

GENESIS 18–20

ABRAHAM'S WELCOME, SODOM'S WICKEDNESS, AND ABIMELECH'S REPENTANCE

Overview

In these three chapters, we encounter the story of Abraham's welcome of the three visitors who confirmed and definitively announced the arrival of Abraham and Sarah's long-awaited son, Isaac. Then, after Abraham pleads to the Lord to spare Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction, the messengers proceeded to those notorious cities to see the situation for themselves—at the same time testing Lot's family to see how their welcome and faithfulness compared to that of Abraham and Sarah. Finally, in chapter 20, we meet Abimelech, the second king in Genesis who aspired to marry Sarah.

A key to understanding what ties all three of these stories together is the Hebrew verb *yāda'* ("to know") and the related noun *da'at* ("knowledge"). After a brief exploration of the rich and powerful meanings of these terms in Hebrew, we will look carefully to see how they apply in Genesis 18–20.

In the Bible, *yāda'* and *da'at* combine two Hebrew concepts: knowing something with the mind or heart and knowing something physically.¹ When used to talk about people, the terms imply a relationship; when God or a marriage partner is involved, they often imply a covenant relationship.² If I have calculated

¹ See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 393–395; Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 4 vols. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994), 1:390–393.

² John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1990), 77. See also John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 178–179. God's covenant with Israel is frequently compared to a marriage relationship in scripture (see Isaiah 54:5–17; Jeremiah 3:20; 31:31–33; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2:20–21).

correctly, these two terms appear twenty-two times in the first twenty chapters of Genesis, and significantly, eight of these occur within chapters 18–20.³

The first biblical appearance of the Hebrew terms for knowing is in Genesis 2:9, when we are introduced to the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The French Bible scholar André Chouraqui translated this as the “tree of penetration of good and evil.”⁴ The English word *penetration* is a helpful translation because it simultaneously expresses both the intellectual and physical meanings of the original Hebrew term. In other words, when Adam and Eve transgressed and obtained the insights that resulted from eating the fruit, they not only *cognitively* penetrated the tree (in the old English sense of “gaining intellectual or spiritual access”⁵) but also *physically* penetrated the sacred, symbolic boundary of the garden where the tree was planted so as to pluck its fruit.⁶

After the story of the Fall, the next appearance of the word is in Genesis 4:1, when “Adam *knew* Eve his wife” and their son Cain was conceived (emphasis added). Because Adam and Eve were faithful to their covenants, their act of mutual knowing was not only physical but also covenantal in nature. Indeed, the act itself honored the covenants the couple made with God to cleave together as one and to “multiply and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28; 2:24). Indeed, a happy covenantal marriage relationship is often used in scripture as a model of the covenant relationship between God and His people. As a husband and wife strive to be one in all things, so those who keep their covenants with God strive to know and become one with Him (John 17:3, 20–23; 1 Corinthians 6:17).

With similar symbolism, in His account of the final judgment, Jesus described the tragedy of those who, by unfaithfulness to their covenants, alienated themselves from His love (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:31). To those individuals, He said, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:21–23).⁷ By this, we are

3 See Genesis 2:9, 17; 3:5, 7, 22; 4:1, 9, 17, 25; 8:11; 9:24; 12:11; 15:8, 13; 18:19, 21; 19:5, 8, 33, 35; 20:6–7. The two meanings of *know* will also be key to some of the later stories of Genesis (see, for example, Genesis 21:26; 22:12; 24:14, 16, 21; 25:27; 27:2; 28:16; 29:5; 30:26, 29; 31:6, 32; 33:13; 38:9, 16, 26; 39:6, 39:8; 41:21, 31, 39; 42:23, 33–34; 43:7, 22; 44:15, 27; 45:1; 47:6; 48:19).

4 André Chouraqui, ed., *La Bible* (Paris, France: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 21, Genesis 2:9.

5 “Penetrate,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed February 12, 2022, https://etymonline.com/word/penetrate#etymonline_v_12617. See also Jacob 2:15 and Moses 7:36, where the Lord’s eye is described as an instrument of “piercing,” confirming His ability to “reach or penetrate with the sight or the mind to see thoroughly into; discern” (J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. [Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004], s.v. “pierce,” sense 4). Also compare Moses 6:32, where the Lord says to Enoch, “No man shall pierce thee,” to this 1640 example: “My lord, learn of me, that there is none of you all, that can pierce the king” (Simpson and Weiner, *Compact OED*, s.v. “pierce,” sense 4).

6 See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The Tree of Knowledge as the Veil of the Sanctuary,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2013), 49–65.

