

## The Bible in Context Ep 30: Abraham's Covenant of Circumcision Gen 17

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Hey everyone, welcome back to the Bible in Context podcast. And it's just me again this week, and they'll be back with us next week. And we had left off talking about Hagar in Genesis 16 and her inverted exodus as this Egyptian slave flees the oppressive elect family back to Egypt. And that chapter ended with a note about Abrams' age.

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And so in chapter 17, the chapter picks back up with Abraham's age about 13 years later, which both connects these two stories and shows that they are a change in scene within this story. So we're going to dive into this passage and see how they connect and see what this passage has to tell us. And yeah, just figure out what we should learn from this and what some of the cultural backgrounds are to some of the covenant that we're going to see taking place. But

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Before we dive into that, I just want to mention one more time that we do have an email now associated with the podcast and it's in the description of the podcast. If you want to take a look at that, if you have any thoughts, questions, comments, we want to hear from you. So it's the Bible in Context podcast, no spaces at gmail.com. So let us hear from you. And again, whatever platform you're on, if you think this stuff is helpful, subscribe, follow, rate, share, like, whatever you can do to.

01:25

Show that you appreciate what we're doing and to help others to see it too So that if it's helpful then it'll help them read their Bibles better as well So let's go ahead and jump into chapter 17 so I already said that these passages are connected because Chapter 16 ends with kind of this fade to black moment as it says Abram was 86 years old When Ishmael was born and then chapter 17 the scene comes back in fades back to color as it says

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When Abram was 99 years old, Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless, that I may make a covenant between me and you and multiply you greatly. Now, this is kind of an interesting way to begin this scene and for God to begin this conversation. Why would God begin this conversation saying, hey, you need to be blameless so that I can establish this covenant? Well, if again, we think back to the previous chapter,

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Abram and Sarah, both really just screwed up. And so it would make sense here that the reason Yahweh is telling him, hey, be blameless is because he needs a reminder. He hasn't been blameless in the previous scene in his life. Yes, it was 13 years ago according to the chronological note, but in narrative time, these things happen back to back. And so again, it makes sense for Yahweh to come to him and just give another reminder of hey, be blameless before me so that we can establish this covenant.

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you're worthy of it and that it would be a good idea for me to make you the instrument through which I will bless the nations. And so how does Abram respond? He falls on his face, he gives a sign of respect and loyalty to Yahweh at this and so Yahweh says, okay, in verse four he says, behold, my covenant is with you. He says that kings shall come from him and you'll have an everlasting covenant established between them throughout their generations and that Abram's offspring will possess the land of his sojourners, the land of Canaan.

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And we've seen before how Yahweh says in chapter 15, a very similar promise where he's going to possess the land of the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Perizzites and the Amorites and all the other aites that are probably set out of order if you are reading along in chapter 15. But he says that all these peoples in the land of Canaan, all the Canaanites, you're going to possess their land. That's part of this covenant. So really in chapter 17 here, whenever Abram expresses loyalty to Yahweh after his reminder to be loyal.

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he reestablishes the covenants that he has already given him. That he's going to be fruitful, which means children, kings are going to come from him, and then he's also going to possess the land of Canaan. That's the promises we've seen so far. Promises of land and promises of chosen seed, reiterated right here. Now the next section gets into the fun topic of circumcision,

but before we get into that, there's something else that I want to take a look at that I meant to read a couple of weeks ago, and

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I met Nate and so I couldn't do it at the time and this was actually a fitting spot to talk about it again because we're talking about these same covenants again so I'm going to do that now. And what it is that I want to talk about is Jeffrey Niehaus's book *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*. It's a really good book. He just picks out a select number of themes and tropes that are seen throughout ancient near eastern literature and he shows how they show up in the Bible.

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And I think what is most significant about that is it shows that there are very few things in the Bible that are not tropes and themes that ancient Near Easterners would be familiar with. Now, what does that mean? Does that mean that the Bible has nothing new to say and is unoriginal? No, it doesn't because it's showing who Yahweh is and it's showing how he interacts with his people, which that is different.

