

## CIRCUMCISION AND COVENANT IN GENESIS 17 \*

### I. INTRODUCTION: GENESIS 17 AND THE PROBLEM OF AN UNCONDITIONAL COVENANT OF “PURE GRACE” IN P

Introducing YHWH’s covenant with his people Israel, concluded at a time when the latter is yet to come forth from Abraham’s offspring, Genesis 17 is widely interpreted as reflecting the concept of an entirely unconditional covenant. As such, it is regarded as the pivotal proof-text for the alleged Priestly theology of “pure grace”<sup>1</sup>. P decidedly disconnected YHWH’s promise from any obligation imposed on Israel, it was influentially argued by Walther Zimmerli, in order to foreclose the possibility of the covenant being broken by the human partner<sup>2</sup>. While this argument was, and still is, met with broad agreement<sup>3</sup>, there is evidence indicating

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<sup>1</sup> The underlying assumption of this argument would be that Genesis 17 is in fact to be attributed to P. The reasons for this view, almost universally held in critical scholarship, are obvious and need not be rehearsed here; for a summary and literature, see J. WÖHRLE, *Fremdlinge im eigenen Land. Zur Entstehung und Intention der priesterlichen Passagen der Vätergeschichte* (FRLANT 246; Göttingen 2012) 46. Note, however, the dissenting opinion argued by B.T. ARNOLD, “The Holiness Redaction of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17)”, *Partners with God. Theological and Critical Readings of the Bible in Honor of Marvin A. Sweeney* (eds. S.L. BIRDSONG – S. FROLOV) (CSHBS 2; Claremont, CA 2017) 51-61, followed by P.N. TUCKER, *The Holiness Composition in the Book of Exodus* (FAT II 98; Tübingen 2017), who attributes Genesis 17 as a whole to a subsequent Holiness redaction.

<sup>2</sup> W. ZIMMERLI, “Sinaibund und Abrahambund. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Priester-schrift” (1960), *Gottes Offenbarung. Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Alten Testament* (TB 19; München 1963) 205-216.

<sup>3</sup> From the more recent literature, see J. JEREMIAS, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (GAT 6; Göttingen – Bristol, CT 2015) 250, 312; O. KAISER, *Der eine Gott Israels und die Mächte der Welt. Der Weg Gottes im Alten Testament vom Herrn seines Volkes zum Herrn der ganzen Welt* (FRLANT 249; Göttingen 2013) 105-107; R. FELDMEIER – H. SPIECKERMANN, *Der Gott der Lebendigen. Eine biblische Gotteslehre* (TBTh 1; Tübingen 2011) 450, 452; and W. GROSS, *Zukunft für Israel. Alttestamentliche Bundeskonzepte und die aktuelle Debatte um den Neuen Bund* (SBS 176; Stuttgart 1998) 47. See also J. WÖHRLE, “Abraham amidst the Nations. The Priestly Concept of Covenant and the Persian Imperial Ideology”, *Covenant in the Persian Period. From Genesis to Chronicles* (eds. R.J. BAUTCH – G.N. KNOPPERS) (Winona Lake, IN 2015) 23-39, here 23-24, and the summary in C. NIHAN, “The Priestly Covenant, Its Reinterpretations, and the Composition of ‘P’”, *The Strata of the Priestly Writings. Contemporary Debate and Future Directions* (eds. S. SHECTMAN – J.S. BADEN) (AThANT 95; Zürich 2009) 87-134, here 93. From the older literature, see especially N. LOHFINK, “Die Abänderung der Theologie des priesterlichen Geschichtswerks

the opposite <sup>4</sup>. For in Genesis 17 there *is* an obligation, in fact a most prominent one. And the consequences resulting from failure to observe it are made clear beyond doubt: “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” (v. 14) <sup>5</sup>.

In recent scholarship this problem is increasingly being taken into account. Two distinct approaches may be discerned. On the one hand, a growing number of exegetes argue for a literary-critical division of Genesis 17. Attributing the commandment of circumcision in vv. 9-14 along with the report of its first implementation in vv. 23-27 to a secondary reworking, identified as H by some, they manage to dissolve the chapter’s complexity diachronically: While the reconstructed base text testifies to the concept of an unconditional covenant, the canonical text presents the covenant as being conditional upon observance of the commandment of circumcision <sup>6</sup>.

im Segen des Heiligkeitsgesetzes. Zu Lev. 26,9.11-13” (1973), *Studien zum Pentateuch* (SBAB 4; Stuttgart 1988) 157-168, here 166.

<sup>4</sup> With regard to Genesis 17, this has been pointed out by M.V. FOX, “The Sign of the Covenant. Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly ‘*ôt* Etiologies”, *RB* 81 (1974) 557-596; I. KNOHL, *The Sanctuary of Silence. The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis, MN 1995) 141, 144, and *passim*; J. JOOSTEN, *People and Land in the Holiness Code. An Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17-26* (VT.S 67; Leiden – New York – Köln 1996) 111-112; J. MILGROM, *Leviticus 23-27. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3B; New York – London – Toronto – Sydney – Auckland 2001) 2340; IDEM, “Covenants. The Sinaitic and Patriarchal Covenants in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-27)”, *Sefer Moshe — The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume. Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Qumran, and Post-Biblical Judaism* (eds. C. COHEN – A. HURVITZ – S.M. PAUL) (Winona Lake, IN 2004) 91-101, here 95-96, and D.A. BERNAT, *Sign of the Covenant. Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (SBL. AIL 3; Atlanta, GA 2009) 34-36. See further F.M. CROSS, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic. Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA 1973) 271 n. 224. See also ARNOLD, “Holiness Redaction”, notwithstanding the fact that he attributes Genesis 17 to H rather than P.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this article, biblical translations follow the NRSV. I have made some modifications where necessary.

