

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART IV – SECTION III

ABRAHAM: HIS POWER AND LIMITATIONS: GENESIS 18-20

I. The final chapters before the birth of Isaac describe a year in which God makes Abraham grow, giving him a vision and liberating him from corrupt neighbors, but also showing his own continuing flaws.

A. In chapter 17, God promised that Abraham would have a child by Sarai, now named Sarah, within a year. The next three chapters describe three interrelated events occurring within that year, which show both Abraham's devotion and compassion on the one hand, but also his still stumbling faith on the other, with the dramatic contrast with the decadent and violent Sodom and Gomorrah, but also the more just King Abimilech. .

B. Chapter 18 recounts the visit of three angels, who represent God and reaffirm the promise to him. At this point, his faith and devotion are stronger, but Sarah is understandably doubtful. The closeness of Abraham to God, as well as his sense of justice comes out, in the ensuing discussion about Sodom and Gomorrah.

C. Standing in dramatic contrast to Abraham's faith and devotion are the terrible vices of lust and violence in Sodom and Gomorrah, described in chapter 19. Abraham's nephew Lot shows some faith and justice, but weakly. Although he is saved, there is a final break between him and Abraham. The field is cleared for the future Isaac to be the heir.

D. However, lest one see simply a sharp contrast between the faithful Abraham and his decadent pagan neighbors, chapter 20 described another instance in which Abraham again passes off Sarah as his sister. Here, the pagan king Abimilech comes off looking more faithful than Abraham. There is a relationship between God's favor and righteousness, but it is not a perfect correlation. God frequently works through flawed characters, rather than through the most obvious ones.

II. The vision of the angels in chapter 18 shows Abraham's righteousness, justice and faith.

A. At first, the angels appear to Abraham as three visitors. Abraham recognizes them as noble figures, but he does not yet see them as angles.

1. Abraham is courteous and humble. Sitting at his tent, he recognizes that the strangers will want a meal and a place to rest, which he offers.

2. Although a very wealthy man, Abraham acts almost as a servant. Furthermore, although he plainly intends to be very generous, he understates what he has, offering some rest and "a little food." The angels accept this offer as general guests.

3. Abraham then organizes the whole household to arrange for a large amount of bread (made of a half bushel of wheat) and a steer to feed the guests. He also brings out the "curds and milk," which are a sign of prosperity. Curds and milk could be a sign of either prosperity or famine, depending on the context. See Is. 7:15. But here it is plainly the best Abraham has to offer. Given the amount of food being prepared, it is clear that Abraham is willing to offer hospitality for some time.

4. This theme of angels appearing as guests or other humans to people will be repeated in next chapter and elsewhere in the Bible, with such events as the apparition of an angel to the parents of Samson, to Gideon the judge and warrior, and to Tobias. See Judges 6:1-24, 13:2-23; Tobit 5:4-17. The letter to the Hebrews would later say that, through hospitality to strangers "some have entertained angels unaware." Heb. 13:2. Later pagan mythology continues this theme, with the most famous example being the account of Zeus and Mercury appearing to a town in the guise of pilgrims and being rejected by all of them except the pious old couple Baucis and Philemon.

- Part of the idea is to test a person's righteousness by having an apparent stranger appear in a situation where it does not appear that hospitality will be rewarded or inhospitality punished. Another reason for the anonymous

appearance of angels is that they are so powerful that people would be overwhelmed if they knew that the guests were angels.

B. The angels reward Abraham by reaffirming the promise of a child, this time in hearing distance of Sarah.

1. It appears that Abraham now accepts their message, but Sarah thinks it comical. Here as elsewhere, God's generosity is more than we dare ask for.

2. The text makes it clear that Sarah is infertile. That fact may seem obvious, given her age. But both Abraham and Sarah's many travels, and especially his worry that other people may want her as a wife indicate that, by a special gift, she has aged slowly, and the reader might conclude that that gift also allowed her continued fertility.

3. The visitors' reiteration of God's promise that Sarah would have a son within a year, makes it clear that they are messengers from God. The text then switches to an identification of their message with God's by saying simply that the Lord speaks to Abraham and Sarah, rather than the angels. It is becoming clearer that they are messengers of God.

