

General Comments on Genesis 18-19

These two chapters contrast the miraculous birth of Isaac and the miraculous destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord's hand is set to create a new family to replace an existing family, and contrasts the social conditions of the two different groups. Abraham extends gracious courtesy to the visiting strangers where the residents of the city want to rape them, threatening Lot and his family and the strangers with violence. Abraham seeks justice and bargains with the Lord to protect the righteous from the imminent destruction of the wicked, where the residents of the city try to commit atrocities. The actions of the two parties serve to illustrate why the Lord has to take action.

Comments on Genesis 18

In ch. 18-19 notice the contrasts made between the characters presented. Both Abraham and Lot are very hospitable to the messengers, whereas the Sodomites are egregiously inhospitable to the messengers.

Regarding this chapter, Nahum Sarna in the Jewish Publication Society's Torah Commentary states:

The chapter divides into two distinct parts. Verses 1-15 tell us of the appearance of angelic visitors to Abraham, while verses 17-35 deal with the intended divine visitation upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Verse 16 effects the transition between the sections. Although the two topics appear to be discrete, they are closely interconnected. The first carries a message of life and posterity, the second of death and everlasting destruction. Both reveal the nobility of Abraham's character; both disclose the workings of divine Providence.

Not only is the chapter a unity, it also has several points of contact with the preceding narrative and is, in fact, dependent upon it. Abraham, whose name does not appear until verse 6, is repeatedly referred to as "he" and "him"; his identity is clear only from chapter 17. Sarah's childlessness is assumed to be a known fact and is not mentioned, although her advanced age is emphasized. The statement of 17:9 that the covenant in the flesh is to

be continued and reaffirmed generation after generation has its counterpart here in verse 19 in the moral legacy that Abraham is to bequeath to his offspring. Finally, there is much similarity between the incredulous laughter of Abraham in 17:16-21 and that of Sarah in verses 10-14 of the present chapter.

Thus, again, a set of contrasts. The covenant of life with Abraham and the curse of death and destruction upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Lord began to clear the land of its wicked inhabitants with the drought in ch. 12, and here He takes a more active role in specifically addressing some egregious examples of social and moral decay.

The contrasts extend beyond that of hospitality versus hostility and life versus death, as matters of sexuality are also compared. In the case of ch. 18, the Lord promises Sarah will miraculously have a son naturally, who will be the progenitor of the covenant made with Abraham. In ch. 19 are threats of homosexual rape, offers of virgin daughters to the rapists, and then incest resulting in the origin of hostile nations.

1 AND the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; 2 And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw [them], he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, 3 And said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: 4 Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: 5 And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said.

6 And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead [it], and make cakes upon the hearth. 7 And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave [it] unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. 8 And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set [it] before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.

v1-8 Abraham, resting in the heat of the day in the shade of the tent door (v. 1), sees three messengers and hastens to

persuade them (v. 2-3) to accept the hospitality of the times, and they accept (v. 4-6). Abraham then has Sarah bake bread (v. 6), and he prepares meat, butter, and milk for the messengers (v. 7-8).

Abraham is a wealthy man with many servants, but these servants were clearly out working and tending flocks. Abraham is not above hastening to serve the messengers himself and having Sarah assist, even in his old age, suggesting his exceptional humility and penchant for service. Given the heat of the day and the absence of his servants, he could have easily asked the messengers to wait for the servants to return and wait on them. But, rather than delay the messengers, he chooses to immediately serve them himself.

v1 "plains of Mamre", a better translation would be "oaks of Mamre" or "forest of Mamre", conveying the sense of being someplace wooded, per v. 4, 8, as opposed to an open grassland.

v8 "stood by them under the tree", standing by your seated guests is a mark of hospitality, showing deference to them as a servant to a master, being ready to attend to them. That they are resorting to shade under a tree indicates Abraham moved with considerable haste as it was still "the heat of the day".

9 And they said unto him, where [is] Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. 10 And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard [it] in the tent door, which [was] behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah [were] old [and] well stricken in age; [and] it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?