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The way he interacts with his people, the promises he makes, the goals that he has, that's different. Yahweh's not capricious and just changing his mind to the last minute and just in it for his own benefit like a lot of the other ancient Near Eastern gods are. He's in it to redeem humanity even at his own sacrifice. But the story of Yahweh and of his people is told in themes, motifs, patterns, tropes that the ancient Near Eastern people would understand so that they could better understand the story.

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If the Bible were written today, we'd probably see a story in it of, say, a young hero who wants to get out and see the world and then goes out into the world and grows, becomes successful and then ultimately becomes a hero. And that's because we as maybe Westerners or Americans or whatever, we recognize that storyline. We see that in people like, let's see, Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins, these kind of...

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people, these kinds of stories are told throughout our culture in a lot of different places. And so when we see the same trope in a different story applied in a different way, we learn new things from it, but we're able to track with the story and be entertained by the story because some of it's familiar. It's not completely disconnected. So that's why the Bible is going to be using ancient Near Eastern tropes to tell its story. Not because it lacks originality, not because it's not unique, not because it doesn't teach us something.

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about the uniqueness of Yahweh, but because it's telling stories in an ancient Near Eastern fashion. So let me read a few quotes from this book. And a lot of these are direct quotes from ancient Near Eastern documents. And this first one just goes to show the way in which ancient Near Eastern gods at times can make a covenant with a king or place them in their position of rulership. I've heard it taught before and preached that there are no covenants like what we find in the Bible in the ancient Near East.

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To a degree that's true, but there are covenants similar in the ancient Near East as what Yahweh makes with Israel. They're not entirely unique. They're not brand new. They didn't just drop out of heaven, so to speak. But it's a unique spin on a very familiar cultural element. So this first one is regarding a covenant that Marduk, the king, or sorry, the god of Babylon makes with the king of Babylon. And it says, the prince will rule all lands. And I owe God's all.

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have a covenant with him. He will destroy Elam, its cities, he will cast down." So we see in this, Marduk, he covenants with the king, he raises him up, puts him in his position of power, makes him ruler of all lands, he gives him lands, and makes a covenant with him that he will subdue peoples. This should sound familiar now. Not only do we have a covenant of kingship, but we also have a covenant of conquest in this statement, and that's not the only one.

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I want to take a look at a couple more here. So this one is from Egypt where Pharaoh Amonhotep II, it says that Ra has appointed him to be king of the living, king of kings, ruler of rulers, victorious lord who takes every land. It is my father, Re, who commands that I do it. He assigns me to that which is with him, all lands, all countries. They come to me in submission like every subject of my majesty.

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that text, but I read straight through them. There were some gaps in the ancient text that they recovered, but I read through it and I think you still get the flavor of what's going on here. There is, again, Re has covenanted and appointed Ammon-hotep II to go out and have conquest over a certain number of lands, just like Yahweh has given to Abram. And then another one about Ammon-Re declaring about Tutmose III, I have given the might and victory

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have set thy fame even the fear of thee in all lands, the terror of thee as far as the four pillars of heaven." And then again, Thutmose III says, "My terror was in their hearts. All lands were under my sandals." And Amon Ray says to Seti I, "I put fear of thee in their hearts. I give to thee all lands. Every country is beneath thy sandals." All countries prostrate beneath his sandals forever.

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Now there's several more that I could read, but I think you're getting the point. There is one more that I want to read, and this is an Assyrian text.

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where King Tikulti-Ninurta declares that the gods have given him lands to conquer as a gift. And it says, at that time, from Tulsina, the mountains, the region between the cities, Sassila and Mashat-Sari, on the opposite bank of the lower Zab, from Mount Zakuuska, I'm probably butchering these names, I don't know how to pronounce all these, but bear with me, Mount Lalar, the district of the extensive Kutu, and it goes on, just listing places after place after place.

