

## THE ABSENCE OF CIRCUMCISION AND THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Scholars and theologians have long recognized the significance of the book of Hebrews for biblical and systematic theology.<sup>1</sup> While Hebrews strongly emphasizes the juxtaposition of the Mosaic covenant with the new covenant instituted and upheld by Christ, the book (often indirectly) references additional covenants. For example, a reference to the Noahic covenant appears in Heb 11:7. Sprinkles of the Davidic covenant appear throughout the book, though most significantly in the first chapter. The Abrahamic covenant appears more directly in Heb 2:16, 6:13–14, 7:1–10, and 11:8–22. Though the Abrahamic covenant is by no means the primary focus of the book of Hebrews, the various references to this covenant within the book are not without issues. The author of Hebrews references the σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ in 2:16, however, the author does not go on to define how one identifies as a σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ. Further, there is no discussion of circumcision in the book—an oddity considering the book’s overwhelmingly Jewish tone.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “The distinction between a former *berith* and ‘a new *berith*,’ or an ‘old *diatheke*’ and a ‘new *diatheke*,’ is found in the Bible in the following passages: Jer 31:31; the words of institution of the supper, and a number of times, with varying phraseology in the Epistle to the Hebrews.” Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Gareth Cockerill discusses the possibility of Jewish vs. Gentile audience. Cockerill asserts a Jewish background for the audience, but he leaves the meaning of this open to the reader. Gareth Cockerill, 19–25. Clark Williamson adds, “Hebrews gives no indication that the renewed people of God is anyone other than Israelites.” See Clark Williamson, “Anti-Judaism in Hebrews?” *Int* 57 (2003): 276. However, this ignored the issue of Judaizing evangelistic efforts rampant throughout the book of Acts (e.g., Acts 15) and Paul’s letters (e.g., Galatians). A convincing interpretation worthy of more study is that of a gentile audience converted by a Judaizing Christian.

The goal of this essay is to explore the absence of circumcision in the book of Hebrews given the Hebrews author's understanding of and purpose for the Abrahamic covenant. By evaluating the absence of circumcision in Hebrews, the identity of the σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ in 2:16, and the significance of faith as an identifying mark for the people of God throughout the book, this study asserts that faith replaces circumcision in the new covenant as an identifier for the people of God and that the Hebrews writer understands that all who possess faith belong to the σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ. To that end, recognizing faith as an identifying mark of the people of God emphasizes the new covenant as available to all nations. To uphold this claim, a short exploration of circumcision theology from Abraham to the 1st century is necessary. The first section of this essay discusses the role of faith, obedience, and circumcision within the Abrahamic covenant. The second section narrows the scope to a discussion of faith as better than circumcision in the book of Hebrews. Finally, a discussion of faith as the “new circumcision” will conclude that obedient faith in Jesus is better than circumcision.

### **The Abrahamic Covenant in Terms of Faith, Obedience, and Circumcision**

Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin from males who possess an Abrahamic genealogy. This mark identifies those who belong to the covenant people of God (i.e., Jews) against those who do not hold an Abrahamic lineage (i.e., Gentiles).<sup>3</sup> Circumcision is a reminder of Yhwh's promise to Abraham for descendants—i.e., the promise to make Abraham into a great nation (Gen 12:1–3). Circumcision first appears in Gen 17:10; however, Gen 12:1–3 establishes the relationship between Abram and Yhwh. This call narrative mentions nothing of circumcision. For Yhwh, obedience to the command to “leave your country” and “go to the land that I will

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a basic definition of circumcision. Issues of gentile circumcision and who really is a “Jew” are topics that will be discussed in following pages.

show you” is at the crux of the relationship (cf. Heb 11:8). However, Abram disobeys Yhwh’s command to “leave his family” by not immediately leaving his father’s house and taking his nephew, Lot, along the journey.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the parenthetical statement signified by the disjunctive ׀ in Gen 12:4 indicates Abram’s reason for not leaving his entire family as Yhwh commanded (i.e., ואברם בן־חמש שנים ושבעים שנה בצאתו מחרן; *Now Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran*).<sup>5</sup> An old man already, perhaps Abram believes he will die on the journey. In fact, Yhwh never mentions that Abram will have his *own* children in the call narrative. Perhaps Abram assumed Yhwh would fulfill this promise through his nephew, Lot—at least until Lot leaves for Sodom (Gen 13:10–12). Abram ultimately grows impatient with Yhwh. Abram utters words of irritation when he says, “O Sovereign LORD, what will you give me since I continue to be childless, and my heir is Eliezer of Damascus? Since you have not given me a descendant, then look, one born in my house will be my heir!” (Gen 15:2–3). Time has passed, but Abram remains childless. Thus, Abram’s slave is set to receive his inheritance. Yhwh’s response is to swear an oath by himself symbolized by passing between animals that Abram had cut in half (Gen 15:9–21). The pagan prophet Balaam says that “God is not a man that he should lie,” (Num 23:19) asserting that lying is outside of God’s nature. However, one cannot firmly assert that Abram knows this about God at this time.<sup>6</sup> To Abram, this deity must be like the deities of his

---

<sup>4</sup> The end of Genesis 11 and 12:1–4 are not in chronological order. Stephen said, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in *Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran*” (Acts 7:2; emphasis added). Note also that the NIV and KJV translate 12:1 as, “God had said,” which the waw consecutive allows. When Terah died he finally went to the land God would show him but took Lot. Abraham did not leave his country, his kindred, or his father’s house at the beginning.