4. The fact that there are three messengers representing God has sometimes been taken as an early hint of the Trinity.

III. In the prelude to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God tells Abraham through one of the angels what will happen and Abraham puzzles about divine justice.

A. In a classic instance of anthropomorphism, the text presents God as thinking about revealing His punishment on Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham, concluding that He should do so because Abraham will be the father of a great nation from which every nation will be blessed.

1. The idea is that, because Abraham must teach his descendants about justice and righteousness, God will make part of His own justice clear to Abraham. The ensuing discussion, and the result that there are not even five just people in Sodom, will bring out more of God's justice.

- As Dr. Leon Kaas explains, the ideas of righteousness and justice in Hebrew are related, but distinct. Righteousness (tsedaquah) means acting in a fashion fitting for God's holiness, not deviating from the right path, but acting purely and consistently. Justice (mishpat) means punishing the evil and rewarding the good; it tends to be a response to righteousness or unrighteousness. Righteousness tends to be more internal, and justice more external. The Beginning of Wisdom 318 f.n. 25.

2. Part of the idea is that leaders especially must know about the ways of God so that they can lead and give others and example. See, e.g., 1 Kings 3:4-14; Wis. 1:1, 6:1-21; St. Thomas Aquinas, On Kingship ch. 14-15. And so God will help Abraham understand righteousness and justice.

B. The text then uses another anthropomorphism and describes God as needing to see for Himself whether Sodom and Gomorrah are really as corrupt as they seem.

1. At first, the notion that God must test Sodom and Gomorrah seems absurd. God must know the truth.

2. However, there are two reasons for this need for a test. First, the reaction of the cities is not fixed. They could repent and turn back to God as Nineveh would at the preaching of Jonah. Jesus does later say that Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented if His miracles had been performed there. Matt. 11:23-24. Second, God is giving an example to all human rulers not to rely on hearsay, but to find out the truth for themselves. See Is. 11:3.

C. In the next scene, Abraham inquires into God's justice, asking whether He would destroy the innocent with the guilty.

1. The scene continues with one angel, who is apparently closest to God, walking a long distance with Abraham. They start in Mamre, which is to the west of the Dead Sea, about midway between its northern and southern ends, and

probably travel down a trade route about 30 miles south to the area overlooking the plains south of the Dead Sea where Sodom and Gomorrah were. The other two angels went further along to Sodom and Gomorrah.

- The test identifies the speech of the angel who remains with Abraham with God's own words. Here as elsewhere, angels are direct messengers for God.

2. Abraham himself first brings up the issue of destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, apparently after either the angel told him of their punishment or he intuited it. Abraham is beginning to grasp the concept that God will judge all nations, not just those whom He has selected and a few surrounding ones. Although God's revelation may be given for the time being only in a few areas, there is a righteousness and justice that extends to them all.

3. Abraham understands that the innocent should not be destroyed with the guilty, but he also knows that the cities ought to be destroyed because of their wickedness. It is likely that his greatest concern is for his nephew Lot, for at first he mentions only one city.
 - a. At one level, Abraham's objection really brings up the problem of evil generally. On one hand, we would like for people to benefit or suffer only for their own good or evil. See Ez. 14:12-23. On the other hand, if people are to live in community, they must be able to affect each other, which implies that one person's good or evil affects others who have little or nothing to do with it. See C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (1940) ch. 2.

 - b. There are many philosophical attempts to resolve this conflict. However, the final answer comes only in the form of Christ, who suffers for all of our sins. See Pope John Paul II, On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (1984) 13, 18.

 - c. For the time being, however, the text does not address that issue, focusing on the fact that God will here avoid punishing the good with the evil, partially by getting the (mostly) just Lot and his family out of Sodom.

4. Although he at first speaks to God rather confidently, almost as an equal, Abraham increasingly senses his own inadequacy, but continues pursuing the issue, asking whether God would punish some lesser number than 50 innocent people with the guilty. Part of the idea is that there is no logical stopping point.

- God continues affirming, without much explanation, that He will not destroy the city if there are 50, 45, 40, 30, 20 or 10 just people.

- There is a conflict here, as elsewhere. On the one hand, it seems extraordinarily inappropriate to continue questioning the will of the almighty God, who is vastly beyond our understanding. On the other hand, God has given us a desire to know why He acts as He does. This interaction between the mystery of faith and the desire of reason is ever at the core of true theology, especially with regard to the question of evil and suffering. See [On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering](#) ch. 3.