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And then at the very end of this paragraph it says, those regions the great gods allotted to me. So again, from all this we should be getting vibes of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham and his allotment of the land and the victory over his enemies as part of that covenant. This is a common trope in the ancient area, something that Joe Schmo, a Syrian or Babylonian or Egyptian would have picked up the Bible and read this and be like, this sounds a lot like things that my kings are boasting about. So what does this say?

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Yahweh. He is also made Abram into a king of sorts in the minds of the ancient Near Easterners and from Abram kings are going to come. Through using this trope we're seeing the rise of a king by declaration of one who calls himself the most high God and creator of all. In light of the ancient Near East this is just all the more significant. Not that it's not significant without this information but I think it makes it easier to connect with as a story not

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to kind of extract the theology and the points out of it, but we're really trying to get invested, feel the suspense, and start to look at our own world through the story when we know the way that ancient Near Easterners would be reading it. So I hope that's helpful. Just keep in mind that there are very, very few things throughout the Book of Genesis or really even the Old Testament that are going to be something that is completely unique, just a brand new style of literature, a brand new literary trope.

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brand new story. Well, we'll talk about this more as we get further into the book of Genesis. We're going to see more places where there are surprisingly ancient Near Eastern stories that

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sound a lot like the stories we're reading. And again, it's not that the Bible lacks originality, not that it didn't have any ideas and just copied things, but it's using the language of that culture, the stories of that culture, to tell who is Yahweh, who is Israel, and what is their purpose. All right, well, I think we can move on to the topic of the covenant of circumcision later in chapter 17, starting in verse...

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9. He says, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, and you and your offspring after you throughout the generations. This is my covenant which you shall keep. Between me and you and your offspring after you, every male among you shall be circumcised. Okay, why is that the sign of the covenant? Why circumcision? Well, there's been a lot of debate over the years of where this rite came from, why exactly is this rite used, how is it viewed in ancient Near Eastern context.

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But there's been a really good article, I think, that has come out called The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel, a Proposal for a Transfer of Right from Egypt to Israel. This came out in the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology from SBTS in 2016. And this article talks about how the right of circumcision, the act, the ritual of circumcision, likely came from Egypt, where it was common

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for those who are devoted to a deity to circumcise themselves as a sign of their priestly devotion to that deity. So, what that would mean in this context is that whenever Yahweh tells Abram to circumcise himself, he's saying, hey Abram, you and your family and all the males in your family are going to devote themselves to me as priests. I want you to be devoted to me as priest and to have a sign of devotion on your bodies.

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So this is a very substantial covenant sign. It's very weird to us, but this is a sign of priesthood. I think that brings a real weight to this. This isn't just some kind of like flippant idea that Yahweh had about, let's do circumcision as just a random sign of our covenant because God just wants it to hurt or something, or because it's symbolic of old flesh being removed from the spirit or something like that.

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different uh... allegorical interpretations of the sign and i don't really think we have to spring for allegory here because there's actually something in the culture that tells us what this means and you may want to argue that there is more to this side that there is something allegorical uh... if you want to try and argue that fine but uh... you gotta root it in the text you gotta find something in this text that signifies that

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is that circumcision is a sign and it comes from the cultural background of being devoted as a priest with this sign. So that is really going to be the interpretation I lean on. For for any interpretation you want to pull out of the text, even if you've heard all your life and it just to you it makes sense, you've got to make sure you can find it in the text. If you can't find it in the text you should question whether or not that is there to begin with, that you should believe it. So, the covenant of circumcision, a

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sign that marks someone as a priest. If you're an Israelite, it marks you as a priest to Yahweh, as devoted to him. And in Egypt, this was for just the, those who were the priests. And what is really cool about this is everyone in Abram's family, every male in Abram's family gets this. And the women, they are associated through their husbands and fathers, and so they also, they come under this and into this, but this was a male sign even in the ancient and eastern culture.