<sup>5</sup> Complete obedience to Yhwh’s word is of utmost importance in the patriarchal and exodus narratives. Adam and Eve break the word of God by eating the forbidden fruit (Gen 2–3). Abraham breaks the word of God by taking Lot along his journey (Gen 12:4). Moses breaks the word of God by striking the rock for water rather than speaking to it (Num 20:8). In each case, breaking the word of God results in turmoil.

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 23:19 uses the word אל for “God.” However, Balaam uses יהוה in v. 21 to denote the God of Israel and אל in v. 22 as the one who brought them out of Egypt.

former people—tricksters and liars who throw tantrums when they do not get their way.<sup>7</sup> The cutting of the covenant allows Abram to understand God on God’s own terms. Yhwh ensures his promise of descendants by “cutting” the covenant with Abram thereby swearing by himself.

Karl Deenick wonders whether one should consider the covenant of Gen 15:1–21 as a new covenant or simply a reinstatement of the so-called “covenant” in Gen 12:1–3.<sup>8</sup> While Deenick is correct in identifying “relationship” as the basis for both narratives, the call narrative of Gen 12:1–3 does not present stereotypical “covenant” features. Rather, the narrative of Gen 12 presents the election of Abram, Yhwh’s call for Abram’s obedience, and Abram’s disobedience to the call by bringing Lot along with him. This call only presents Yhwh’s purpose for Abram. The focus of the call narrative is on Abram and Abram alone.<sup>9</sup>

Circumcision appears for the first time in Gen 17:10. Genesis 17 presents circumcision as a reminder of this covenant.<sup>10</sup> The Abrahamic covenant is a promise for descendants. It is not a marriage vow, a civil law, or a ceremonial guide like that of the Mosaic law. The Abrahamic covenant states that, though Abraham is childless at his call and advanced beyond the years of procreation, God will make him into a great nation by multiplying his descendants. Abraham’s seed (זָרַע; σπέρμα) is the raw material needed to form this nation through his descendants.

---

<sup>7</sup> i.e., Ishtar in the Gilgamesh epic or the older gods in Enuma Elish who become upset at the noise of the younger gods. Additionally, some deities can be “evil” while retaining their divinity (e.g., the god Set(h) in Egypt).

<sup>8</sup> Karl Deenick, *Righteous by Promise: A Biblical Theology of Circumcision* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2018), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Later call narratives of Moses (Exod 3–4), Isaiah (Isa 6:5–8), and Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–10) demonstrate the election of a human for a specific purpose while receiving protection and blessing from Yhwh.

<sup>10</sup> Debate abounds concerning the continuity of the covenant(s) in Gen 15 and 17. The documentary hypothesis suggests two accounts of a covenant—one between Yahweh and Abram (ch. 15) and one between Elohim and Abraham (ch. 17). Genesis 16 separates the two with a story about someone who is not in direct line of descent according to the promise of ch. 15. Some scholars suggest ch. 16 exists to identify Ishmael as a Jew. However, Arab peoples also practice circumcision and the line of Ishmael exists separate, though alongside, the line of promise through Isaac. See Daniel Bediako, “The Covenant of Abraham: Relationship between Genesis 15 and 17,” *VVUJT* 2 (2012): 4.

Circumcision is a visible mark on the organ involved in the act that will produce the fulfilment of this covenant. Though males are the ones who bear the mark of circumcision in their flesh, sexual intercourse exposes the female to the sign as well. The female then carries the result of the promise and gives birth to the fulfilment of the promise. Thus, both men and women bear a sign of the promise—both visible at certain times, both involving reproductive organs (i.e., circumcision for men and pregnancy for women).<sup>11</sup>

Though God establishes circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Abraham, the sign extends throughout each subsequent generation of Israel. Thus, circumcision for Abraham looks ahead, while circumcision for the nation of Israel looks back. At Yhwh's command Abraham circumcises himself and all the men in his household including Ishmael, who is Abraham's son by Sarah's Egyptian slave, Hagar. Though Ishmael is not the son of promise, he must bear the sign of the promise as also all the males in Abraham's household must do.<sup>12</sup> When Isaac is born, Abraham obeys Yhwh's command to both name and circumcise Isaac on the eighth day (Gen 17:12, 19; Gen 21:4).

Though circumcision began as a reminder of the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision takes on a new function within three generations, namely denoting the way in which one identifies as a Hebrew. Genesis 34:14 presents the issue of an uncircumcised man (Shechem) desiring to marry a descendant of Abraham (Dinah). Though the issue in Gen 34 (i.e., the rape of Dinah and the slaughter of her assailant) runs deeper than the matter of circumcision, the text presents circumcision as a practice observed by the Hebrews and required of those who desire to unite with the Hebrews. The caveat that the sons of Jacob give to Shechem and his tribe (אם תהיו כמנו)

---

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, a gentile woman can obviously become pregnant. Thus, the woman's pregnancy can only serve as the completion of the sign's promise when connected to a Jewish man.