13 And the LORD said unto Abraham, wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? 14 Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. 15 Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.

v9-14 One of the messengers questions Abraham concerning his wife and he responds (v. 9). The messenger then blesses Abraham with the promise of a child through her. Sarah overhears the promise and is incredulous (v. 10), since they were both so old (v. 11). Sarah laughs to herself that such a thing is impossible (v. 12). The messenger then questions Abraham

concerning Sarah's disbelief (v. 13), as the Lord is capable of bringing about the promised miracle (v. 14). Sarah denies having laughed, being quite literal, but is corrected by the messenger who perceives she laughed "within herself" (v. 15).

The promise of offspring appears to be connected to Abraham's hospitality and humility. Note the conception and birth is owing to Abraham's faith and the promise to him, and Sarah's apparent lack of faith does not come to bear on the Lord's promise.

v11 Both Abraham and Sarah were old, and menopause had overtaken her.

v12 Sarah's response was entirely practical. She was not in the immediate presence of the messengers, only overhearing whatever conversation she could from the tent. If Abraham was aware of them being heavenly messengers, it is entirely possible Sarah was not aware of such, being separated from them. Hence her seeming faithlessness, assuming they were simply men, and nothing more. Having baked bread for strangers, why would she necessarily assume anything else? There is nothing in the conversation between Abraham and them, as documented in the text, to suggest they were heavenly messengers.

v14 "according to the time of life", i.e., next year, as it will take about that long to conceive and give birth.

v15 "she was afraid", naturally she would have been because they had read her mind. She did not literally laugh out loud, but "within herself", so while her denial was literally true, it was not true in essence. They expose this, and in doing so reveal they are no ordinary messengers, and thus their promise is not ordinary either.

16 And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way.

17 And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; 18 Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

20 And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; 21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to

the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.
22 And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward
Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the LORD.

v16-22 The messengers of the Lord resume their journey towards Sodom, and Abraham escorts them (v. 16).

One of the messengers of the Lord explains the underlying theological purpose of their mission (v. 17-19). The Lord had previously decided to reveal His intentions (v. 17) to Abraham concerning his own family (v. 18), which impacts the local Canaanites since they are presently occupying the land promised to Abraham's lineage, and it also ultimately impacts all nations of the earth (cf. Gal. 3). The Lord knows Abraham will raise up his children to be just and walk in the ways of the Lord, and He will fulfil His promises to him (v. 19). So, the Lord uses the present situation to teach Abraham and his children, through his example, concerning the bounds of mercy, justice, and judgement. Mercy has its place, as does justice, and judgement.

One of the messengers indicate they have heard injustice and sin in Sodom and Gomorrah is terrible (v. 20) and therefore must be investigated to determine if what they hear is true (v. 21). Two of the three (cf. v. 2, 19:1) messengers leave to go to Sodom, but one of them stays to talk with Abraham (v. 22).

v16 Abraham is a major local political and military figure, given the events of the preceding chapters, so his accompanying the messengers is a means of guaranteeing their safe passage, as well as providing direction, since they are obviously not locals.

v17-22 The JPS TC states on these verses:

God now makes Abraham privy to one of His historic decisions. Ten generations earlier He had disclosed His secret purposes to Noah (6:12), but only in order to save the man's life. Here foreknowledge permits Abraham to plead disinterestedly for other people's lives. One is reminded of the words of Amos in 3:7, "Indeed, My Lord God does nothing / Without having revealed His purpose / To His servants the prophets." Jeremiah, in 23:18, expresses the same notion when he refers to the one "who has stood in the council of the Lord, / And seen and heard His word." In the case of the prophets, the divine foretelling is an expression of God's love for humanity, meant to

warn of impending calamity in the hope of bringing about repentance and the enhancement of the human condition. Such was the case, for instance, in the Book of Jonah. In this prior revelation to Abraham of God's intentions toward Sodom, both the patriarch's humanity and God's morality are put to the test.