<sup>6</sup> This way has been led by K. GRÜN WALDT, *Exil und Identität. Beschneidung, Passa und Sabbat in der Priesterschrift* (BBB 85; Frankfurt am Main 1992) 42-62; for a more recent discussion, see J. BLENKINSOPP, “The ‘Covenant of Circumcision’ (Gen 17) in the Context of the Abraham Cycle (Gen 11:27-25:11). Preliminary Considerations”, *The Post-Priestly Pentateuch. New Perspectives on Its Redactional Development and Theological Profiles* (eds. F. GIUNTOLI – K. SCHMID) (FAT 101; Tübingen 2015) 145-156. See also WÖHRLE, *Fremdlinge*, 45-50; IDEM, “The Integrative Function of the Law of Circumcision”, *The Foreigner and the Law. Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (eds. R. ACHENBACH – R. ALBERTZ – J. WÖHRLE) (BZAR 16; Wiesbaden 2011) 71-87, here 74-78; IDEM, “Abraham”, 26, and M.G. BRETT, “The Priestly Dissemination of Abraham”, *HeBAI* 3 (2014) 87-107, here 90. However, see further below at footnote 32 on the approach of Wöhrle and Brett.

The second approach wants to avoid what the first one does, namely, dismembering the coherent chapter. The goal is to retain the textual integrity of Genesis 17 and a reading that supports a “pure grace” theology. Instead of diachronically purging the chapter of the commandment of circumcision, the latter is interpreted in a different way. This interpretation builds on the fact that failure to observe the commandment, considered a “breach of covenant”, carries the penalty of *karet* in Gen 17,14 and thus is regulated in view of the individual: “he has broken my covenant”. The argument is that by focusing on the individual Israelite, P seeks to exclude the possibility of collective catastrophes of the divine-human relationship <sup>7</sup>.

Attractive as it may seem, this second approach has not stood up to scrutiny. As I have argued in a previous article, when we examine the comparative material on the penalty of *karet*, we see that whenever this penalty is imposed the commandment in question concerns a case in which an individual, by an action for which he or she is responsible by him- or herself, jeopardizes the community as a whole <sup>8</sup>. Hence, when focusing on the individual Israelite, Gen 17,14 is not individualizing the covenant breach. Quite the contrary, the text is addressing the individual with a view to his responsibility for the community. This renders doubtful the second approach, which leaves us with the first one, that is, with the question of whether the theological complexity of Genesis 17 can, and needs to be, accounted for diachronically <sup>9</sup>.

The present article will address this question by proceeding in three steps. In the first place, I will propound some essential observations on the literary structure of Genesis 17 (section II). Against this background,

<sup>7</sup> As proposed by H.-J. STIPP, “‘Meinen Bund hat er gebrochen’ (Gen 17,14). Die Individualisierung des Bundesbruchs in der Priesterschrift” (2005), *Alttestamentliche Studien. Arbeiten zu Priesterschrift, Deuteronomistischem Geschichtswerk und Prophetie* (BZAW 442; Berlin 2013) 117-136, and GROSS, *Zukunft für Israel*, 61. The approach has been adopted by NIHAN, “Priestly Covenant”, 101-103; C. KOCH, “Art. Covenant. II. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament”, *EBR* 5 (2012) 900-908, here 904, and M. KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’ mit Abraham und die ‘Erwählung’ Israels in Genesis 17”, *Covenant and Election in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism. Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaja Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism*, Vol. V (ed. N. MACDONALD) (FAT II 79; Tübingen 2015) 1-28, here 20, among others.

<sup>8</sup> J.J. KRAUSE, “Individualisierung des Bundesbruchs? Die neuere Deutung von Gen 17,14 im Licht der Vergleichsbelege”, *ZAW* 129 (2017) 194-204, drawing on R. RENDTORFF, “Die sündige *nāfēs*”, *Was ist der Mensch ...? Beiträge zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments*. Hans Walter Wolff zum 80. Geburtstag (eds. F. CRÜSEMANN – C. HARDMEIER – R. KESSLER) (München 1992) 211-220.

<sup>9</sup> As STIPP, “Individualisierung”, 129 puts it: “Ist also der Charakter der priesterlichen Abraham-*בְּרִית* in diachron aufgeschlüsselter Form zu beschreiben: ein Gnadenbund in der ursprünglichen Priesterschrift, ein bedingter Bund im vorliegenden Endtext?”

I will then subject the abovementioned diachronic analysis to a thorough examination (section III). Its result will be negative. Scrutinizing the adduced arguments point by point, I will argue that the time-honored view of Genesis 17 as a unified literary composition still stands. This result, however, compels a new synchronic interpretation of the chapter, affording a fresh appraisal of its theological thrust (section IV). Is the covenant made with Abraham conditional or unconditional? Or are these rough and dichotomic categories in fact unable to capture its complexity? In the end, calling it conditional might do more justice to the concept of covenant in Genesis 17 than the opposite. However, that categorization itself needs to be redefined in order to allow for an essential differentiation.