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that had significant meaning and it did bring the women into the the covenant as well. This wasn't an exclusion necessarily because they are part of this family unit that is receiving the sign. But everyone receives it. The priesthood is democratized among God's people. It's not held for just an exclusive class. And we see this play out later at Exodus 19 whenever he says, you are to be a nation of priests, my kingdom of priests.

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That's what Peter calls us, a kingdom of priests, royal ambassadors. We see that kind of language throughout the New Testament. This is where it comes from, at least I think the seeds of it. We see it spelled out more explicitly in Exodus 19, but this is the seeds of that idea, that God's people are to be an entire nation of priests, of representatives of him to the nations. So it's just really cool that we're already seeing that idea starting to take root as early as Genesis 17. We've seen it earlier already with Adam and Eve, with their...

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I mean, they're the mother and father of all humanity. But again, it's showing up. There's this idea, again, even in just tiny seed form, showing up that Yahweh wants his people to all be representatives of him and to be close to him. Now, I think something else that's really cool about this. Who would expect that in the ancient Near East, slaves would get the mark of the covenant? They would get the mark of...

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priestly circumcision. And that's exactly what this verse tells us that should happen. In verse 13 it says, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought of money shall surely be circumcised. They are not excluded from the priesthood. They are part of God's people when



they come into Abram's house. They are to be brought into this covenant. And again, just the same thing that the image of God does. This levels human value.

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whatever social class. We don't really understand much about social class. At least I think most of us don't, at least in this Western and primarily I guess American context as far as my knowledge goes. But this was very impactful. I mean in this time and place there were the kings and then the more rich lords who had sway and had people under them in large houses and then you know at the very bottom of this rung you have slaves who are essentially property.

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And in some cultures you can kill them with no thought, no repercussion. But here they are brought up to be priests just as Abraham through this covenant. Right. When we get to the laws and Exodus and Deuteronomy later, we're going to see more about how the Bible elevates the status of those who are in lower, quote unquote, lower classes according to the culture. But once again, we're seeing this crop up that

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Those who are of low status within the culture, they're the same as everybody else, and they are to be just as much as part of God's family, to bear the responsibility and the honor of image bearer of priest, of representative of Yahweh. Now let's talk about the last line in this little section about circumcision in verse 14, where it says, any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.

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Now this is one of those places that I feel like I've heard it talked about as this is where God is just harsh. So someone doesn't want to put themselves in pain and so he just says, you're out of my community or just this right that he flippantly came up with to be a sign of the covenant. If they don't want to take it then they have to be banned and exiled and that's so harsh and so terrible and all those things. And I think in part of that we have a probably a little bit different view of pain than...

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others have throughout time in history. We view it as kind of the bane of our existence, any discomfort, whereas others may have seen pain as kind of a normal part of life that is sometimes even necessary and sometimes as part of a rite of passage, something that gains honor and perseverance and endurance. That's a conversation for another time, but it's worth pointing out here, at least with that aspect of the argument, that yes, circumcision for a grown man would be painful, but I don't think that's really

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the point here. I don't think it really comes up at all and we shouldn't really focus on that. But why would someone who is uncircumcised be cut off and exiled from the people essentially? Well, again, there's a really good reason for this that makes a lot of good sense. If circumcision is the sign of the covenant, it is the sign of priesthood, of being one who is close to Yahweh and represents Yahweh, if they say, I don't want to take that sign, they're saying, I don't want to be part of Yahweh's nation of \*\*\*\*.

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I don't want to represent him. I don't want to be close to him I don't want to take on the priesthood and so okay, that's fine. This nation is priests So if you don't want to be a priest, you're not part of the nation simple as that So, you know don't let the door hit you on the way out. That's that's kind of what's going on here Everyone is welcome slave and free Highborn and lowborn status people they are all welcomed equally into this status into this nation into this priesthood But if they want to leave it, that's you know, that's not a good thing. I'm not gonna say that's fine, but

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That's their choice. And they can't say that I don't want to be part of the nation, but still reap its benefits. They have to get out because they will not be able to stick around and pretend to be one of these priests and represent Yahweh when they're only going to profane His name and harm the rest of the community. They've chosen to leave it and what it stands for. Now, as we continue on in the passage in verse 15 and on, we actually come back to this idea of, well, okay, circumcision is for men.