Abraham is granted this singular privilege because he symbolizes the future Jewish nation, which is destined to become a source of blessing to other nations. As such, he cannot avoid direct involvement in the fortunes of humanity at large. At the same time, he is the repository of those eternal values of righteousness and justice that constitutes "the way of the Lord." God relies upon him to transmit the heritage to his posterity, which is the indispensable precondition for the fulfillment of the divine promises. The lessons of Sodom and Gomorrah, the judgement of God, and the actions of Abraham exemplify the principles of justice and righteousness, divine and human.

v19 Abraham needs to teach his children righteousness and bring them up in the ways of Lord, and so this tension between justice and mercy provides a solid practical example of how things should play out. But, the Lord also needs to clear the land of the wicked Canaanites in order to fulfil the promises made to him as well. Thus, a dual purpose is met.

v20-22 On these verses the JPS TC states:

The sin and cataclysmic punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah have converted the names of those two cities into a permanent metaphor of human wickedness and divine retribution.

The first hint of the immorality of their inhabitants was the bare observation in 13:13 that they were "very wicked sinners against the Lord." The narrative now speaks of "outrage" and "outcry" [the KJV renders both appearances "cry"] (so also 19:3). These two terms are identical; the Hebrew stems z-`-k and ts-`-k are simply dialectical variant of each other. They connote the anguished cry of the oppressed, the agonized plea of the victims for help in the face of some great injustice. In the Bible

these terms are suffused with poignancy and pathos, with moral outrage and soul-stirring passion. God heeded the "outcry" (Heb. Tse`akah) of His people against the harsh slavery of Egypt in Exodus 3:7; His "anger blazes forth" when He hears the "outcry" of the ill-treated widow and orphan in Exodus 22:21-23; and to the prophet Isaiah, in 5:7, and "outcry" is the absolute negation of justice and righteousness: "And He hoped for justice. / But behold, injustice' / For righteousness, / but behold, an outcry." Tse`akah is especially used in connection with the suffering of the poor and the impoverished victims of avaricious exploitation.

The sin of Sodom, then, is heinous moral and social corruption, and arrogant disregard of basic human rights, a cynical insensitivity to the suffering of others. The prophet Jeremiah identified Sodom with adultery, false dealing, and the encouragement of evildoers all without any feelings of contrition (23:14) while Ezekiel sums up the situation as follows in 16:49: "Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before Me; and so I removed them...." The indictment of Sodom lies entirely in the moral realm; there is no hint of cultic offense, no whisper of idolatry. As with the Flood story, the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative assumes the existence of a universal moral law that God expects all humankind to follow. The idea that there is an inextricable connection between the social and moral behavior of a people and its ultimate fate is one of the pillars upon which the entire biblical interpretation of history stands.

23 And Abraham drew near, and said, wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? 24 Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that [are] therein? 25 That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? 26 And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their

sakes. 27 And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which [am but] dust and ashes: 28 Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt thou destroy all the city for [lack of] five? And he said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy [it]. 29 And he spake unto him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do [it] for forty's sake. 30 And he said [unto him], Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do [it], if I find thirty there. 31 And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And he said, I will not destroy [it] for twenty's sake. 32 And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy [it] for ten's sake. 33 And the LORD went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place.

v23-33 Here Abraham stands before the Lord, presumably via the Lord's messenger per v. 20-22, in favor of some few righteous who might be among the wicked. He starts out arguing for fifty righteous, and then works down to ten. Note Abraham's repeated acts of explicit deference in making such bold appeals.

Abraham is certainly aware that Lot is among the Sodomites, so at the very least he is pleading on behalf of Lot and his household. Abraham is also well aware of the wicked nature of the Sodomites, as is evidenced in his exchange with their king in ch. 14, so he is not in any rush to plead their case. So carefully note that Abraham is not pleading the case of the Sodomites, but rather the few righteous that might be among them.

