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GENESIS 17:10

THE SCRIPTURE CONCERNED

> THIS *IS* MY COVENANT, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; EVERY MAN CHILD AMONG YOU SHALL BE CIRCUMCISED. (Genesis 17:10 AV)

THE MEANING PEOPLE DRAW FROM THIS TRANSLATION

People have concluded from this Scripture that God made "a covenant of circumcision" with Abraham. In other words, people conclude that God made a covenant that Abraham and all of Abraham's male descendants were to be circumcised, in that way placing great emphasis on circumcision itself. It is circumcision that becomes the issue.

THE "MISTRANSLATION"

This Scripture does not contain any "mistranslation" as such. What this Scripture does do, is that it contains a totally inappropriate grouping together of verses, which has the effect of obscuring the real meaning of God's statements here.

Circumcision is NOT AT ALL "the covenant" that God made with Abraham! The covenant God made with Abraham is spelled out in verses 1-2.

> And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I *am* the Almighty God; WALK BEFORE ME, AND BE THOU PERFECT. And I will make MY COVENANT BETWEEN ME AND THEE, and will multiply thee exceedingly. (Genesis 17:1-2 AV)

The covenant, or agreement, that God was here making with Abraham was that Abraham was to "walk before God and to become perfect". The verb "walk" is in the imperative mood, meaning that THIS IS A COMMAND! "Walk" is a synonym in biblical Hebrew for "LIVE". The expression "and be you perfect" is a translation of the Hebrew adjective "tamim" (or "tamiym"), which means "blameless, in sincerity, in integrity, without spot, uprightly", etc.

The adjective "tamim" describes HOW Abraham was "TO WALK BEFORE GOD". In plain terms, God is here saying to Abraham: "I want you to live UPRIGHTLY AND IN INTEGRITY before Me".

Any covenant is an agreement between two parties, with one party's obligations being conditional on actions by the other party, unless one party unilaterally commits to a certain course of action independent of the other party's actions. Thus there are "conditional covenants" and "unconditional covenants". In Genesis 17 we have a conditional covenant.

In simple terms, a covenant with God goes as follows:

God says: "I will do THIS (typically some form of blessing) IF you will do THAT (typically obedience to God's laws).

In Genesis chapter 17 the covenant God was making with Abraham is discussed from verse 1 to the first half of verse 10. The middle of verse 10 CONCLUDES the discussion of this covenant.

Verse 1 has spelled out THE CONDITION that God required from Abraham, which was "to live uprightly and in integrity before God".

IF Abraham would fulfill this requirement of verse 1, THEN God would pour out the following blessings upon Abraham:

1) God would greatly multiply Abraham's descendants (verse 2).

2) Abraham would become a father of many nations (verse 4).

3) Abraham would receive a new name (verse 5).

4) Abraham's descendants would include kingly lines (verse 6).

5) This covenant would be extended to Abraham's descendants (verse 7).

6) God would give specific territory to Abraham and his descendants (verse 8).

Having spelled out BOTH PARTS of this covenant, verse 9 then gives an injunction from God, that Abraham and his descendants were to abide by the requirement of this covenant, which requirement God had spelled out in verse 1.

Then the first half of verse 10 CONCLUDES the discussion of the covenant God was making with Abraham. It says:

> THIS *IS* MY COVENANT, WHICH YE SHALL KEEP, BETWEEN ME AND YOU AND THY SEED AFTER THEE. (Verse 10)

The word "this" is a translation of the Hebrew demonstrative pronoun "zeh", which Gesenius makes clear can refer to both, THAT WHICH PRECEDES, and THAT WHICH FOLLOWS. It is always THE CONTEXT that makes clear whether "zeh" refers to what went before or what comes after.

A very clear and unmistakable example of "zeh" referring to "that which precedes" is found in Ecclesiastes 6:9, which reads as follows:

> Better *is* the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: THIS (Hebrew "zeh") *is* also vanity and vexation of spirit. (Ecclesiastes 6:9 AV)

Here "zeh" must refer to "that which precedes" the use of "zeh", meaning that "the wandering of desire" is vanity and vexation of spirit. It is thus always the context that determines whether "zeh" refers to what went before or what follows after, rather than any inherent attributes of the word "zeh" itself.

Having spelled out the terms for both parties in this covenant in the preceding 9 verses, the context here shows that in this statement in Genesis 17:10 "zeh" refers to what was spelled out BEFORE.

The second part of verse 10 goes together with the thought of verse 11. Thus:

> Every man child among you shall be circumcised; AND YE SHALL CIRCUMCISE the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be A TOKEN (or "sign") OF THE COVENANT betwixt me and you. (Genesis 17:10-11 AV)

Here circumcision is not the covenant itself, but only THE TOKEN OF the covenant that God was making. "The token" is not the same as "the real thing". The "sign" or "token" of circumcision was to serve as an outward INDICATOR that the circumcised person was committed to fulfilling the conditions God had laid down in Genesis 17:1. A token or sign ALWAYS points to something else; a token is never an end in itself.

THE SOURCE OF THIS WRONG DIVISION OF VERSES

The Jewish desire to focus on outward rituals and traditions (Matthew 15:3) made circumcision itself the focus of this covenant. The token became more important than what that token was intended to stand for, which is heartfelt sincere obedience to the real intent and purpose of God's laws.

THE CORRECT DIVISION OF VERSES

Genesis 17:10 This *is* my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee.

Genesis 17:11 Every man child among you shall be circumcised; and ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

THE MEANING OF THIS CORRECT DIVISION

Verse 10 is the concluding statement of the actual covenant itself. From verse 11 onwards God discusses the token that was to symbolize this covenant. The covenant itself was to focus on how Abraham and his descendants were to live before God, and the token of circumcision was to symbolize their commitment to comply with God's conditions stated in verse 1.

IN SUMMARY

The punctuation and the division into verses were only effected long after Moses had written these Scriptures. And it is the division into verses that needs to be corrected in this case.

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