<sup>12</sup> This is particularly important for the discussion of what makes a Jew. These slaves are presumably not Hebrew, but they receive benefit from being connected to Abraham's household.

להמל לכם כל-זכר; *unless you become like us by circumcising all males*; Gen 34:15) shows circumcision's transition from a mark of the covenant to a mark of a people-group. Jacob's sons do not say, "You must bear the mark of Abraham." Instead, they seem to understand circumcision as an identifier of their people. To be a Hebrew, one had to become כמנו (*like us*).

Although the book of Hebrews presents Abraham as the pinnacle of obedience and faith, and although most scholars consider the book of Hebrews to be a Jewish document, circumcision never appears in the text.<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, this may be due to the author's need for brevity. Clearly the author wishes to say more concerning various matters of which space did not allow (e.g., Heb 11:32). However, if this were so, it seems more likely that the author would reference that space or time did not allow for a discussion of the topic as he does elsewhere throughout the document. Though vaguely referenced, the Abrahamic covenant appears in the letter as an illustration of God's ability to keep his promises (e.g., Heb 6:13–18), not as a legal bond like that of the Mosaic covenant. In fact, the book of Hebrews never uses the term διαθήκη (*covenant*) to describe the relationship between Yhwh and Abraham. Additionally, the character of Abraham appears with more personal details in the so-called "faith chapter" of Heb 11 than any other faith character example, though Heb 11 mentions nothing of the Gen 15 covenant or of Gen 17 circumcision.

---

<sup>13</sup> The absence of circumcision in an overwhelmingly Jewish document may present clues to multiple issues. First, the author, while well versed in the HB (namely the Torah) does not connect circumcision with the Torah (Lev 12:3) or with Abraham's covenant (Gen 17). This may provide a hint at the author's identity and the date of the letter. Regarding the author's identity, an interesting possibility is that of a gentile convert who has become well versed in Jewish tradition but has not undergone circumcision (cf. Acts 15). For this gentile author, if he is in fact a gentile, the old covenant is easier removed in favor of the new rather than holding on to various aspects of the old covenant. Additionally, the lack of circumcision may give sway to the possibility of a female author. Of course, further study is necessary to develop this hypothesis further. Secondly, and more likely, the lack of circumcision may present a clue as to the date of the document. Since the issue does not appear explicitly in the letter, one may assume this is a post-Jerusalem council document, though this is clear without raising the issue of circumcision. However, a date prior to the fall of Jerusalem (ca. 64, so Ellingworth, Jewett, and Lane) seems unlikely in that Paul writes concerning the issue of circumcision and Jewish rites in Romans, Galatians, and Colossians. This leads one to believe the issue of circumcision is larger pre-fall of Jerusalem while the temple is still active. For more regarding the pre-70 date of Hebrews, see Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 29–33; Robert Jewett, *Letter to the Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 55–56; William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8, 9–13*, WBC 47a, b. 2 vols. (Waco, TX: Zondervan, 1991), 64–68.

Abraham appears throughout the NT as well as in various Jewish histories as a key figure of faith.<sup>14</sup> For the Hebrews writer, Abraham's faith appears most notably in trusting that God would give him descendants (Heb 11:11–12). However, the text also mentions Abraham's faith in leaving his homeland “to go out to a place he would later receive as an inheritance” and “he went out without understanding where he was going” (Heb 11:8). Here, the author of Hebrews asserts that Abraham demonstrates his faith by being obedient to his call—which may say more about the tradition of the author than the actual events of the call narrative (cf. Gen 12:4). According to the Genesis tradition, Abraham demonstrates his faith in a greater obedience by obeying Yhwh's command to circumcise every male (Gen 17:10–14, 23–27); yet, there is no mention of this in the Heb 11 pericope. Ellingworth helpfully notes, “Abraham is implicitly presented as an example of faith; not, as in Gal 3:6–14, as the (spiritual) father of a believing people.”<sup>15</sup> For the Hebrews writer, Abraham presents a fundamental example of faith that looks ahead, and in this case, to “a better land” (Heb 11:16).

Circumcision for Abraham also looks ahead but only to the promise for descendants. Because God had fulfilled that promise physically and is currently fulfilling the promise spiritually, one can understand why the Hebrews author does not capitalize on the matter of circumcision in the letter. The author simply does not need circumcision to make his (or her) argument.<sup>16</sup> However, though the document does not mention circumcision verbatim, the identification for the people of God is not completely absent from the document either.

---

<sup>14</sup> Rom 4:3, 9, 22; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23. See also Philo, *Leg. All.* 3.228 and Jos. *Ant.* 1.227. See also Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 580.

<sup>15</sup> Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 581.

<sup>16</sup> The lack of circumcision in the book may suggest female authorship. The issues would not be one with which a female would be overwhelmingly concerned. Such an exploration is beyond the scope of this essay but worth exploration elsewhere.

Circumcision then lies in the document's theological background in juxtaposition to obedience and faith.