## II. OBSERVATIONS ON THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF GENESIS 17

The literary structure of Genesis 17 has been called “crystal clear” and key to unlocking the concept of covenant as it is presented in that chapter<sup>10</sup>. In this regard, some of the most important observations are owed to Sean McEvenue<sup>11</sup>. In his seminal study on the narrative style of the Priestly writer, he unearthed no less than three complementary “techniques or figures of development”, all of which highlight the subject of circumcision<sup>12</sup>. First, there is “a linear development” from intention to fact which climaxes in the actual circumcision in vv. 23-27. Second, there is “a circular development” which stresses, at its center, the command to circumcise in vv. 9-14. Third, there is “a development in two parallel panels”, each ending on the subject of circumcision in vv. 9-14 and 23-27, respectively<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, it should be noted that divine speech is introduced in a nuanced way. While that part of the chapter in which Abraham interacts with YHWH is framed by the phrase *וידבר אתו אלהים* (see v. 3b and cf. v. 22a), the detailed speech of YHWH which for the most part makes up Genesis 17 is subdivided by recurrent *וַיֹּאמֶר* (vv. 1b, 9a, 15a, 19a)<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> C. WESTERMANN, “Genesis 17 und die Bedeutung von berit”, *ThLZ* 101 (1976) 161-170, here 169; IDEM, *Genesis*. Vol. 2: Genesis 12–36 (BK I/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1981) 308. In the same vein, see also GROSS, *Zukunft für Israel*, 54; KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 5, and already IDEM, *Leben in Gottes Gegenwart*. Studien zum Verständnis des Gesetzes im Alten Testament (FAT 43; Tübingen 2004) 79: “Die Architektur von Gen 17 als Interpretationsschlüssel.”

<sup>11</sup> S.E. MCEVENUE, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (AnBib 50; Rome 1971).

<sup>12</sup> MCEVENUE, *Narrative Style*, 156-159.

<sup>13</sup> All quotes from MCEVENUE, *Narrative Style*, 159.

<sup>14</sup> As observed by KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 5.

In view of these observations, a thoughtfully designed structure comes to light: following a solemn declaration of principle in vv. 1b-2, the main body of YHWH's covenant speech consists of three parts, containing promise (vv. 3b-8), commandment (vv. 9-14), and again promise (vv. 15-21)<sup>15</sup>. For the present discussion of the conditional nature of the covenant, some features in the first half of the chapter deserve a closer look<sup>16</sup>. First of all, there is the declaration of principle in vv. 1b-2. In a nutshell, it introduces the two aspects that govern Genesis 17: promise and commandment. Abraham is called to "walk before" YHWH and "be blameless" (v. 1bβ), and YHWH promises to give his covenant between him and Abraham, and to bless Abraham's offspring (v. 2). These are the very aspects that are developed in the following covenant speech. Hence vv. 1b-2 have been aptly described as a prologue and programmatic "summa" of the chapter<sup>17</sup>. Further observations reinforce that interpretation. First among them is the logic sequence of the prologue and following main body of the speech, for what is announced in the former is in fact accomplished in the latter, the cohortative of v. 2, אַתָּה בְּרִיתִי, being taken up in a performative speech act in v. 4, אֲנִי הִנֵּה בְרִיתִי אִתְּךָ<sup>18</sup>.

As the program of this summa is unfolded, a carefully crafted correspondence between promise and commandment is to be observed in vv. 3b-8 and 9-14<sup>19</sup>. Both parts commence with a personal pronoun highlighted

<sup>15</sup> See KÖCKERT, *Leben in Gottes Gegenwart*, 79-80; WESTERMANN, "Genesis 17", 162; IDEM, *Genesis*, 307-308; GROSS, *Zukunft für Israel*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> For the recent debate regarding the second half in Gen 17,15ff. and the question of whether the Abrahamic covenant is meant to include not only Israel, but all peoples originating from Abraham, see A. DE PURY, "Abraham. The Priestly Writer's 'Ecumenical' Ancestor", *Rethinking the Foundations. Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible, Essays in Honour of John Van Seters* (eds. S.L. MCKENZIE – T. RÖMER) (BZAW 294; Berlin – New York 2000) 163-181; K. SCHMID, "Gibt es eine 'abrahamitische Ökumene' im Alten Testament? Überlegungen zur religionspolitischen Theologie der Priesterschrift in Genesis 17", *Die Erzväter in der biblischen Tradition. Festschrift für Matthias Köckert* (eds. A.C. HAGEDORN – H. PFEIFFER) (BZAW 400; Berlin – New York 2009) 67-92; T. NAUMANN, "The Common Basis of the Covenant and the Distinction between Isaac and Ishmael in Gen 17. The Case of Ishmael and the Non-Israelite Descendants of Abraham in the Priestly Source", *The Foreigner and the Law. Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (eds. R. ACHENBACH – R. ALBERTZ – J. WÖHRLE) (BZAR 16; Wiesbaden 2011) 89-109. See also M.G. BRETT, "Reading the Bible in the Context of Methodological Pluralism. The Undermining of Ethnic Exclusivism in Genesis", *Rethinking Contexts, Rereading Texts. Contributions from the Social Sciences to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. M.D. CARROLL R.) (JSOT.S 299; Sheffield 2000) 48-74, and WÖHRLE, "Integrative Function"; IDEM, *Fremdlinge*, 45-50. For a profound critique of these approaches, see KÖCKERT, "Gottes 'Bund'".

