

**Genesis 18 and 19**  
**May 30, 2021**

- 1) Genesis 18:1-15 – Again, A Son Is Promised to Abraham and Sarah
  - a) As in verse 1 of the previous chapter we are told, “The Lord appeared to Abraham,” who is now staying near the Oaks of Mamre. It is a typical setting for patriarchal story as Abraham sits near the entrance of his tent while Sarah is inside preparing a meal. We are not given the identity of the 3 strangers, but in keeping with the opening of verse 1 we can assume one of them is the Lord. Some Christian commentators have attempted to see the Holy Trinity in this reference, but that is not the intent of the J or Yahwist writer.
  - b) Though Abraham does not seem to be sure of the strangers’ identity, he makes elaborate plans to show his hospitality: he runs to meet them, he bows down to them, he identifies himself as their servant, he brings them water allowing them to wash their feet and offers them a shaded spot in which to rest. Abraham arranges for an elaborate meal asking Sarah to prepare cakes, asking the servants to prepare a meal of tender veal, and ordering the delicacies of milk and yogurt to complete this feast. No one could have displayed greater hospitality.
  - c) Now the strangers began to speak by announcing: “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” Typical of the earthy style of the J writer, Sarah is described as eavesdropping and laughing while she says to herself: “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” In contrast to the reality of her withered old age, Sarah dreams of recapturing the sexual excitement of her youth. In verse 13 we are told it is the Lord speaking who recognizes Sarah’s laughter and skepticism and who responds: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? ... Sarah shall have a son.” The Lord added, “Oh yes, you did laugh.” The narrative ends with Abraham and Sarah still doubting in the promise.
  - d) In a theme that will reappear when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, this story demonstrates the difficulty and scandal of faith. Brueggemann states, “Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal

scheme of life and perception.... It breaks out of the parameters of reason, wisdom, morality, and common sense.... But our interpretation must focus on the overwhelming question of the Lord – ‘Is anything impossible for the Lord?’... We must say it is the fundamental question every human person must answer. And how it is answered determines everything else.”

## 2) Genesis 18:16-33 – Divine Judgment Pronounced on Sodom

- a) Except for the account of Noah’s flood, this is the longest continuous narrative we have encountered so far in Genesis. This story is of great importance to the J writer, beginning in 18:16 and continuing to 19:29. It can be divided into 3 parts: 1) 18:16-33 tells of God’s intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah while Abraham pleads for the protection of their innocent inhabitants. 2) 19:1-11 reintroduces the character of Lot and describes more fully the depravity of Sodom. 3) 19:12-29 tells of the actual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is from these accounts that Sodom and Gomorrah become synonymous with depravity, even adding to our English vocabulary words such as sodomy and sodomize.
- b) Verses 16-21 – Verse 16 provides the pivot from the visit to Abraham’s tent to a refocus on God’s intention to punish Sodom. Continuing with his hospitality, Abraham accompanies the strangers as they journey southeast from the Oaks of Mamre. In verses 17-19 the writer describes the inner working of the divine mind as God considers how much should be shared with Abraham. God speaks of Abraham as one who will bless “all the nations of the earth,” and as one who is charged “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” It is as if God seeks to shield this blessed patriarch from the evil judgment that is about to be unleashed. In verse 21 the Lord announces he will take one more look at the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- c) Verses 22-32 – Abraham Challenges God
  - i) 2 of the 3 men journey toward Sodom while Abraham remained in the presence of the Lord. In footnote F of the NRSV, reference is made to a “correction” inserted in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. by scribes who were transmitting the text of Genesis. 5 such scribal changes to Genesis were

noted by the scribes. They did not think it was seemly for the Lord to be waiting before a human being. It was suggested, however, by 1 scribe that the Lord was willing to wait patiently while Abraham recovered from the effects of his adult circumcision.