### **Faith as the Identifier of the Σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ**

While circumcision began as a sign of future descendants in Gen 17, it soon transitioned to a sign of a people-group in Gen 34:15 and Josh 5:2–12. While other ANE cultures practiced circumcision (e.g., Egyptians, Midianites, Canaanites) only the Hebrews practiced infant circumcision that removed the entire foreskin.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, circumcision fades from biblical view (though still strongly evident in the historical background) after the institution and adoption of the law of Moses. Circumcision appears only once in the law of Moses (Lev 12:3) with no commentary concerning the motive behind the procedure. One may infer that the law of Moses assumes its readers already know of the Abrahamic tradition. Additionally, Sabbath observance in the law of Moses overshadows circumcision as the cult-act that is solely unique to the Hebrew people.<sup>18</sup> The theme of sabbath (i.e., rest) is prevalent throughout Hebrews, namely in chs. 4–5. The author's emphasis on sabbath, priestly functions, and sacrifice in Hebrews suggests that, for the author, Jewish identity has its source in cultic ritual rather than physical, fleshly identification.

Outside the Hexateuch, circumcision only appears in the HB as a metaphor for spiritual purity (i.e., Jer 4:4; 9:24).<sup>19</sup> However, the events of the Babylonian exile (586–538 BCE) brought

---

<sup>17</sup> Jack Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966): 474.

<sup>18</sup> "While the Abrahamic covenant affirms strongly the ethnic component of the identity, it is the Sinai covenant, with its sign of sabbath observance, that establishes the cultic-religious element as the congregation of Yahweh. This is also an eternal covenant, an institution that requires observances as the condition of participation." See John Van Seters, *The Pentateuch: A Social-Science Commentary* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 184.

<sup>19</sup> The last mentioning of physical circumcision in the HB appears in Josh 5.



circumcision back to the forefront of Jewish ethnic identification. Because the Israelites had no temple or land to define their identity, the Israelites placed heavier emphasis on identifying rites they could employ without a temple or national land. Elelwani Farisani notes, “Under the circumstances in which the exiles lived, circumcision could thus retain its value as a sign of the covenant.”<sup>20</sup> Some scholars disagree asserting that any suggestion of circumcision’s so-called “rise in significance” to the exilic period cannot be concretely known.<sup>21</sup> What can be known is that physical circumcision does not seem to be a major issue in the Hebrew Bible outside of the Hexateuch. However, the topic of circumcision becomes an overwhelmingly significant issue for Christians of the 1st century.

During the intertestamental period, circumcision broadened its role as a means by which gentiles could adopt Jewish religion and identify with the Jewish people. Josephus notes that one could not become a Jew unless one had undergone circumcision (Josephus *Ant.* 20.38). Though this seems to be the consensus for most Jews of the second temple period, for others, the gentile simply needed to reject the gods of his culture and confess Yhwh as his only God.<sup>22</sup> Debate continues among scholars as to what criteria is necessary to designate a gentile as a “Jew.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Elelwani Farisani, “A Sociological Analysis of Israelites in Babylonian Exile,” *OTE* 17 (2004): 386.

<sup>21</sup> Ackroyd, P. R. *Exile and Restoration: A study of Hebrew thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Note the confessions of a certain Alexander (Josephus *Ant.* 11.331–36), Heliodorus (2 Macc 3), and Ptolemy (*Let. Aris.*). Admittedly, these examples do not reach the status of “full conversion,” but demonstrate the significance of gentile faith-statements.

<sup>23</sup> This conversation is most prevalent in the discussion of the audience of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Some such as Matthew Thiessen, Rafael Rodriguez, Andrew Das, and Runar Thorsteinsson suggest the audience of Romans are gentiles who think themselves to be Jews. While this conversation is overwhelmingly present in the Romans discussion, one wonders how the same question might uphold in the Hebrews debate. See Thiessen, Matthew. *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Rodriguez, Rafael. *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016; Das, Andrew. *Solving the Romans Debate*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007; Thorsteinsson, Runar. *Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003.

What can be known is that, while different Jews enforced different criteria, gentiles could become Jews by some means of confession and law observance.<sup>24</sup> However, the act of circumcision undoubtedly served as the ultimate identifying mark signifying full conversion from paganism to Judaism.<sup>25</sup>

The rite of circumcision became a notable issue for Christians and Jews of the 1st century.<sup>26</sup> The issue takes center stage in the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 and Paul's letter to the Galatians. In Acts 15:1, Judaizing Christians promoted that "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." However, Peter rebuts, "On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are" (Acts 15:11). Paul takes this notion one step further in his letter to the Colossians by redefining circumcision as a matter of the heart rather than a matter of the flesh (cf. Col 2:11–12). In this way, baptism is the "flint knife" that removes the sinful σάρξ (*flesh*) and allows for

---

<sup>24</sup> This too raises the question the designation of proselyte and God-fearer. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* uses the term "proselyte" (10 out of 11 times) to mean one who has been converted to Judaism by means of circumcision. For more, see Graham Stanton, "Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho" in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Graham Stanton and Guy Stroumsa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 269.

<sup>25</sup> Terence Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism to 135 CE* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 483–92.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, the issue continues into the second century and beyond. "For the circumcision according to the flesh is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and your land may be desolate and your cities burned with fire, and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem. For you are not recognized among the rest of men by any other mark than your fleshy circumcision" (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. XVI).

regeneration by forgiveness in Christ (Col 2:11–15).<sup>27</sup> While baptism, according to Paul, is how one becomes spiritually circumcised, it is one's faith in the power of God that makes the circumcision of the heart successful (Col 2:12; Eph 4:5).