<sup>17</sup> WESTERMANN, "Genesis 17", 162; KÖCKERT, *Leben in Gottes Gegenwart*, 79-80.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion, see W. GROSS, "Bundeszeichen und Bundesschluss in der Priesterschrift", *TThZ* 87 (1978) 98-115, here 111-112; and H. GUNKEL, *Genesis* (HK I/1; Göttingen<sup>6</sup>1964) 264.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent treatment of this issue, see ARNOLD, "Holiness Redaction", 58.

by *casus pendens*: **אני** — **ואתה**. In both, this prepares for the main statement: “As for me, this is my covenant with you” — “As for you, you shall keep my covenant”. The correspondence between promise and commandment introduced here is corroborated by the grammar and semantics of the two passages, as they are marked by verbs in the first and in the second person, respectively, and address the topics of numerous offspring, of land, and of YHWH’s being God to Israel in vv. 3b-8 and of adequate obedience (**שמר**) and of circumcision in vv. 9-14.

The meaning of this structure is not far to seek. As YHWH’s covenant is announced as “my covenant between me and you” in Gen 17,2a, it concerns himself as well as his covenant partner, namely Abraham and the people to come from him. YHWH, for his part, fulfills his promise in granting his covenant and the blessings it entails. In turn, Abraham and all Israel after him are called to keep YHWH’s covenant, that is, to heed the commandment of circumcision<sup>20</sup>. Yet the two words of YHWH are not on a par with each other, for the commandment is directed to one who has received the promise already<sup>21</sup>. The commandment is only the second word. Thus, whatever Abraham and Israel do will either correspond to or contradict YHWH’s promise, but it is no precondition for the covenant. Israel is asked to answer — no more, no less<sup>22</sup>.

In short, the literary structure of Genesis 17 testifies to an integral relationship between promise and commandment. This is corroborated by the fact that both aspects are denoted with one and the same term, **בריתי**, “my covenant”. It is *the* “Leitwort”<sup>23</sup> which runs through YHWH’s speech and, by consistently being used for both promise and commandment, connects its parts<sup>24</sup>. What is more, both promise and commandment are, with the exact same phrase, designed as an “everlasting covenant”, **ברית עולם**, (vv. 7a and 13b; see also 19b). Therefore, it is hard to escape the conclusion that, in Genesis 17, promise and commandment

<sup>20</sup> WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 308.

<sup>21</sup> WESTERMANN, “Genesis 17”, 162; IDEM, *Genesis*, 306.

<sup>22</sup> See KÖCKERT, *Leben in Gottes Gegenwart*, 82; IDEM, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 15.

<sup>23</sup> WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 307.

<sup>24</sup> As emphasized by KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 19 n. 84, in his critique of the attempt to dissociate the two aspects by E. KUTSCH, “‘Ich will euer Gott sein’. *b<sup>c</sup>řřt* in der Priesterschrift”, *ZThK* 71 (1974) 361-388, here 388. See further P. WEIMAR, “Gen 17 und die priesterschriftliche Abrahamgeschichte” (1988), *Studien zur Priesterschrift* (FAT 56; Tübingen 2008) 185-225, here 208, and IDEM, “Zwischen Verheißung und Verpflichtung. Der Abrahambund im Rahmen des priesterschriftlichen Werkes”, *Für immer verbündet. Studien zur Bundestheologie der Bibel, Festgabe für Frank-Lothar Hossfeld zum 65. Geburtstag* (eds. C. DOHMEN – C. FREVEL) (SBS 211; Stuttgart 2007) 261-269, here 265.

are related to each other in the very word ברית<sup>25</sup>. The question remains, however, whether they have always been.

### III. SCRUTINIZING RECENT ATTEMPTS AT A DIACHRONIC DIVISION

Regarding literary criticism in Genesis 17, there is “nothing to note”, Julius Wellhausen succinctly stated<sup>26</sup>. While in Wellhausen, this judgment on the chapter concurred with his general view of P as a document of cultic and legal character, it is even more significant that Martin Noth, despite his momentous claim that the Priestly “Grundchrift” (P<sup>s</sup>) should be construed as an exclusively narrative source, which in order to be reconstructed has to be cleared of legislative material<sup>27</sup>, apparently did not see any problem with the commandment of circumcision either<sup>28</sup>.

More recently, things have changed. As noted above, a growing number of exegetes are calling for such an analysis. Klaus Grünwaldt, who initiated that discussion, notably did so by applying Noth’s postulate in an even more rigorous fashion<sup>29</sup>. Attributing vv. 9-14 to a later reworking, he is able to reconstruct a narrative base text that testifies to an unconditional covenant of “pure grace”<sup>30</sup>. In the same vein, Joseph Blenkinsopp also regards vv. 23-27 as secondary<sup>31</sup>. As to the work of Mark Brett and Jakob Wöhrle, it should be pointed out that they approach Genesis 17 from another angle, that of non-Israelites and their role with regard to the Abrahamic covenant<sup>32</sup>. In so doing, however, they built on the same separation between a “previously unconditional covenant” and subsequent insertions turning it into a “conditional” one<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 6: “So sind die Verheißungen V. 2-8 und das Gebot der Beschneidung V. 9-14 [...] *sub voce* ברית aufeinander bezogen.”

<sup>26</sup> J. WELLHAUSEN, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin 1963) 25: “nichts zu bemerken”.

<sup>27</sup> See M. NOTH, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (Stuttgart 1948) 7. See also K. ELLIGER, “Sinn und Ursprung der priesterlichen Geschichtserzählung” (1952), *Kleine Schriften zum Alten Testament* (eds. H. GESE – O. KAISER) (TB 32; München 1966) 174-198.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. NOTH, *Überlieferungsgeschichte*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> See GRÜN WALDT, *Exil und Identität*, 3, quoting N. LOHFINK, “Die Priesterschrift und die Geschichte” (1977), *Studien zum Pentateuch* (SBAB 4; Stuttgart 1988) 213-253, here 217 n. 16: “[V]ielleicht muß man sogar noch radikaler als Noth sein, vor allem für den Bereich zwischen Gen. i und Ex. xiv.” See also GRÜN WALDT, *Exil und Identität*, 4, stating his opinion that the theological profile of P<sup>s</sup> will become the clearer the more certain one can be in dismissing legislative material from the narrative.