ii) In these verses we have the record of Abraham arguing with God pleading for the lives of innocent people living in the city of Sodom by saying, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” Then Abraham begins to bargain: what if there are 50 righteous people, what if there are 45, what if there are 40, what if there are 30, 20, and finally if there are just 10 righteous people in the city of Sodom? It is interesting in this argumentative scene that Abraham describes himself as just “dust and ashes.” Yet, as lowly as he is in relation to the Lord, Abraham seems ready to challenge and question God. Finally, in verse 32 God agrees to spare Sodom if 10 righteous citizens can be found. This picture of a God who changes the divine mind is of crucial importance for our modern faith. Sibley Towner comments, “This picture makes God a participant in human dilemmas... This image of God’s justice being worked out in the crunch of real life... prefigures the gospel of the eternal logos made incarnate.” God’s being is affected by human life.

d) Verse 33 demonstrates the J writer’s ability to describe the Lord in anthropomorphic ways as God moves easily around the world of people and places. The phrase, “The Lord went his way,” is reminiscent of God’s walk in the garden of Eden in 3:8 or God smelling the pleasant odor of Noah’s sacrifice in 8:21. Don’t get too comfortable with this picture of God, however, because in the next few verses he will begin to rain sulfur and fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

### 3) Genesis 19:1-11 – The Shame of Sodom

a) Two of the strangers, now identified as angels, journey to Sodom and visit with Lot. As did Abraham, Lot displays graciousness and hospitality – going to meet them, bowing down before them, inviting them into his house to spend the night, and providing water for them to wash. Notice, unlike Abraham, Lot lives in a house in the large and evil city. Though initially reluctant, the 2 visitors agreed to stay, and Lot prepares a feast for them.

- b) In verse 4 the story takes a dramatic and frightful turn. Now we learn just how evil Sodom really is. All the men of Sodom surround the house of Lot. In verse 5 they shout out: “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” The term “know” is used here as a euphemism for rape. Lot courageously steps outside and begs the crowd not to molest the 2 strangers who are visiting. However, in verse 8 his nobility disappears when he unbelievably offers his 2 virgin daughters in the place of the strangers. To demonstrate the extremes of a patriarchal culture, the use of women to protect the honor of men or satisfy the sexual needs of men is found elsewhere in the Old Testament such as in Judges 11 and 21.
- c) The angry crowd of Sodomites are ready to cast Lot aside and break down the door to the house when the 2 angelic visitors opened the door, grab Lot, and bring him safely back into the house. The troubling episode comes to an end when the 2 visitors strike all the men in the vicious mob with blindness. The intent of the story is to emphasize the thoroughly corrupt nature of the inhabitants of Sodom. Sibley Towner summarizes the reason for including this troubling account: “Evil corrupts and destroys everything around it, and the Lord will not tolerate it forever.”

#### 4) Genesis 19:12-29 – The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

- a) Verses 12-14 tells the story of how the angelic visitors attempted to evacuate the family of Lot, saving them from the destruction that is about to occur. Surprisingly not all the members of Lot’s family heed the warnings. Only Lot, his wife, and 2 daughters escape. The 2 sons-in-law refuse to take the warning seriously. We can picture them laughing as destruction begins to rain down on the city. The surviving four members of Lot’s family failed to meet the minimum number of 10 righteous people needed to spare the city.
- b) In verses 15-23 the escape of Lot’s family is described. On the day of destruction, Lot is in no hurry to escape. It is necessary for the 2 divine visitors to bodily grab them and force them out of the city. They are told in verse 17, “Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the plain; flee to the hills or else you will be consumed.” Even then Lot dragged his feet and insisted on finding safety in the little town of Zoar. Fortunately for

Lot the 2 strangers grant his request; they are assured their safety, even though they don't "flee to the hills."