5. Abraham does end the inquiry at 10, possibly because the implications are clear and he is increasingly uneasy about questioning God. It is also possible that he does not want to confront directly the fact that his real concern is for Lot and his family.

- The implication, however, that God will not destroy the whole if He can find anyone who is fully just sets up the later fittingness that we be saved by one who is a perfect human, perfectly obedient to God, Jesus Himself. See Rom. 5:12-21.

6. Later on, Moses will intercede with God, not to save the innocent, but rather the guilty and untrusting Israelites, for the sake of the covenant. See Ex. 32:1-14; Num. 14:1-25.

III. The text then turns to the testing of Lot, on the one hand, and Sodom on the other, with the areas around Sodom being destroyed.

A. Given the fact that Lot and his family ran from Sodom to Zoar, which is on the southwest corner of the Dead Sea, within an hour or two, Sodom had to be within a few miles of this place; and Gomorrah was presumably nearby. Their location could be

below the current Dead Sea, or possibly south of it.

1. The destruction described could have been the result of a massive earthquake or volcanic like underground explosions, which caused the bitumen pits described in chapter 14 to throw out colossal amounts of pitch and other molten materials. The earth and the molten material would have swallowed up the cities; the term "overthrow" in verse 25 of chapter 19 literally means "turned upside down." In addition, weather patterns may have since made area utterly inhospitable.

2. This punishment is fitting for Sodom, Gomorrah and the areas, which turned the moral order upside down because of their uncontrolled and flaming passions. Now their own cities are turned upside down by fire from the earth.

B. Two of the three angels continue onto Sodom, which stands in for the whole area. It is noteworthy that God will not destroy the innocent with the guilty, and here it seems that He would not destroy the unrepentant with the repentant. For it appears that the repentance of one city (Sodom) could have prevented the destruction of the whole area, or at least given them a chance to repent.

C. There is a parallel between Abraham and Lot, with similarities and differences.

1. Similar to Abraham, Lot greets the guests, whom he does not recognize as angels, in a humble fashion. At first, the angels are relatively silent, but then provide for Lot's family. Lot's wife, like Sarah, shows some doubts.

2. The differences begin with the very greeting. Lot receives two angels, not three, with the one closest to God missing. Second, the angels come as night is beginning, signaling the darkness of evil. Third, unlike Abraham, who dwells in an open tent and is completely in charge, Lot is a stranger with no power or influence, who tries to protect himself with walls, which prove to be inadequate. Fourth, the hesitancy of Lot's wife is not merely rebuked, as with Sarah's, but punished as she turns into a pillar of salt. Finally, the provision is not for a miraculous son, but rather for the family is to flee the destruction, a flight that bizarrely results in the death of Lot's wife and an incestuous relationship.

D. At first, Lot behaves nobly, seeing what look like clueless strangers in Sodom and offering them protection and hospitality.

1. Lot can easily ignore them and, in fact, their initial refusal of hospitality gives him every excuse to do so. However, he is generous enough not to be put off, possibly because there will be a great danger to them at night in the town square.
2. Lot himself does all of the preparation. His family is not as united as that of Abraham. However, he does have the courtesy of dining with the guests and, as it turns out, with angels. Again, hospitable people entertain angels unaware.
3. Lot is basically just, see 2 Peter 2:7-8, but he does not have the faith or assertiveness of Abraham.

E. The city then shows its horrible perversion and violence.

1. The text says that all of the men, young and old, came to the house. The term "all" may be a hyperbole, but it is clear that the large majority of the men in the town, whose population was at least in the hundreds, came to abuse the strangers. Their vice combined lust, violence and a determination to dominate strangers.

- It is possible that the defeat in the battle against the five kings from the east, described in chapter 14, hardened a hatred of outsiders.

- In any case, there is a gang mentality that increases evil tendencies.

2. They had seen the two messengers in the town square and wanted perverse and violent relations with them. As Dr. Leon Kaas points out, there is a connection to their sexual perversion, in which they wanted a lover who was the same as themselves, and their hatred of outsiders, only respecting people like themselves. See [The Beginning of Wisdom](#) 328-30. There is also a remarkable misogyny, common in the ancient world, with a neglect for women, both on the part of the people of Sodom and even with Lot, who thinks of his daughters as disposable.