<sup>30</sup> GRÜN WALDT, *Exil und Identität*, 42-62.

<sup>31</sup> BLENKINSOPP, “Covenant”.

<sup>32</sup> WÖHRLE, *Fremdlinge*, 45-50; IDEM, “Integrative Function”, 74-78; IDEM, “Abraham”, 26; BRETT, “Dissemination”, 90.

<sup>33</sup> The quotes are from WÖHRLE, “Integrative Function”, 76.



In fact, the perceived tension between the concept of an unconditional covenant in P and the commandment of circumcision provides the main argument for discarding the latter from the first layer to be found in Genesis 17<sup>34</sup>. In addition to this theological argument, two literary arguments are adduced. One is drawn from a comparison of the Abrahamic covenant with the other covenant P relates, that with Noah and every living creature on earth according to Genesis 9. The latter being unconditional, this should also be expected of the former, it is argued. To bolster this argument, it is pointed out that the term “sign of the covenant” refers to a guarantee given by God in Gen 9,12.13.17, while it designates an act of obedience on the side of his partner in Gen 17,11<sup>35</sup>. The second literary argument draws on the language and style of Gen 17,9-14. So the fact that vv. 10-12a and 13b address a second person plural is taken as evidence for an insertion<sup>36</sup>. This analysis seems to be validated by “the legal idiom”<sup>37</sup> of the passage which is found in the phrases שמר ברית (vv. 9a, 10a), הפר ברית (v. 14b) and the penalty of *karet* (v. 14a). These phrases are alien to P but are akin to D or typical of H, respectively, it is argued<sup>38</sup>.

Scrutinizing these attempts at a diachronic division of Genesis 17, I would like to propose, in the first place, to defer discussion of the theological argument that builds on the perceived tension between a previously unconditional covenant and subsequent insertions that turn it into a conditional one. In my view, there is a severe methodological problem with this argument, since it runs the risk of importing preconceptions which may prove foreign to the biblical account<sup>39</sup>. Instead, I propose to assess first the literary arguments which are less theologically laden. Afterwards, I will return to the problem of conditionality, that is, to the question of whether there are theological tensions that require diachronic analysis or whether the content can be accounted for by an interpretation of the text as it stands.

If we start with the argument drawn from Genesis 9, the case seems rather clear-cut, for comparing the two covenants in this way neglects an

<sup>34</sup> For a recent discussion of this issue, see BLENKINSOPP, “Covenant”, 149.

<sup>35</sup> GRÜN WALDT, *Exil und Identität*, 58-59; WÖHRLE, *Fremdlinge*, 48-49.

<sup>36</sup> GRÜN WALDT, *Exil und Identität*, 35-36.

<sup>37</sup> BLENKINSOPP, “Covenant”, 149.

<sup>38</sup> GRÜN WALDT, *Exil und Identität*, 27-35. On the comparison of Gen 17,9-14 with Exod 12,43-49 by WÖHRLE, “Integrative Function”, 81-84, and the conclusion drawn from it by BRETT, “Dissemination”, 90, namely, that the passage should be assigned to a Holiness redaction, see below.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly GROSS, *Zukunft für Israel*, 59 n. 31, critiquing Grünwaldt and Kutsch. Furthermore it should be noted that the argument is built on circular reasoning, as pointed out by E. OTTO, “Forschungen zur Priesterschrift”, *ThR* 62 (1997) 1-50, here 37-38.



essential difference. The covenant granted after the flood is made not only with Noah, but with all flesh on earth. For this reason, there is neither room nor need for a sign of obedience in correspondence to the establishment of this covenant<sup>40</sup>. By contrast, the second argument, which draws upon the language and style of Gen 17,9-14, seems stronger. But it is not quite as strong as it may appear. As for the change in number starting in v. 10, this feature is called for by the context: when addressing Abraham in v. 9b, YHWH calls out to “you and your offspring after you throughout their generations” (see also vv. 12a, 13b)<sup>41</sup>. While it well may point to earlier prescriptive material having been used in composing the commandment, the change in number does not offer a clue for literary criticism<sup>42</sup>. As for the phrases *שמר ברית* and *הפר ברית*, it is true that they are characteristic of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic tradition but not the Priestly literature. Yet in order to construct a literary-critical argument from this observation, one needs to postulate in addition that a Priestly tradent would have, for whatever reason, felt obliged to categorically refrain from using these expressions. There is nothing to substantiate such a claim<sup>43</sup>.

At this juncture, it should be pointed out that there are indeed reasons to assume that parts of vv. 9-14 are not original to Genesis 17. Drawing on earlier observations, Jakob Wöhrle has made a good case by highlighting significant parallels with the late Priestly passage Exod 12,43-49<sup>44</sup>. While he concludes from them that the entire passage Gen 17,9-14 should be secondary, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the aforementioned parallels are found exclusively in vv. 12b-13a. Incidentally, these are also the verses that exhibit a change back from the plural address to the singular. Therefore it seems plausible to assume that vv. 12b-13a have been inserted secondarily<sup>45</sup>. However, this does

<sup>40</sup> This is also pointed out by KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 16.