The JPS TC on these verses states:

Until now Abraham has spoken with God three times (Gen. 15:2, 8; 17:17). On each occasion his personal welfare has been the sole subject of the discourse. Now a change takes place. The next dialogue with God involves a concern for the welfare of others, total strangers. Abraham displays an awareness of suffering and an ability to respond beyond his immediate personal interests. He shows himself to be a moral man, a compassionate person. His behavior at this moment makes him the paradigm of "the just and the right," the qualities that are to characterize his

descendants (v. 18). As the Talmud in Betsah 32b observes: "Whoever is merciful to his fellow beings is without doubt of the children of our father Abraham; whoever is unmerciful to his fellow beings certainly cannot be of the children of Abraham our father."

On this last quote compare John 8:30-40.

With respect to starting with fifty and whittling down to ten that should be spared, this conversation suggests plainly the one Abraham is bargaining with is the Lord's messenger and not the Lord directly. The Lord would have known directly how many righteous were there, and would not have needed to visit Sodom to see if the received reports were accurate. But, the Lord's servant would need to do that.

Negotiating with the Lord

In this chapter Abraham negotiates with the Lord and seems to get Him to change His mind. Did Abraham really get the Lord to change His mind? What is happening here? There are a few different approaches to take when reading this text:

It is a practical teachable moment for the person at hand in the discussion, e.g., Abraham, Moses (cf. Exod 32:10-14), Amos (cf. Amos 7:1-6), etc. That person is put into the difficult position of negotiating with a perfectly just and righteous God over the fate of sinful humans as an opportunity for them to see what is like for God to have to deal with unrighteous people. The prophet acts as intercessor, as a type of Messiah, cf. Isa. 53:12, and pleads for mercy when people really deserve justice. The prophet is forced to sympathize with people with whom he himself has been angry with, and acknowledge his own shortcomings in the process.

The complexity of dealing with a group of people with a systematic corporate legalistic framework. Any population is made up of individuals, and treating the group as homogeneous is problematic. The complexity in the question is "How is this fair?" The argument in favor is God chooses the least punishment appropriate for what all of them are guilty of at a minimum, as opposed to an average level of sin, or a maximum or outlier case, which would be unjust for some or most of the population. For the tension in communal versus individual responsibility, and the seeming lack of equity in the Lord failing to mete out immediate divine justice see Exod. 20:5, Deut. 24:16, Jer. 31:28-30, Ezek. 18, Ezek. 33:2-20.

How does a God of Justice appropriately grant Mercy without allowing sin to proliferate? This is an issue discussed in the Scriptures at length, Jer. 12:1, Hab. 1:12-13, Jonah 4:1-4. It is plain the Lord errs on the side of caution and delays divine judgement until there is a genuine existential threat. The delay is granted to give the opportunity to change and repent (cf. Alma 12, Alma 42), and that delay comes to an end when there is a threat to life that would preclude the opportunity to repent regardless. If the Lord meted out divine Judgement immediately, then there would be little or no human free will, as the consequences would be immediate and condition us to never sin because of immediate consequences and persistent

conditioning.

An anti-Mesopotamian polemic. The presentation of Abraham negotiating with the Lord over the fate of the people at Sodom and Gomorrah presents the Lord as deliberate and reasonable, not enraged, impulsive or capricious. This is the opposite of what the Mesopotamian gods were depicted as:

I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to a god!
What seems good to one's self could be an offense to a god,
What in one's own heart seems abominable, could be good to one's god!
Who could learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven?
Who could grasp the intentions of the gods of the depths?
Where might human beings have learned the ways of a god?

(Poem of the Righteous Sufferer, Tablet 2, Lines 33-38; Foster, Benjamin R., 1995, Before the Muses: myths, tales and poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia, CDL Press, Bethesda, Maryland)

The standard position of Western Philosophy is God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent (this is not the Eastern Religion/Philosophy approach) so He already knows what He is doing beforehand, so there is no point to a conversation with some mortal over the outcome of some imminent event, as there is no changing the mind of God. If one insists on looking at it from this viewpoint (which no ancient human would do) then there has to be some other ulterior motive attributed to God other than changing His mind. This leaves the reader to discern God's intentions with Abraham, and it usually comes down to some combination of the above.

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