3. Lot, with a sense of hospitality but little confidence in God, does not ask God for help or wisdom, but instead goes out and offers his daughters in place of the guests. The offer is rejected, not because the men did not want any relations with women (some of them at least were married), but rather because they could have such relations

anytime. Here, they wanted to abuse strangers, both because of lust and a desire to show dominance over outsiders.

- It is strange that Lot would not think of the abuse of his daughters as bad as the abuse of strangers. However, the duty of hospitality was so strong that he may well have considered a failure on that front worse. He may also have been buying time, knowing that the offer would be refused.

- In any case, Lot comes off as basically wanting to do what is right, but in a weak fashion. For its part, the city looks down upon Lot as a foreigner, and threaten violence against him as well.

4. Now that the city has manifested its full evil, and thus failed the test miserably, the angels take over and, with a supernatural light, temporarily blind the attackers. God will use a cloud and then a glance from heaven to confuse the Egyptians at the Red Sea. See Ex. 14:19-20, 22.
5. The angels are willing to protect Lot and, through him, his family. Because the city is so evil and abusive toward Lot, his (basic, albeit weak) goodness does nothing for it. But he can save his family, as Noah had done before, and later save a small town, Zoar. His intercession has at least some power.

F. Despite the violence of the town toward Lot and his family, he is still reluctant to leave. People can be attached to their wealth and comfort, even when they know it is destructive. The angels mercifully force Lot to leave as the dawn is rising. There is a great symbolism of evil prospering in the darkness, but being destroyed in the light.

G. Having only a partial faith in God, Lot has little faith in himself and his family. As a result, he asks to stay at Zoar, a small town on the southern end of the Dead Sea that had been allied with Sodom and Gomorrah in the war against the kings of the east. See Gen. 14:2. It appears that Zoar was one of the cities to be destroyed. The angel grants the request, thus possibly saving Zoar. Strangely enough, Lot in the end does not want to stay there either.

H. Only Lot's two daughters accept the offer of salvation.

1. The fiancées of his daughter simply disbelieve Lot and stay in Sodom, thus condemning themselves to punishment. Even the intercession of another person must be accepted for salvation to be effective.

2. Lot's unnamed wife, who was presumably from Sodom or the outlining areas, looks back at her now lost homeland. She is turned into salt, either as a punishment, or perhaps more likely, because the very hideousness of the sight, like the head of Medusa, is deadly.

- Being turned into salt may have been a euphemism for dying and being taken into the shaking land, which are to this day marked with salt pillars.

I. The final scene involves Abraham looking majestically, but sadly over the wreckage, probably wondering about the fate of his nephew Lot. It is an image of righteousness dwelling in final stability and dignity as destruction overwhelms the unholy. The word for the fumes rising from the ground (olah) is also used for the smoke rising from a sacrifice offered on the altar. Both work to the glory of God, but in different ways.

IV. Lot's subsequent life confirms the instability of his family and his final break from Abraham.

A. The text does not say why, but Lot is afraid to stay in Zoar. He may have been afraid that they would think he brought the destruction on the other lands. Or, perhaps, he believed them to be as corrupt as the residents of Sodom.

B In any case, he goes to live in the very hill country that he was supposed to have fled to in the first place. Notably, he does not return to Abraham, perhaps out of a shame at having left him and being unable to provide for himself.

C. Because Lot seems to be afraid of human society, his daughters do not believe that they will receive husbands. They were raised in Sodom and thus are used to perversions. As a result, in order to have children, they get Lot drunk and have relations with him. Lot, utterly distraught because of the death of his wife and destruction of his town and all his wealth, becomes an easy target.

D. The children of this incestuous union become the ancestors of the Moabites and Amorites.

1. The Moabites and Ammonites were people who lived in plains west of the Dead Sea and Jordan Rives, with the Moabites to the south and the Ammonites to the north. The Chosen People, the Moabites and the Ammonites sometimes fought each other, see Judges 3:12-14, 10:7; 2 Sam. 12:20-31, but they were not meant to be enemies and their lands were not supposed to overlap with those of the Chosen People. See, e.g., Duet. 2:8-23.