<sup>41</sup> See GROSS, “Bundeszeichen”, 113 n. 34; IDEM, *Zukunft für Israel*, 59 n. 33, and FOX, “Sign”, 587 n. 58. See also WÖHRLE, *Fremdlinge*, 46-47 n. 70.

<sup>42</sup> For further discussion, see WÖHRLE, *Fremdlinge*, 46-47 n. 70. See also GROSS, *Zukunft für Israel*, 53 n. 16.

<sup>43</sup> As pointed out by KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 15. See also STIPP, “Individualisierung”, 135, arguing for a purposeful literary strategy of the Priestly tradent in Genesis 17 to redefine traditional terms in covenant theology.

<sup>44</sup> WÖHRLE, “Integrative Function”, 82-84.

<sup>45</sup> As has been proposed repeatedly, e.g. by R. SMEND SEN., *Die Erzählung des Hexateuch auf ihre Quellen untersucht* (Berlin 1912) 9. The question as to how this insertion should be accounted for in terms of redaction history, and whether it can be of help in substantiating the case for H in Genesis (thus BRETT, “Dissemination”, 90, among others), does not need to be addressed here. For a methodological discussion, see C. NIHAN, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch. A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus* (FAT II 25; Tübingen 2007) 564.

not justify discarding vv. 9-14 as a whole <sup>46</sup>. To the contrary, it only confirms that the commandment of circumcision is part and parcel of the Abrahamic covenant.

That is the conclusion Sean McEvenue has drawn as well. Summarizing his careful study of the compositional design, he states: “[T]he subject of Gen 17 is circumcision. All the literary structures underline this” <sup>47</sup>. The subject is circumcision and its function within the Priestly concept of covenant, I should like to add. In any case, this result militates against the approach to diachronically purge the chapter of the commandment in vv. 9-14. And the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the report of its first implementation in vv. 23-27.

#### IV. A NEW SYNCHRONIC INTERPRETATION

So far I have endeavored to show that the literary arguments for reconstructing an original version of the Abrahamic covenant without the commandment of circumcision do not stand up to scrutiny. Only deferred was the theological argument building on the tension between a covenant granted without any condition, as in vv. 3b-8, and the condition introduced in vv. 9-14. I now take up this problem, discussing it under a twofold hypothesis. Said tension, I submit, need not be accounted for diachronically, as it is inherent in the theology of Genesis 17 and in that of P as a whole. In other words, the Abrahamic covenant *does* contain the element of a condition. Yet it will prove necessary to make precise distinctions as to the function of that condition. Speaking of a “condition” by itself is not particularly helpful, for it leaves open the crucial question: a condition for what <sup>48</sup>? The way to proceed in this discussion is to pay close attention to the literary structure of Genesis 17 — the key to the Priestly concept of covenant <sup>49</sup>.

I shall focus on three essential points, all of which have been prepared for by the above observations <sup>50</sup>. The first point concerns the declaration of principle in vv. 1b-2. Here the covenant to be established is presented as a bilateral relationship between YHWH and the people to come forth from Abraham. It is a “covenant between me and you” (v. 2a; see also

<sup>46</sup> As rightly noted by OTTO, “Forschungen”, 37 and KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 14, 16.

<sup>47</sup> MCEVENUE, *Narrative Style*, 159.

<sup>48</sup> Thus also KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 15.

<sup>49</sup> See above at footnote 10.

<sup>50</sup> See Section II above.

vv. 7a, 10a, 11b)<sup>51</sup>, the content of which is YHWH being God to Israel (vv. 7b, 8b). This promise to be God to his people cannot be realized except in a relationship<sup>52</sup>. Accordingly, the initial declaration introduces, as we have seen, both promise and commandment. Of these aspects, the latter is invoked first: “Walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you” (vv. 1bβ-2a)<sup>53</sup>. This sequence might suggest that obedience on Abraham’s side is a *precondition* for YHWH’s granting his covenant<sup>54</sup>. However, it should be noted that the covenant in question is *his* covenant, as the *Leitwort* בריתי stresses time and again. It denotes a bilateral relationship which has been unilaterally established by YHWH<sup>55</sup>. This is corroborated by the sequence of actual events or, rather, of speech acts in the main body that follows, for this sequence presents an inversion of that in the prologue. There YHWH performs what he has promised in actually giving his covenant (vv. 4-8), and only then is Abraham given instructions about how to respond (vv. 9-14).

This brings me to the second and most important point, which is the “covenantal obligation” to circumcise every male offspring and its function<sup>56</sup>. Studying the literary structure of Genesis 17, we have already seen that the subject of circumcision is an integral component of the chapter. We have also seen that this commandment is only the second word of YHWH, as it follows the actual establishment of the covenant. What is wanted is a conduct corresponding to YHWH’s covenant<sup>57</sup>, a confession acknowledging what has been received<sup>58</sup>, in a word, an answer<sup>59</sup>. To be sure, some have gone to great lengths to avoid interpreting the Abrahamic covenant as conditional in any sense by emphasizing the fact that this

<sup>51</sup> See KNOHL, *Sanctuary*, 141 against J. BEGRICH, “Berit. Ein Beitrag zur Erfassung einer alttestamentlichen Denkform”, *ZAW* 60 (1944) 1-11.

<sup>52</sup> WESTERMANN, “Genesis 17”, 165. See also G. VON RAD, *Das erste Buch Mose. Genesis* (ATD 2/4; Göttingen<sup>9</sup>1972) 156.