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Are women excluded from the elect family? Are they not part of this covenant? Well, let's see. Verse 15, and God said to Abraham, as for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her name Sarah, but Sarah shall be her name. You know, I just realized that I didn't talk about this yet and I can't

believe I did. So let's go back for a second. We just read about Sarah's name change. We didn't even talk about Abram's name change. And this is a really simple comment I just wanna point out here. So back in verse four, or no, sorry, five.

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It says, no longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be called Abraham, for I have made you a father of a multitude of nations. Abram, he is again, he is taken from his position. He is made into something new here. His name has changed. His destiny is decreed. He's taken from one place and made for another purpose. Ultimately, this happened for the first time in Genesis 12 when he is taken from the exile of Babylon and made to be a kingdom of priests and to be a blessing to the nations.

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And here that act of recreation is signified in the changing of Abram's name, in the decreeing of his destiny in his name. His name went from meaning exalted father to father of a multitude, in that we have an act of new creation, of recreation, as new humanity through the ancient Ariesian concept of functional ontology that we see throughout Genesis. And we've talked about this several times now. Most significantly, we talked about it back.

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in our Genesis 1 episodes and we talked about it, I believe last episode regarding Ishmael, we mentioned it a little bit. But we see this show up again where Yahweh has changed a name and now, again, is Sarai supposed to receive the benefits of this covenant? Is she left out because she's a woman? Well, no. She actually gets her own act of recreation and name change along with Abraham. She gets her name change to mean princess or queen or highly exalted woman in the community.

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a recreated status and a new destiny decreed for herself as she takes her place by God's decree as queen alongside King Abraham of this new kingdom of priests that Yahweh is creating through them. So in this and in the verses following we see that the covenant and promises given to Abraham are also being given to Sarai. She is just as much a part of this as Abraham is. Now but hang on a minute.

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Sarah just received a decree of recreation. And if you remember last week's episode about Genesis 16, what's odd about that? There's some tension here, isn't there? Because if you remember, back in chapter 16, when we left that chapter, we thought, wait, maybe Ishmael is the chosen seed. He got...

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a decree of recreation pronounced over him and had these blessings pronounced on him and it was important that he returned back to Abraham his father so that he could have his son. Clearly Ishmael, he's the chosen seed. Why in the world did Sarai just have her name changed? Why did she have the act of recreation put on her and why does she begin to receive these blessings of becoming the mother of kings and peoples? It seems that God is not satisfied with work

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through Sarai's schemes with Hagar, but he has plans with Abram's wife that he has brought through an exodus previously in chapter 12. Now Abram hears this in verse 17, he falls on his face and laughs and says, shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? And he's in disbelief essentially. He's still, I think, trusting in God to some degree. He's shown that already in this chapter by falling down and showing the loyalty.

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to Yahweh. And I think we see that in the fact that in this passage, Yahweh responds favorably and continues the conversation, whereas Sarai, she laughs and asks a question in true doubt, not thinking Yahweh is capable, and for that Yahweh responds less than favorably. Now Abram goes on to ask after this question, oh, the Ishmael might live before you. He says, this is my son, and I thought that he was the chosen one. You know, can you make him the chosen one? Can you just work with him?

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But God responds in verse 19, no, Sarah is going to bear the son. She is your wife and you will call his name Isaac, which is the word for laughing. Yitzhak. And Yahweh goes on to say, I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you, behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. And he shall father 12 princes and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac.

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Sarah shall bear it to you this time next year." So here Yahweh makes clear that yes, you do have Ishmael, you love Ishmael, that's great. I will bless him. I will actually give him blessings that really, really resemble the blessings that Abram and Isaac are going to get. Not only that, but there's also going to be 12 princes, 12 patriarchs in Ishmael's family, just like there's going to be 12 patriarchs in Israel's family. The author is going out

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make clear that we know that Ishmael's family and Isaac's family are set in parallel both in terms of blessing and in terms of the number of patriarchs. So what's the purpose of this? Well, okay, first of all, we've had the tension resolved of is Ishmael going to be the chosen one?