The author of Hebrews never mentions circumcision nor does the author discuss matters concerning baptism in the document.<sup>28</sup> However, matters of spiritual identity do appear throughout the document, even if cryptic in some instances. For example, the author uses the designation τοῖς πατράσιν in Heb 1:1. At first glance, this gives the author and the audience a common ancestral tie. However, given Paul's assertion that all who are in Christ are of the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:29) and that many infer the author of Hebrews to be part of a Pauline circle, one cannot be dogmatic about the ethnicity of either the author or the audience here.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the author uses the Septuagint (hereafter LXX) without adding significant exegetical commentary. The author uses these passages some 35x to prove his theological points. This implies that the audience is at the least familiar with the OT and likely most familiar with the LXX's rendition. This is not surprising given that the religious text of the early church was the LXX for both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the presence and knowledge of these passages are not enough to demand a Jewish author or audience either.

---

<sup>27</sup> Paul's use of σὰρξ often describes humanity's fallen nature (cf. Rom 7:5, 18, 25; 8:3–9, 12; 13:14), though the term certainly has broader implications in various contexts. Cf. BDAG, s.v., "σὰρξ," (1) material that covers the bones of a human or animal body (cf. Rom 2:28), (2) the physical body as a functioning entity (cf. Rom 7:18; 6:19; 7:25; 8:3–9 as an instrument of various expressions), (3) one who is or becomes a physical being (cf. Rom 3:20); (4) human/ancestral connection (cf. Rom 4:1; 9:8; 11:14), and (5) the outward side of life (no examples from Romans). BDAG, s.v., "σῶμα," (1) the body of a human or animal/corpse (cf. Rom 8:10; 12:1, 4; 4:19; 6:6), (2) pl. *slaves* (no examples from Romans; cf. Rev 18:13), (3) the structure of a plant or seed (no examples from Romans; cf. 1 Cor 15:35), (4) as substantive reality (no examples from Romans; cf. Col 2:17), (5) a unified group of people (cf. Rom 12:5).

<sup>28</sup> One may arguably interpret the image of "washing with pure water" in Heb 10:22 and the "ritual washings" of Heb 6:2 as scant allusions to baptism.

<sup>29</sup> The mention of Timothy in Heb 13:23 has led many to connect the author of Hebrews to a Pauline circle. See James Thompson, *Hebrews*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 276.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Hanhart, "Fragen um die Entstehung der LXX," VT 12 (1962): 162.

For the author of Hebrews, identity is not a matter of genealogy, law, temple-cult, or ritual. Instead, the believer's identity is in Christ. This identity is not the result of one's fleshly mark but by one's faith exemplified by one's obedience. Such a notion is not unique to the author of Hebrews. For example, the Apocrypha presents many instances where obedient faith manifests as one's commitment to the whole law of Moses.<sup>31</sup> The Jewish idea of "obedient faith" takes its shape in the keeping of certain rituals such as circumcision, generosity, adherence to food laws, and Sabbath observance most specifically during the Seleucid oppression and Maccabean revolt.<sup>32</sup> While faith that acts is a zealous and righteous ideal during the time of the Maccabees, it is only a blessing when presented in juxtaposition to its inverse. For example, 1 Mac 1:11 mentions the *υιοὶ παράνομοι* (*sons of lawlessness*) who came from Israel to mislead many (cf. Deut 13:13). These *υιοὶ παράνομοι* are Jewish people who—while bearing the title of "Jew"—did not demonstrate their faith with their actions.<sup>33</sup>

The depiction of Abraham in Hebrews presents a stark contrast with these *υιοὶ παράνομοι*. This contrast shines through not only because of Abraham's belief in the power and promise of Yhwh for descendants but in Abraham's obedience to go to a place that he did not know (Heb 11:8; Gen 12:4). For the author of Hebrews, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant does not rely on circumcision since circumcision is a sign of the covenant and not the

---

<sup>31</sup> Don Garlington, *The Obedience of Faith: A Pauline Phrase in Historical Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 254.

<sup>32</sup> Garlington, *The Obedience of Faith*, 90–162.

<sup>33</sup> Some went as far as to reverse and hide their Jewish identity. "In those days there appeared in Israel transgressors of the law who seduced many, saying: 'Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles all around us; since we separated from them, many evils have come upon us.' The proposal was agreeable; some from among the people promptly went to the king, and he authorized them to introduce the ordinances of the Gentiles. Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom. They disguised their circumcision and abandoned the holy covenant; they allied themselves with the Gentiles and sold themselves to wrongdoing" (1 Macc 1:11–15).

covenant itself. The Hebrews writer understands that the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is dependent on Abraham's willingness to obey Yhwh's commands.

For the author of Hebrews, Abraham is the demonstration of faith *par excellence*. Not only does Abraham provide an example of faithful obedience for the audience of Hebrews, but Abraham provides a type and a trajectory for how one can both become and remain a part of God's covenant people. Faith for the author of Hebrews serves as the true seed (i.e., the genetic material for procreation) that produces the (spiritual) descendants of Abraham. While the author makes it clear that "without faith, it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6), the author also makes clear that without faith it is impossible to be part of God's covenant people.