<sup>53</sup> For the semantics of Gen 17,1bβ see Gen 5,22.24 and 6,9. See also NIHAN, “Priestly Covenant”, 99.

<sup>54</sup> Thus KNOHL, *Sanctuary*, 138, 141, followed by JOOSTEN, *People and Land*, 111-112 and MILGROM, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2340.

<sup>55</sup> For discussion, see G.N. KNOPPERS, “Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant. A Parallel?”, *JAOS* 116 (1996) 670-697.

<sup>56</sup> The quote is from FOX, “Sign”, 588.

<sup>57</sup> See E. BLUM, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189; Berlin – New York 1990) 328 and R. RENDTORFF, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Ein kanonischer Entwurf*, Vol. 2: Thematische Entfaltungen (Neukirchen-Vluyn 2001) 21.

<sup>58</sup> See VON RAD, *Genesis*, 157, and more recently JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 250, 314.

<sup>59</sup> See above before footnote 22. See also B. JACOB, *Das Buch Genesis* (1934) (Stuttgart 2000) 422.

answer is called a “sign” of the covenant (אות ברית) in v. 11b<sup>60</sup>. More convincing, in my view, is the approach of Frank Moore Cross who held that in Genesis 17 circumcision is at once a sign and a “law of the covenant”<sup>61</sup>. This is also what the sanction of v. 14 suggests, for it shows that, while the covenant is established by YHWH and YHWH alone, it can in fact be “broken” by the human partner. That is, the human partner can fail to meet the obligation that comes with the covenant<sup>62</sup>. In short, the condition introduced in Genesis 17 is concerned with how to keep the covenant previously established by YHWH. It instructs the individual Israelite and Israel as a whole how to live before YHWH and how to stay in his covenant<sup>63</sup>.

The third and last point concerns the solemn designation of that covenant as an “everlasting covenant”, a ברית עולם. In the customary interpretation of Genesis 17, which aligns with a “pure grace” theology, this designation is invoked as proof of the alleged concept of an entirely unconditional covenant. The Abrahamic covenant cannot be everlasting *and* conditional upon human obedience, it is argued<sup>64</sup>. This ignores, however, that in Genesis 17 this designation is used not only for the promise but also for the commandment (vv. 7, 19 and v. 13, respectively). Verse 13 even states: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” Apparently the Priestly tradents did not see the problem that many modern theologians see in this juxtaposition. To the contrary, if we include the other occurrences of the phrase ברית עולם in the Pentateuch and beyond<sup>65</sup>, we find that it is quite typical for the Priestly tradition to designate not only promises but also obligations as “everlasting”<sup>66</sup>. Notably, this holds both for presumably late Priestly

<sup>60</sup> Thus, *inter alios*, GROSS, “Bundeszeichen”, followed by WEIMAR, “Gen 17”, 209; WEIMAR, “Verheißung”, 266.

<sup>61</sup> CROSS, *Canaanite Myth*, 271 n. 224, 297. For a different interpretation, see A. WÉNIN, “L’alliance de la circoncision (Gn 17). Essai d’interprétation du signe”, *RTL* 42 (2011) 558-578, which builds on his earlier study, “Recherche sur la structure de Genèse 17”, *BZ NF* 50 (2006) 196-211.

<sup>62</sup> See FOX, “Sign”.

<sup>63</sup> WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 328: “Bleiben bei Jahwe.”

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., GROSS, *Zukunft für Israel*, 45; KÖCKERT, “Gottes ‘Bund’”, 19; NIHAN, “Priestly Covenant”, 99-101.

<sup>65</sup> Gen 9,16; 17,7.13.19; Exod 31,16; Lev 24,8; 2Sam 23,5; Isa 24,5; 55,3; 61,8; Jer 32,40; 50,5; Ezek 16,60; 37,26; 1Chr 16,17 par. Ps 105,10.

<sup>66</sup> Thus also S.D. MASON, *‘Eternal Covenant’ in the Pentateuch*. The Contours of an Elusive Phrase (LHBOTS 494; New York 2008). For a reconstruction of the understanding inherent in that usage, see JACOB, *Genesis*, 432: “indem jedes Geschlecht die Beschneidung vollzieht, wird sie zu einem [sic] ברית עולם”.

materials like the instruction on sabbath observance in Exodus 31<sup>67</sup> and for Genesis 17 which should be at the heart of P by any definition<sup>68</sup>. So in P, ברית עולם is used also, and in fact especially, for obligations on the side of the human partner.

Having said that, I would still agree that when the Priestly tradents call the covenant everlasting they are putting special emphasis on presenting it as steadfast and reliable, particularly in view of the catastrophic crisis of the divine-human relationship which had become manifest in the exile<sup>69</sup>. The question remains, however: “what it is according to P that gives the covenant the potential of being eternally valid”<sup>70</sup>. If we take seriously the Priestly usage of ברית עולם in Genesis 17 and the composition of that chapter as a whole, it must be acknowledged that this goal is not achieved by excluding the possibility of a breach of covenant on the side of the human partner. It seems, rather, that when searching for the guarantor of the everlasting covenant, YHWH himself should be sought — which is what the radical theocentricity so characteristic of P actually suggests.