7 Here, as in the majority of occurrences of *yādaʿ* in the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament, the Hebrew term is translated by the Greek *ginōskō*.

meant to understand that the Lord knows only those individuals who have received and kept His covenants.⁸ Elder Bruce R. McConkie further explained, “Jesus is saying: ‘Ye never knew me so fully as to be sealed up unto eternal life with your callings and elections made sure, and since you did not magnify your callings in the priesthood, you shall be cast out and be as though I never knew you.’”⁹

Using an analogy to the Jewish law specifying that an “advocate cannot represent a client whom he or she does not know personally,”¹⁰ Jesus is saying that He cannot act as a mediator for such a person and that if, on that day of final judgment they are found to have “[wasted] the days of [their] probation” (2 Nephi 9:27), they must be “cast out” from His presence.

With the understanding of the covenant meaning of *yādaʿ* as context, we can better appreciate what the Lord said of Abraham in Genesis 18:19: “For I *know* him, that he will command his children and his household . . . , and they shall keep the way of the Lord” (emphasis added). By way of contrast, Lot, “Abraham’s nephew (Genesis 12:5) who, at first and laudably, joins his uncle in the latter’s wanderings but, finally and less laudably, settles among the worst evildoers [that is, in Sodom], is quite an ambivalent figure and therefore rightly called Lot, [related to the Hebrew word for] ‘veiled.’”¹¹ In the context of the events of Genesis 19, Lot’s “veiling” signifies, among other things, that unlike Abraham, Lot had cut himself off from divine knowledge.¹² Going further, it also suggests that at the last day, Lot will not be received into the presence of the Lord.¹³ Finally, in a physical sense, after his daughters incestuously “la[id] with” their father” (note that scripture deliberately avoided describing their act with the Hebrew covenantal word for *knowing*), the inspired author underlined the same lesson in saying that Lot was drunken and “perceived [*yādaʿ*] *not*” what his daughters had done (Genesis 19:33, 35).

By the time we reach chapter 20, we are prepared by these previous stories to understand that King Abimelech, who was not then part of Jehovah’s covenant people, was more righteous than Lot, who forsook the covenant he had been privileged to receive. For, despite Abimelech’s grievous offense in kidnapping Sarah to become one of the women in his harem, God freely forgave him, saying to him in a dream: “I *know* that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart” (Genesis 20:6; emphasis added). The God that

8 See Amos 3:2: “You only *have I known* of all the families on earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (emphasis added). See also Welch, *Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, 77–78.

9 Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1973), 1:255.

10 Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Yarbro Collins, eds., *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 55n23.

11 Yehuda Thomas Radday, “Humour in Names,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda Thomas Radday and Athalaya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1990), 63.

12 See, for example, Isaiah 25:7; 2 Corinthians 3:13–16; Alma 19:6; Ether 4:15; Doctrine and Covenants 38:8; 67:10; 110:1; Moses 7:26, 56, 61.

13 See, for example, Ether 12:19, 21; Doctrine and Covenants 38:8; 101:23.

Abimelech did not know knew him. Afterward, Abraham prayed for Abimelech, and his household was blessed (see Genesis 20:17–18).

With these three stories as an introduction to the Old Testament concept of *knowing*, we are ready for chapters 21 and 22, where Abraham came to *know* God through a supreme test of faith. His trial reminds us of the stirring account of handcart pioneer Francis Webster: “We became acquainted with [God] in our extremities.”¹⁴ Through Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham came to know firsthand the depth of love described in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from “Abraham’s Hebron: Then and Now part 5: Mamre - Jeffrey M. Bradshaw,” video, 21:22, February 20, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=MNVHd5MzIoc&t=7s> (among other things, this video features Hugh Nibley recounting the story of Abraham’s encounter with the three messengers in Genesis 18).

Related verses

Genesis 18–20

Genesis 18:1–8. Abraham’s Character Is Revealed in His Lavish Hospitality to Strangers

18:1. “*And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day.*” Rabbinical commentary takes great care to depict the extraordinary nature of Abraham’s hospitality to all travelers which, in Abraham’s hundredth year, was rewarded by the visit of three messengers from God.¹⁵ As in many other such accounts, blessings came only after a period of intense trial.

On the third day after his circumcision (see Genesis 17:23–27), when Abraham was suffering dire pain, God spoke to the angels, saying, ‘Go to, let us pay a visit to the sick.’ . . . The day whereon God visited him was exceedingly hot, for He had bored a hole in hell, so that its heat might reach as far as the earth, and no wayfarer venture abroad on the highways, and Abraham be left undisturbed in his pain. But the absence of strangers caused Abraham great vexation, and he sent his servant Eliezer forth to

¹⁴ Chad M. Orton, “Francis Webster: The Unique Story of One Handcart Pioneer’s Faith and Sacrifice,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2006): 140. Importantly, William R. Palmer reported that these words attributed to Webster were not verbatim, though they were correct “in substance.”