- c) The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is described in verses 24-29. A rain of sulfur and fire coming out of heaven is reminiscent of a volcanic eruption decimating everything in the surrounding area. It is a story of complete devastation of the 2 cities and all their inhabitants including all the vegetation in the area. In verse 26 we are told of the fate of Lot's wife who disobeyed the angelic command not to look back. As a result, she was turned into a pillar of salt (which today provides a great tourist attraction). In a concluding scene, Abraham from a distance looked down at where Sodom and Gomorrah once existed, and he saw only smoke rising as if from a furnace.
- d) The image of raining fire and brimstone is a stylized image that the writers used with dramatic effect, and it became the poetic imagery utilized by the apocalyptic tradition since that time. Walter Brueggemann states, "It is a characteristic way of speaking about the most horrible judgment on human history that is thinkable." To focus on the judgment visited upon Sodom is the popular way of interpreting Genesis 19. However, it misses the point to see this chapter as simply teaching that God is the one who punishes sinners. As Brueggemann points out, "A counter theme in the narrative is the special destiny of Lot.... The rescue of the remnant presents an alternative to the general destiny." While Sodom is guilty and destroyed, Lot demonstrates hospitality and is rescued. Even in this harsh tale of cruel punishment, the narrative makes room for a gospel of grace.
- e) The location of the city of Sodom has never been found, though it supposedly stood north of the Dead Sea near Jericho. There is no mention of the city or its destruction in any other ancient text. The city of Zoar is the one place mentioned in the story whose existence is attested by others such as Josephus, the Mishnah, and the historian Eusebius. All attempts to locate an ancient volcano in the area have also failed. Rather than attempting to validate the story through historical and archaeological research, it is best to treat this story as it was written. Sibley Towner concludes in his commentary, "the Lord did it. Once that faith claim is accepted, the

importance of the historicity of the story recedes and the real substance of it emerges: God cannot tolerate human corruption forever.”

#### 5) Genesis 19:30-38 – The Shame of Moab and Ammon

- a) This disgusting story leaves the reader with the impression that Sodom, in fact, had no righteous citizens at all. The clear purpose of relating this tale is to denigrate 2 groups of people whose territory bordered the kingdoms of David and Solomon when these words were written. According to the J writers, drunkenness and incest mark the very origin of these people and after this Lot and his 2 daughters fade from the scene.
  
- b) There is obvious irony in the telling of the story when the 2 daughters of Lot do to their father what he was willing to have them do with the men of Sodom. On 2 successive nights they rape their drunken father and are impregnated by him. Thus, the writers of Israel claim to tell the story of the origins of their neighboring clans. In verse 37 we are told that the son of the 1<sup>st</sup> daughter is named Moab, a name that means “from my father.” The tribe of Moab was located southeast of Israel in what is today known as Jordan. Remember that the Old Testament character of Ruth was a hated Moabite who nonetheless served as an ancestor to David and Jesus. The son of the 2<sup>nd</sup> daughter was named Ben-ammi, which loosely translated means “son of my family.” That child is the ancestor of the Ammonites who lived east of the Jordan River and north of Moab. Their name is preserved in the modern name for the capital of Jordan – Amann. The point of this tale is to cast dispersions on 2 competitive tribes by saying their story begins with the abhorrent sexual escapades of the 2 daughters of Lot.

#### Questions for Reflection

1. When the Lord once again promises a son to the aged and barren couple of Abraham and Sarah, they are understandably doubtful. It seems impossible. Brueggemann speaks of the difficult nature of faith. For you, how reasonable is your faith? Is it fair to describe faith as the impossible possibility?

2. When Abraham argues with God, it is as if Abraham is serving as the divine conscience, and God's mind is changed. Is this just crude anthropomorphism or is there theological truth being spoken here? Is God really responsive to the pleas of humanity? What does this say about the possibility for intercessory prayer?

3. The character of Lot is highly questionable in these stories. Do you think he was worth rescuing? What lessons can persons of faith learn from the grace offered to Lot and his family? Would you go as far as Brueggemann by insisting that the rescue of Lot is the true focus of Genesis 19?

4. Does it matter to you that the historicity of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is difficult to validate? Regardless of that, are there important theological truths to be found in the story?