Thus, focusing on YHWH’s side, yet another motif which characterizes the Priestly tradent’s covenant theology comes into view: YHWH “remembers” (זכר) his covenant. Again, this motif is not exclusive to the Priestly tradition<sup>71</sup>, but there is a significant distribution of the findings here<sup>72</sup>. As is obvious from both Gen 9,15.16 and Exod 2,24; 6,3-4,

<sup>67</sup> A. SCHÜLE, “The ‘Eternal Covenant’ in the Priestly Pentateuch and the Major Prophets”, *Covenant in the Persian Period*. From Genesis to Chronicles (eds. R.J. BAUTCH – G.N. KNOPPERS) (Winona Lake, IN 2015) 41-58, here 43; J. STACKERT, “Distinguishing Innerbiblical Exegesis from Pentateuchal Redaction. Leviticus 26 as a Test Case”, *The Pentateuch*. International Perspectives on Current Research (eds. T.B. DOZEMAN – K. SCHMID – B.J. SCHWARTZ) (FAT 78; Tübingen 2011) 369-386, here 378.

<sup>68</sup> Cf., however, the recent approaches by ARNOLD, “Holiness Redaction” and TUCKER, *Holiness Composition*.

<sup>69</sup> It should be borne in mind here that in his approach, which proved to be so influential for the common understanding of an unconditional concept of covenant in P, ZIMMERLI (“Sinaibund”) argued that the Priestly concept was conceived of as a critical revision of the Deuteronomistic concept: While the Deuteronomists had theologized for the catastrophe of 587 B.C.E. by stating that Israel had “broken” the covenant, the Priestly tradents sought to exclude precisely this possibility. For a reconstruction of this argument, see KRAUSE, “Individualisierung”, 195-196.

<sup>70</sup> Seldom if ever asked, this question is also raised by SCHÜLE, “‘Eternal Covenant’”, 53.

<sup>71</sup> See Jer 14,21; Pss 105,8-10 (par. 1Chr 16,15-17); 106,45; 111,5.

<sup>72</sup> See Gen 9,15.16; Exod 2,24; 6,5. Cf. Lev 26,42.45 and Ezek 16,60. For a comprehensive account of the findings, see W. SCHOTTRUFF, ‘Gedenken’ im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament. Die Wurzel Zākar im semitischen Sprachkreis (WMANT 15; Neukirchen-Vluyn<sup>2</sup>1967) 202-211.

YHWH's remembering his covenant is employed at the most "crucial junctures"<sup>73</sup>. Enquiring into the semantics of the phrase, two aspects merit attention: To "remember" the covenant (זכר + ברית) is the opposite not of forgetting it, but of "breaking" it (פרר + ברית)<sup>74</sup>; and to remember the covenant is an action which is attributed to YHWH exclusively<sup>75</sup>. Against this background, the employment of the motif in P is even more significant, for it makes clear beyond doubt that eventually the validity of his (!) covenant is contingent not on Israel, but on YHWH. This is what warrants the eternal nature of the covenant according to P: YHWH will remember it.

#### V. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A HOLISTIC VIEW OF THE PRIESTLY CONCEPT OF COVENANT

To put it in a nutshell, the seeming contradiction between YHWH's granting his covenant and the commandment of circumcision which has been observed in Genesis 17 proves to reflect two sides of the same coin. Out of "grace" — to employ the conventional term for a last time — YHWH grants his covenant; and in calling it an everlasting covenant, he also promises that in the end it will prevail over disobedience and failure on the side of his partner. Nevertheless, there is the demand of such obedience. In fact it is part and parcel of the covenant relationship. Having been granted YHWH's covenant, Abraham and Israel after him are called to keep it and to stay in it. YHWH himself instructs Abraham regarding the first and fundamental step: "Every male among you shall be circumcised".

In conclusion I would argue that the Priestly concept of covenant presented in Genesis 17 is more complex, or holistic, than the accepted approach suggests. Indeed such a holistic view seems imperative, especially when assuming an exilic or post-exilic date of P<sup>76</sup>. In order to appear plausible to its addressees, any large-scale theology of the covenant, and hence of the history of Israel, conceived in view of the disaster that befell Judah and Jerusalem, needs to offer an explanation of that disaster, or at least to allow for one<sup>77</sup>. Seen from this angle, things are rather simple: in order to account for the history of Israel, one has to reckon with Israel.

<sup>73</sup> D.M. CARR, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis*. Historical and Literary Approaches (Louisville, KY 1996) 140.

<sup>74</sup> See Jer 14,21 and Lev 26,42.45 in context.

<sup>75</sup> Aptly noted by SCHOTTROFF, *Gedenken*, 204.

<sup>76</sup> See above, footnote 69.

<sup>77</sup> On this problem, see KRAUSE, "Individualisierung", 203, and BLUM, *Studien*, 327.

At the same time, the very fact that this theology has been conceived in the face of destruction and exile bears witness to the Priestly tradents' belief in the truly everlasting nature of the covenant. Everlasting it is, however, not because Israel cannot "break" it but because YHWH will not break it.

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#### SUMMARY

Genesis 17 is widely interpreted as reflecting the concept of an entirely unconditional covenant. As such, it is regarded as the pivotal proof-text for the alleged Priestly theology of "pure grace". As the argument goes, P decidedly disconnected YHWH's promise from any obligation imposed on Israel in order to foreclose the possibility of the covenant being broken by the human partner. However, this is challenged by the commandment of circumcision in Genesis 17. In recent scholarship this problem is increasingly accounted for by a literary-critical division of the chapter. Attributing the commandment to a reworking, identified as H by some, a growing number of scholars argue that, while the reconstructed base text testifies to the concept of an unconditional covenant, the canonical text presents the covenant as being conditional upon observance of the commandment of circumcision. The present article engages this approach critically, offering instead a new synchronic interpretation of the chapter which affords a fresh appraisal of its theological thrust.