¹⁵ Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 606.

keep a lookout for travelers. When the servant returned from his fruitless search, Abraham himself, in spite of his illness and the scorching heat, prepared to go forth on the highway.¹⁶

Hugh Nibley, who was moved by this story, said of Abraham: “He seemed to be generous to the point of lacking common sense.”¹⁷ Remember that Abraham was one hundred years old, sick, and sitting in pain when he rose and ran to welcome the visitors. “‘Lord of the Universe,’ he cried, recognizing one of them, ‘is it the order of the Cosmos that I sit while you remain standing?’¹⁸ The scene, as . . . André Parrot . . . remarks, ‘is as magnificent as it is strange.’”¹⁹

The hospitality of Abraham is commemorated annually by the Jewish people on the first night of Sukkot (the feast of tabernacles or booths). On that night, it is said that Abraham himself sometimes appears in the booths of the righteous, followed on successive nights by six other “shepherds” of Israel, the *uspizim*.²⁰ Those so privileged are invited to emulate the virtues of their visitors, Abraham’s primary virtue being kindness. “Since the world was created for kindness, *Chazal* state that the world was created for Abraham, for it was built in his merit.”²¹

18:2. “three men.” In line with Doctrine and Covenants 29:42–43, some ancient texts also speak of three messengers who appeared to warn, protect, and instruct Adam and Eve and of their efforts being

16 Louis Ginzberg, ed., *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols., trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (1909–1938; repr., Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 1:240–241. Compare Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsi’a 86b, cited in Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends (Sefer Ha-Aggadah): Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1992), 35, chapter 3, verse 26; Yaakov ibn Chaviv, *Ein Yaakov: The Ethical and Inspirational Teachings of the Talmud* (Lanham, MI: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 909–910. See also E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 171–179; Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Éric Smilévitch, eds., *Chapitres de Rabbi Éliézer (Pirqé de Rabbi Éliézer): Midrach sur Genèse, Exode, Nombres, Esther* (Lagrasse, France: Éditions Verdier, 1992), 170 ; see also 440nn5–40.

17 Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 332–333.

18 Nibley translated this statement from Micha Joseph bin Gorion (Berdichevsky), *Die Erväter* (Frankfurt, Germany: Rütten und Loening, 1914), 202: “Da sprach Abraham : Herr der Welt! Ist das der Welt Ordnung , daß ich sitzen soll und du stehen?” Compare John T. Townsend, ed., *Midrash Tanhuma*, 3 vols. (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing, 1989–2003), 1:91, Wayyera, Genesis 4. Contrast the version that puts similar words in the mouths of the angels: “‘Sovereign of the Universe!’ the angels protested, ‘how long wilt Thou honor him; how long wilt Thou stand while he sits?’” (Menachem Mendel Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation: A Millennial Anthology*, 9 vols., trans. Harry Freedman [Monsey, NY: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1957], 3:7, Genesis 17:2).

19 Hugh W. Nibley, “Abraham’s Temple Drama,” in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 17 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2008) 3, citing André Parrot, *Abraham et son temps* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1962), 104: “Un récit aussi magnifique qu’étrange.”

20 Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 299. The most commonly cited primary source for this tradition is *Zohar* 3:103b–104a (Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vol. 8 [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014], 163–168).

21 Shai Graucher, *Ushpizin: The Seven Guests in the Succah* (Rahway, NJ: Mesorah Publications, 2019), 33.

resented and opposed by Satan.²² For example, in the early Christian *Apocalypse of Adam* we read, “And I saw before me three men whose appearance I could not recognize . . . saying to me, ‘Rise up, Adam, from the sleep of death, and hear about [the manifestation of God] and the seed of that man to whom life has come’”—thus referring to the later coming of Christ.²³ Similar accounts of instruction from three divine messengers are also given concerning other prominent Old Testament figures, including Abraham. With reference such messengers, BYU professor Alonzo Gaskill observed that

Peter, James, and John, whether appearing [literally or figuratively] to Adam and Eve or serving as the head of the post-resurrection Church in the meridian of time, are symbols of something much greater than themselves, namely, the Godhead . . . as [are] all subsequent First Presidencies. . . . What is of importance is what they brought and whom they represented.²⁴

18:2–8. “he ran to meet them . . . and bowed himself toward the ground.” Textual details imply that Abraham was not giving the three men special treatment because he knew they were divinely sent, but rather he extended the same lavish bounty that he would have to any stranger. Unlike Abraham, scripture readers, of course, already know that the messengers represent the Lord.