The "faith + non-Israelite = accepted by God" formula throughout Heb 11 exemplifies this concept. The author begins, not with Adam and Eve, but with Abel. Abel was not an Israelite. Abel did not undergo circumcision (at least the text is silent concerning the issue). Abel was not bound by the law of Moses. However, the author begins with Abel because Abel (from the Genesis perspective) was the first to fully live by faith. Adam and Eve had seen, talked to, and fully experienced God in the garden. Abel had not. Therefore, Abel's faith demonstrated by his obedience allows him to remain a part of God's accepted people before God elected Abraham. Enoch, Noah, and Rahab also fit within this formula. Thus, for the author of Hebrews, faith precedes and overrides both circumcision and genealogical Jewish identity.

This calls back the author's statement in 2:16–17, "For surely his concern is not for angels, but he is concerned for Abraham's descendants. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people."<sup>34</sup> The text primarily

---

<sup>34</sup> Jeremy Barrier notes the interpretive gap between Gen 12–22 and Gal 3:14–16, which connects the "promised" seed of Abraham with the experience of the "spirit." Barrier argues that πνεῦμα is a physiological

serves to heighten Jesus's humanity (i.e., becoming like his ἀδελφοὶ) and his faithfulness.<sup>35</sup>

Edward Rignbach notes the challenge of identifying Abraham's descendants in this context when he writes, "A particularistic narrowing of Christ's redemptive work to the Jewish people is not presupposed; however, the author's way of expressing himself shows that the question of the gentiles' share in salvation lies quite beyond the horizon of his present discussion."<sup>36</sup> At this point, the author affirms that Jesus involves himself with "the seed of Abraham" rather than the angels.<sup>37</sup> This "seed of Abraham" refers back to those described in 2:10–14; however, as the author demonstrates throughout, the current faith community lives in continuity with the people of Israel.<sup>38</sup> Thus, for the author of Hebrews, faith is not merely an internal belief or strong hope but the identifying mark of the true people of God.

### **Faith is Greater than Circumcision**

The structure of Hebrews presents a series of comparisons and contrasts between Christ and lesser, though significant, entities (e.g., sacrifices, priests, angels, the law of Moses, Melchizedek, etc.).<sup>39</sup> In each case, Jesus is better than these former realities. For example, the Mosaic covenant has become obsolete in favor of the new covenant found in Christ, which has

---

metaphor well-known in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century. To that end, Barrier adds to the work of Richard Hayes who understands Abraham's seed to be Christ. I have adopted this approach here. See Jeremy Barrier, "Jesus' Breath: A Physiological Analysis of πνεῦμα within Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *JSNT* 37 (2014): 115–138.

<sup>35</sup> Simon Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Amsterdam: W. G. van Soest, 1961), 101.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Rignbach, *Die ältesten lateinischen Kommentare zum Hebräerbrief* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1907), 56.

<sup>37</sup> Luke Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 288.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Hebrews*, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Schreiner, Andreas J. Köstenberger, and T. Desmond Alexander, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 355.

no fault (Heb 8:7–13). Christ fulfills and thereby completes the Mosaic covenant in himself (Matt 5:17) by being the once-for-all sacrifice that he, the great high priest, offered (Heb 9:11; 10:10). On the other hand, for the author of Hebrews, the Abrahamic covenant does not fade away in favor of a new, better covenant.<sup>40</sup> Instead, the Abrahamic covenant expands to include all who live by faith since “election goes from Abraham to his ultimate seed, Christ, [and] to those who are in Christ, both Jew and Gentile alike.”<sup>41</sup> The expansion of those considered “children of Abraham” from Jew only to all who are “in Christ” results from Jesus’s sacrificial death, which allows all peoples to belong to his body (cf. Acts 2:47; Heb 10:1–10). The book of Hebrews does not possess an “evangelistic” theme per se. Rather, the book displays a premise of “correction.” To phrase it differently, the recipients of this material know the truth of the author’s statements since they are not in the process of coming to faith but are in danger of leaving the faith.<sup>42</sup>

The author introduces Abraham in 2:16 but expounds further on the Abrahamic promise in 6:13–20. This section highlights Abraham’s faith and God’s assurance of action.

---

<sup>40</sup> Admittedly, Heb 10:9 reads, “He does away with the first in order to establish the second,” but contextually, this cannot refer to any covenant other than the Mosaic law. The mention of the law (νόμος) and to the sacrificial system given in 10:8 denotes only the Mosaic covenant and no other OT covenant of which there are several. For example, one would not suggest that the Noahic covenant in Gen 8:20–22 is overturned by Christ. Instead, the covenant remains even to this day. Thus, Christ’s new covenant does not allow for the destruction of the world with water (cf. 2 Pet 3:8–13). In the same way, the Abrahamic covenant is not included in the designation of the “first” in 10:9. As Thompson argues, “The statement ‘he takes away the first in order to establish another (10:9b) appeals to the same hermeneutical method that the author has used earlier (4:8; 7:11; 8:6); the latter passage nullifies and replaces the earlier. Just as the new covenant replaces the old covenant (8:6, 13), the event in which Jesus did the will of God in his sacrificial death replaced the *sacrifices of the Levitical covenant*,” (emphasis added). See Thompson, *Hebrews*, 196.

<sup>41</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Biblical Theology: The Convergence of the Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 344–45.