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Well, very clearly, no. But God still has not tossed him aside. Now we're left scratching our heads. Well, if he's not gonna be the chosen one, why did God bring him back to Abram? We've discussed the reason for this a little bit last week, but that passage in Genesis 16, as well as this passage in Genesis 17, 20, shows us God's care for Ishmael.

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in part because he's part of Abram's household, but also just for the Gentiles in general, for those who are not part of the elect family in general, and the non-elect line, which we're going to see that Ishmael falls in line with the non-elect lines like Cain and Ham and Lot. But God cares for these people. He wants to bless them. His goal is not to take the non-elect line and throw them away. His entire goal is he wants all humanity to be fruitful and multiply.

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and Eve. Well, they screw it up, that doesn't happen. He still wants humanity to be fruitful and multiply, and then he wants to redeem all of them. So that's what we're seeing here. He still wants Ishmael as a human, as one of his images, even though a flawed one, to multiply, to become great, and then ideally, through the Elect One, one day, Ishmael's kingdom will come back to the Elect One, back into the garden with Yahweh and fulfill his purpose as an image of God, along with the rest of God's images.

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And also just in this statement, Yahweh is again reaffirming to Abraham the promise that he has already given to Hagar in the previous chapter. So we're going to see God come through on his word to this Egyptian slave woman and her son. Well, I think that really gets us through the bulk of chapter 17. Just as a quick recap, we've talked about Abram's covenant of kingship, of multitude, of land, and of conquest, and how that really fit into the ideas in the ancient.

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in Near East about their own stories and political narratives. And that's something I didn't bring up a minute ago, and I should do that here, is that these weren't just stories that were written down for entertainment or remembrance or even teaching. These were political texts that we read. These were about the domination and conquest and God-ordained leadership from the kings of these nations. So in this story, we're not just hearing a good story.

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that would be familiar to an ancient Near Easterner, we're hearing a political claim of a new kingdom that represents Yahweh, and that is, in this instance, Israel. I would take it that now that is ultimately the church, which is the kingdom of priests, according to the New Testament, but I just wanna bring up this wasn't just a story that is supposed to be abstract and is supposed to teach. This was a real political message, really, because it is the statement

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and that is Abraham. And that kingship is going to flow down through Abraham until it reaches Jesus. He is the real political ruler of this world who will return and establish his good kingship when he returns. That was a little tangent in our summary, but we also talked about circumcision and its meaning as a right of priesthood and representation of Yahweh and how that sign is democratized.

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It is given to all people how Abram and Sarai are both

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included in the recreation status through their name change and identification with a new purpose as mother and father of a multitude of kings and so on. We talked about how the tension with Ishmael being the elect one potentially is resolved. He is not going to be. He's going to bless him. God cares for him and loves him, but Sarai is the chosen wife and Isaac is going to be the chosen

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Abraham goes and he does circumcise himself, his son, his slaves, everyone in his household. They all become priests to Yahweh through this sign and the chapter wraps up and continues on into chapter 18 which is going to be a really fun one to talk about. For now we're gonna pause there. Next week Nate should be back and we're gonna do our recap of the book of Genesis so far. We want to do these periodically just to keep our heads on straight and to think about

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not only the granular little bits of the book of Exodus, but really what does it mean on the whole? How should we read this when we come away from it? Whenever we go away, and we have probably forgotten a lot of the details because we're, you know, several books later, several months later, we're just trying to keep track of the main points. What do we really need to take away from this? How on a large scale should these narratives shape our hope and shape our lives? So that's what we're gonna talk about a little bit next week. I hope that is something that's really helpful. And then after that, we'll continue on in the book of Genesis.

1:32

with chapter 18. So thanks for listening.