting" states the extreme case. The people who have no land will have land for perpetuity; present landlessness is not the wave of the future.

In all three of these promises of fruitfulness, covenant, and land, the present circumstance of barren exile is countered; and in each, present circumstance is countered with a powerful modifier, "exceedingly, everlasting, everlasting." God's word overrides present circumstance.

(4) God's powerful, promissory assertion is concluded and sealed with God's new self-identity: "I will be their God" (v. 8). Everything hinges on God's self-resolve and commitment which changes all future reality for Israel.

III

God's self-resolve and self-disclosure (vs. 4–8) are dominated by the self-asserting "I." Now the subject changes abruptly: "You" (*'attah*, v. 9). There is *a second side* to this relationship. The covenant must be kept (*šamar*) by Abraham (vs. 9–14). The verb *šamar* bespeaks watchful care and attentiveness. The precise mode of obedient attentiveness is given in the single, simple direct command: "Every male among you shall be circumcised" (v. 10). This is a covenant "in your flesh" (v. 13).

When viewed through the familiar Pauline polemic (cf. Rom. 2:25–29), circumcision is viewed negatively; it had become a rite of arrogance and exclusiveness. Moreover, in our contemporary horizon circumcision is enormously problematic as a male rite, consigning women to second-class status. None of that, however, is on the horizon of this text.

We may hear the requirement of the text on its own terms:

(1) In an exilic context where syncretism in dominant culture is a powerful seduction, the community of covenant needs a gesture of distinctiveness, so that it can announce that it does indeed march to a different drummer. Circumcision is a "sign," an assertion of being present in the world differently, not according to dominant values and expectations. Circumcision is a sustained act of sacramental ratification of the covenant.

(2) The "sign" must be concrete, intentional, and in some way costly. Thus the sign of commitment is a mark in the flesh, in the body, in the lived person who is marked by a different membership. The concluding formula of excommunication (v. 14) is intolerant of those who will not submit to this sacramental gesture of distinctiveness.

(3) The most striking dimension of this sacramental institution is that the "born" and the "bought" are both included (vs. 12–13). The born are the blood descendants of the line of Abraham. The bought are outsiders to the bloodline. Perhaps they are prisoners of war or purchased slaves in the work force. The text assures that they are full members of the covenant community, even outside the blood line (cf. Isa. 56:6–7).

The sacrament of distinctiveness is even-handedly available to both. While the point should not be pressed, it is possible to see in this provision an anticipation of the later Pauline struggle concerning Jews and Gentiles, yet

another test case concerning insiders and outsiders. The exilic community envisions an openness to all who share the promises and the requirement of distinctiveness.

IV

Finally, in response to the promise (vs. 4–8) and the sign (vs. 9–14), there is a dialogue concerning the *troubled reception* of the covenant by Abraham (vs. 15–21). God speaks first to make the promise of an heir concrete and specific (vs. 15–16). The promise will be fulfilled through Sarah, the "princess" whose life begins in barrenness (11:30). She is the carrier of God's blessing through whom barrenness will be transformed into fruitfulness and new social power.

Abraham responds (vs. 17–18). This is his only speech, his chance to answer in obedience. Abraham's response, however, is one of cynical doubt and mocking. His double question is a scornful acknowledgement of the old age of both the would-be parents. He refuses the promise in his harsh, "no way."

After his negative refusal, Abraham offers God a more credible alternative: Ishmael! Ishmael is Abraham's desperate attempt to invert his situation of despair. He offers his only son, one not born to Sarah, as the way to seize the future and fulfill the promise. If only God had promised an heir and had not specified Sarah, Ishmael could be a viable candidate. Sarah, however, is the only mother nominated, and Ishmael is perforce excluded. God's way into the future will not be Abraham's chosen way. God's way depends completely on God, a way seemingly impossible to this mocking voice of despairing exile.

Now God speaks once more to refute Abraham's more reasonable strategy, and to reiterate the only permitted way to the future (vs. 19–21). God's answer begins in an abrupt refusal to Abraham: Nay (*'abel*)! God's way is not Abraham's way (cf. Isa. 55:8–9). God then utters three claims to Abraham: (1) Isaac is the only way into the future. The future depends on the unborn child of an old, barren woman. (2) Astonishingly, God blesses Ishmael. He is not Abraham's ticket to Israel's future, but he is a legitimate heir who will be fruitful, multiply, and be great. God's powerful promise is not confined to the claims of Israel's covenant tradition. (3) The last word is a specific word about Isaac. While Abraham doubts and wonders, God is already fixed on the next generation, the one beyond the present hopelessness.

V

God departs (v. 22). Abraham is left alone to obey. He does obey; he circumcises his "other" son, Ishmael (vs. 25–26), and all his males, born and bought (v. 27).

There is as yet no son and no land of promise, but everything has been changed by the self-asserting, history-guaranteeing "I" of God. Generation

after generation, the family of Abraham holds to this text. Because of this utterance, Israel is always a gain in a new circumstance. Israel embraces a future it cannot see, but which is authored and authorized by the one uncontained in the present barrenness.

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John 2:13–22

SOMETIMES THE LINE between folly and faith, between sanity and insanity, is a fine one indeed. On April 10, 1990, eight members of the so-called "Plowshares Eight" stood before a federal judge in Norristown, Pennsylvania, to receive sentencing for the crimes they had committed against the federal government and General Electric Corporation. The eight men and women had broken into a nuclear weapons station and had damaged several nuclear warheads. In their defense, they argued they were acting in protest to the nuclear arms race and in accord with the biblical injunction "to beat swords into plowshares." How does one evaluate such an action? Is it the cost of discipleship, or is it the folly of misguided people, fanatics in a cause that sometimes overwhelms all of us?

John 2:13–22 is a text that raises for us the issue of faith and folly in our own lives. The story of the "cleansing of the temple" is familiar to all of us. It is told not only by John but by the Synoptic writers as well (cf. Matt. 21:10–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–46).

John 2:13–22 is a diptych in two panels: 2:13–16 and 17–22. The first panel describes what happened in the temple. The second panel gives a theological reflection upon that event. The church has seen in this text a ray of insight into the meaning of discipleship. Thus, it is found as a lectionary reading for the third Sunday of Lent. In addition, the narrative of the cleansing of the temple has long been taken as symbolic of the purification of candidates in preparation for their baptism on Easter eve. In union with the risen Christ, the believer now becomes a new temple. Thus, the passage has a liturgical as well as Lenten context.

One of the problems immediately confronting the interpreter of this text is the relationship of the Johannine tradition to that of the Synoptic Gospels. To be sure, there are many features that are quite similar. The temple vocabulary is the same. Moreover, John and the Synoptics are in agreement about the driving out of the sellers of doves, the overturning of the tables of the money changers, and in referring to the temple as the house of God.

There are also profound differences. John places the cleansing of the