

NAMES AND COVENANTS: ABRAHAM AND SARAH

CULTURAL INSIGHT

As part of their covenant with Jehovah, Abram and Sarai had their names changed. The name Abram in Hebrew means something like “exalted father,” from *ab* “father” and *ram* “to be high or raised up.” In the book of Abraham, the theme of fatherhood appears all through the first few verses, with the word “father” (or “fathers”) appearing ten times in the first five verses. These are likely symbolic puns on Abram’s name.

The scriptures continue to connect themes of fathers and fatherhood in the Abrahamic covenant. When Abraham’s name changed from Abram to Abraham, *ab* remained in his name, continuing the connection to the idea of fatherhood. The book of Genesis explains the name change as representing Abraham’s status as a “father of many nations” (Hebrew *ab hamon goyim*) (Genesis 17:5). Even though this explanation seems to be something of a folk etymology (because the name Abraham does not come from *ab hamon goyim*) and there is some evidence that Abraham and Abram are forms of the same name, the giving of this name symbolized the covenant relationship between the Lord and Abraham. Indeed, the name is the lesson: it represents the covenantal promise from God that Abraham will be a father of multitudes.

At the same time that Abram’s name was changed to Abraham, Sarai’s name was changed to Sarah. We do not have a reason for the change to Sarah’s name. They both appear to come from a Semitic root meaning “princess.” Even more than Abram and Abraham, Sarah and Sarai appear to be forms of the same name. With that observation, however, it is worth noting that there was still a symbolic element to receiving a new name as part of the new covenant identity. Abraham and Sarah’s new names were symbols of both their covenant blessings and their covenant responsibilities to serve the Lord and to bless His children.

Related verses

Genesis 12:1

Genesis 17:4–7, 15–16

Isaiah 51:1–2

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