<sup>42</sup> Regarding the oral form of the content, James Thompson notes that, except for the final section of the book, the work does not follow the structure of an ancient letter (i.e., an opening with the author’s name, greeting, and thanksgiving, a body with a disclosure formula and a request, and a closing with greetings to various individuals). The use of alliteration (among other tools) throughout the book may suggest work was an oral construction composed with the purpose of being spoken and heard before it was written down as a formal document. See Thompson, *Hebrews*, 11 and Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 59–60.

The *a fortiori* (lesser to greater) argument assumes the widespread practice of swearing by one greater than oneself (e.g., a god or a king) in the ancient world. In the OT, people often swore by God (e.g., Gen 14:22; Deut 6:13). If such an oath undertaken by a human could not be annulled, how much more certain would be God's oath confirming his promise to Abraham? Indeed, it is staggering that God would add an oath to his (already certain) promise.<sup>43</sup>

The Hebrews writer notes that, aside from the birth of Isaac, Abraham did not see the fulfillment of God's promise. However, the promise to Abraham was also to become the father of great nations.<sup>44</sup> The overall context of Hebrews 6 (i.e., assurance and exhortation) implies the author assumes he and his audience are heirs of the Abrahamic promise. However, there is a tension between present and future realities.<sup>45</sup> For the author of Hebrews, Abraham provides the ultimate example for one who receives a promise, yet does not see it fulfilled.

Various cognates of πίστις/πιστεύω appear 34 times throughout the letter. Not surprisingly, most of these instances appear in ch. 11 as a dative of means, though sometimes appearing as an accusative of manner (e.g., Heb 11:13). In this pericope, the author asserts faith as the operating system in which those who are pleasing to God exist. The author proves this by providing various examples from Abel to Rahab with a quick aside to Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets.<sup>46</sup> However, it is Abraham who serves as the quintessential example of one who lives by faith. It seems that the author of Hebrews interprets the use of the *w<sup>e</sup>qatal* וַיִּאֱמֵן (*and he believed*) in Gen 15:6 as a representation of a repeated

---

<sup>43</sup> Dana M. Harris, Andreas J. Köstenberger, and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Hebrews*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 148.

<sup>44</sup> Harris, Köstenberger, and Yarbrough, *Hebrews*, 151.

<sup>45</sup> Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 334.

<sup>46</sup> The author tends to overemphasize the goodness of the characters throughout Heb 11. While one can know with certainty that the author is quite familiar with the character tradition presented in the HB (or LXX), the author tends to overshadow the less-than-ideal aspects of the characters. For example, the author states that Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (11:24); however, there is no mention of this in the Mosaic narrative. Further, Samson and Jephthah do not display righteous characteristics in their narratives. Though the Hebrews writer does not expound on them, he does reference these as possible examples of faith. Clearly, the author's goal is not to recount biblical events but to prove his point of Heb 11:6.



activity.<sup>47</sup> Genesis 15:6 LXX (καὶ ἐπίστευσεν) agrees with the MT, so one can offer little here concerning the Hebrews writer's interpretation based on syntax alone. Although Abraham does not appear first in the "faith list" of ch. 11, the content concerning his life is double the content concerning Moses while other examples of "faith heroes" in ch. 11 only hold one verse per character. The sheer amount of information regarding Abraham suggests the author is not seeking to present a singular faith example from the Abraham narrative but to denote a lifestyle of actionable faith.

In Hebrews, to have faith is to have salvation because Jesus is both the originator of salvation (2:10; 5:9) and the pioneer and perfecter of faith (12:2).<sup>48</sup> This stands in stark contrast with certain Jewish interpretations. For example, Targum Jonathan (2nd c.) interprets Ezek 16:6 as "I said unto thee: with the blood of *circumcision* I shall have mercy upon thee and with the blood of *the paschal lamb* I shall redeem thee" (emphasis added).<sup>49</sup> Thus, the author of Hebrews and Targum Jonathan agree that "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22). However, the shedding of blood for Jonathan and the shedding of blood for the Hebrews writer result from different sources. Targum Jonathan suggests mercy results from circumcision and redemption results from the Passover lamb. Circumcision in Targum Jonathan connects the reception of mercy to the Abrahamic covenant—that is, one receives mercy by being a part of the Abrahamic lineage. Similarly, the Passover lamb connects redemption with Israel's release from Egypt (Exod 12) and, more broadly, with the Mosaic covenant. Targum Jonathan does not

---

<sup>47</sup> Max Rogland argues for the translation "he kept believing" in Gen 15:6. See Max Rogland, "Abram's Persistent Faith: Hebrew Verb Semantics in Genesis 15:6," *WTJ* (2008): 239.

<sup>48</sup> Dan Via, "Revelation, Atonement, and the Scope of Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Deconstructive and Reader-Response Interpretation," *BibInt* 11 (2003): 518–19.

<sup>49</sup> Ezekiel 16:6, "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!'" See Sidney Hoenig, "Circumcision: The Covenant of Abraham," *JQR* 53 (1963): 329.

mention any sin offering or an allusion to the day of atonement. On the other hand, the author of Hebrews suggests that the sacrifice of Jesus brings salvation once for all (Heb 9:27–28). In this way, Jesus brings mercy (i.e., the gift of being a descendant of Abrahamic lineage) and salvation (i.e., the one who prevents the outpouring of the wrath of God).