2. The text indicates that the children were named Moab and Ammon, after the Hebrew words for "father" and "kin." There is a mixed notion here. On the one hand, they are related to the Israelites, and thus have a certain share in their dignity. Despite their odd parentage, God does seem to have guided the children of Lot to become peoples of their own. See Duet. 2:9, 19. On the other hand, at least part of their founding was from a bizarre relationship and they became pagan.

3. Lot seems to fade into oblivion after this time; it is not even clear whether he and Abraham ever meet again. Presumably his sons (who were also grandsons) then returned settled in the area west of the Dead Sea and Jordan River, married natives, and began their tribes from there.

V. Having seen the angels and witnessed the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah and their region, Abraham then stumbles again, fearing violence from his neighbors.

A. It is not perfectly clear why Abraham went to Gerar, which is in the southwest of what would become the Promised Land.

1. The explanation of a famine, which was the reason for his travels to Egypt in chapter 12, is not likely because Gerar, appears to have been less than 100 miles away and with a similar environment.

2. It is possible that Abraham wanted to survey more of the land that he was promised. It may also be that the smoke and fumes from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah make the area around Mamre unpleasant for awhile.

3. It is possible that this journey occurred earlier, shortly after the trip to Egypt, but is only placed in the narrative at this point to show that Abraham and Sarah were not perfect, nor their neighbors all evil.

B As with the journey to Egypt, Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister, an arrangement that Sarah agrees with. Verse 11 indicates that, as with the similar event in Egypt, Abraham again is worried that the people may kill him to marry Sarah. There may have also been a subtle testing of God's promise to him, or perhaps even a desire that God would settle upon Ishmael as Abraham's heir and thus avoid the impending problems between Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael.

1. As the Pharaoh before him, King Abimilech sends for Sarah to be his wife, but fortunately does not have relations with her immediately.
2. Although she was 90 years old, Sarah probably looked much less than her years, perhaps appearing to be about half of that.

C. Here, God speaks directly to Abimilech in a dream about the deceit. Abimilech appears to be a holy man, whom God communicates with directly.

1. It appears from chapter 18 that there was sterility among Abimilech's household. There were presumably many members of his household, probably in the hundreds, with his people in the thousands. That large number would explain both why Abraham was afraid of him despite being the lord of many hundreds, and explain how the sterility among his household could be noticed in a few months' time.
2. God threatens death to Abimilech, but offers to rescind the punishment if Abimilech gives Sarah back to Abraham. God accepts Abimilech's entirely justified defense on the grounds of ignorance. Nevertheless, as with any evil action, there is an obligation to rectify it even if it was blameless.

3. Despite Abraham's deceit and faltering faith, God still identifies him as His spokesman and places great value on his prayers. Spiritual power is related to virtue, but the relationship is not always a neat one.

D. Abimilech understandably calls Abraham and demands a justification. Abraham offers three rather weak rationales. First, he says that deceit was due to his fear of being killed. Second, he says that the statement was not really a lie because Sarah was his half-sister. Third, he says that Sarah agreed with the arrangement when they started their journeys. None of these excuses works, for: (1) Abraham should have trusted in God's protection; (2) the statement that Sarah was his sister was still deceitful even if partially true; and (3) deceit cannot be justified on the grounds that another person agrees with it. In this case, the arrangement provoked the wrath of God.

E. Despite being the deceived party, Abimilech gives Abraham and Sarah numerous animals and some slaves, as well as free use of his land, to repair his mistake. He apparently realizes Abraham has great spiritual power despite his failings. It is also possible that he considers Abraham's fears to be partially accurate, and that one of his people may well have killed Abraham so that Sarah would be free.

- The gift is not so much compensation, for no real harm had been done to Abraham or Sarah. It was rather to make it perfectly clear to everyone that Abimilech realized that taking Sarah was a mistake, and so he released her. The gift was partially an admission of guilt, so that people would not blame Sarah for deceit nor think that Abimilech was sending her away because she was unsatisfactory.

F. Here, it is Abimilech who comes off as the sensible and faithful one. There is a message that goodness can be found outside the Chosen People, and likewise that even the leaders God selects are not perfect. Here as elsewhere, the Biblical accounts are both supernatural and also eminently human.