Hebrews 11 presents a sequence of Jew, non-Jew, and pre-Jew as character studies. Regardless of the individual's ancestry or ethnicity, the author considers them all pleasing to God because they demonstrate their faith by their actions.<sup>50</sup> Erich Grässer suggests the author understands the time before Christ (particularly realized in Heb 11) as a time when God tested faith.<sup>51</sup> However, Victor Rhee sees the chiasmic structure of Heb 11 as presenting faith in a way that is Christologically comparable to the Pauline epistles.<sup>52</sup> If, as Rhee suggests, the passage presents a chiasmic structure, Abraham's faith is the central point of the text. This allows the author to transition from the "Christ is better" theme to a "faith is better" motif. But is this a generic faith that is synonymous with a strong hope? Or does this type of faith exist in a narrower scope—i.e., faith in Christ, trusting faith, or even obedient faith? For the Hebrews author, the answer is "Yes" to both. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as the "assurance of things hoped for" and "being convicted of what we do not see." Subsequently, Heb 11:6 adds that "without faith it is impossible to please [God]." Thus, for faith to be pleasing to God, faith must be demonstrable. The character examples of Heb 11 demonstrate what faith looks like in life events.<sup>53</sup> For the author of Hebrews, no one exemplifies this better than Abraham.

---

<sup>50</sup> The overwhelming positive use of names such as Jephthah, Samson, and Jacob, and the mention of Moses from the perspective of Philo rather than Exodus may imply that the author is more familiar with Hebraic tradition rather than the actual text. This would undoubtedly be true if the author was a gentile.

<sup>51</sup> Erich Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (Marburg: Elwert, 1965), 65-66, 79.

<sup>52</sup> Victor Rhee, "Chiasm and the Concept of Faith in Hebrews 11," *BibSac* 155 (1998): 327.

<sup>53</sup> The issue is not whether these characters are concretely historical. The author uses their narratives as an object lesson for actionable faith.

For faith to be “better,” there must be something for faith to be better than. Faith cannot be better than obedience for it is obedience that demonstrates faith. Faith cannot be better than hope for faith is the assurance of a hopeful expectation. Faith cannot be better than the promise for without the promise, faith has no purpose. For the Jew, circumcision fulfills this role. Circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant goes beyond the removal of the foreskin. Just as Abel was the first to truly live by faith although his parents knew and experienced God, Isaac is the first to under true Hebraic circumcision (i.e., circumcised on the eighth day and named; Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3). Abraham, Ishmael, and the men in Abraham’s house undergo circumcision, but they are older than eight days and have already received names. Erich Isaac notes this issue and suggests circumcision symbolizes a new birth for Abraham.

Whether Abraham in becoming ‘a new man’ also died symbolically is not clear. A ‘death’ is possibly hinted at in the first covenant ‘... a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, a dread, even a great darkness, fell upon him’ (Gen 15:12). This sleep, described as *tardēmā* is considered a deathlike sleep. Both Jewish and Patristic exegesis have regarded sleep and death as a continuum.”<sup>54</sup>

Isaac goes on to say that circumcision may represent Abraham’s “rebirth” because he receives a new name on the day of his circumcision (Gen 17:5). However, Abraham is not the only one to receive a new name in the Gen 17 pericope. Sarai also receives a new name (i.e., Sarah) and undergoes a significant physical change in the opening of her womb. Though this would not manifest itself until Gen 21, both Abraham and Sarah received new names and undergo significant changes in their reproductive organs.

If, for the author of Hebrews, faith is better than circumcision, faith must fulfill the same functions as circumcision to a higher degree with eternal implications. Circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant served four primary purposes: (1) circumcision marks a male as a Jew, (2)

---

<sup>54</sup> Erich Isaac, “Circumcision as a Covenant Rite,” *Anthropos* 1964 (59): 452.

circumcision serves as a reminder of Yhwh's covenant with Abraham, (3) circumcision is the medium through which a man's seed must pass to instigate the promise, and (4) circumcision signifies a new life. For the Hebrews writer, faith now fulfills these purposes, which makes circumcision obsolete. First, faith marks all people (male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, etc.) as the people of God. Second, faith reminds the believer that God will fulfill his promises. These promises for the author of Hebrews are largely eschatological rather than physical as in the Abrahamic narrative. Third, faith is the medium through which salvation meets the sinner (cf. Eph 2:8–10). Finally, faith marks a new beginning for one who is in Christ. Colossians 2:12 states that baptism serves as a circumcision of the heart. While it is unclear whether the author of Hebrews shares the same sentiment, the author certainly views faith as the dividing wall that separates God's covenant people from those who are outside the community.

### **Conclusion**

The Abrahamic covenant is less significant in the book of Hebrews than the Mosaic covenant; however, the character of Abraham provides a type for the faith community. Additionally, circumcision appears nowhere in the document. However, a closer examination has demonstrated that circumcision does not need to appear in such a Jewish-toned document because faith has replaced circumcision providing a better way in which one can identify as a member of God's people. The seed of Abraham then is not a matter of ethnic or fleshly identification. Rather, those who belong to the people of God bear the mark of faith exemplified in obedience to the new, better covenant in Christ.