Summarizing the extent of Abraham’s welcome to the strangers, Nahum Sarna wrote:

Abraham’s openhearted, liberal hospitality to the total strangers knows no bounds. He has water brought for them to bathe their feet, a much appreciated comfort to the traveler. . . . He invites them to rest under “the tree.” . . . He promises to fetch “a morsel of bread” but prepares a lavish feast. . . . In asking Sarah to bake cakes, Abraham specifies the use of “choice flour,” that is, the finest and choicest of wheat flour, the type from which meal offerings were later brought to the sanctuary. [Abraham] himself selects the calf for the main dish, a rare delicacy and a sign of princely hospitality among pastoralists. He provides curds and milk, the basic products of a pastoral economy. . . . Milk was highly esteemed in the ancient Near East and was offered to the gods. . . . Abraham personally serves the strangers this rich fare and stands close by, ready to attend to their needs.²⁵

22 For an example from Jewish tradition, see Matt, *Zohar*, 237–238, Be-Reshit 1:37b. For examples from the Mandaeen tradition, see Mark Lidzbarski, ed., *Ginza: Der Schatz oder das Grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, J. C. Hinrichs, 1925), 263–264.

23 George W. MacRae, “Apocalypse of Adam,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 712, Apocalypse of Abraham 2:2–2.

24 Alonzo L. Gaskill, *The Lost Language of Symbolism: An Essential Guide for Recognizing and Interpreting Symbols of the Gospel* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2003), 302. Compare Nibley: “When Peter spoke to Adam, which Peter was it? The Peter of Adam’s day? No, the timeless Peter” (Hugh W. Nibley, “The Law of Consecration,” in *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 9 [Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1989], 439).

25 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 129. André Chouraqui calculated the “three measures of fine meal” (verse 6) as amounting to forty liters! (André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête [La Genèse]* [Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992], 183n18:6). Some readers are more conservative in their estimates of the amount of flour

Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *The First Days and the Last Days: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary on the Book of Moses and JS—Matthew in Light of the Temple* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 116.

Related verses

Genesis 18:1–8

Genesis 18:9–15. The Announcement about Sarah Heraldizing Isaac’s Birth

18:9. “Where is Sarah thy wife?” The fact that the strangers already knew Sarah’s name is the first hint to Abraham that these were no ordinary men.²⁶

18:12. “Sarah laughed within herself.” The Hebrew verb *yitshaq*, “to laugh,” is identical to the Hebrew form of the name Isaac that was introduced in Genesis 17:19.²⁷ In chapter 17, Abraham had laughed at the idea that Sarah would bear a son. Now Sarah laughs with him. References to laughter occur four times in the span of a few verses (verses 9, 12, 13, 15).

18:12. “pleasure.” The Hebrew term *‘ednu* is related to Eden and conveys the idea of agricultural luxuriance and plenty (hence, the Book of Mormon alludes to “Eden” in the place-name “Bountiful”).²⁸ Thus, a better translation of Sarah’s expression would be “fruitfulness, abundance”—here referring specifically to pregnancy.²⁹

18:15. “Is any thing too hard for the Lord?” President Spencer W. Kimball’s firm answer to this question was, “I believe the Lord can do anything he sets his mind to do.” However, qualifying his answer

mentioned, but the point is not exact measurement, but rather the extravagant nature of Abraham’s generosity.

26 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1994), 47.

27 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:55n17:17.

28 See, for example, see 1 Nephi 17:5; Alma 22:29–31—in fact, an ancient site not far from the likely spot of the Old World Bountiful was reputed to be a place of such great abundance that its inhabitants were denounced by Islamic “Hud” traditions for their attempt to create an earthly replica of paradise. The description also evokes the conceptually related name Joseph Smith gave to “Nauvoo” (literally meaning, “they-are-beautiful”). For more on these allusions to Eden in modern scripture, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *The First Days and the Last Days: A Verse-By-Verse Commentary on the Book of Moses and JS—Matthew in Light of the Temple* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 53.

29 Ronald S. Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Fully Revised and Updated*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al., rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 28n18:9–15.

to teach a broader lesson, he said, “But I can see no good reason why the Lord would open doors that we are not prepared to enter.”³⁰

Abraham and Sarah had been preparing for the arrival of Isaac for decades, and it was only then that God found them ready for this blessing. Nahum Sarna noted the fashion in which “the divine promise has been unfolding in stages”: “First, in 15:4, Abraham was assured that his heir would be a natural-born son; then, in 17:16–21, he was assured that Sarah would bear this child; now a time limit is set for the fulfillment of the promise.”³¹

Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw

Related verses

Genesis 18:9–15

Genesis 18:16–22. The Announcement about Sodom

18:16. “Abraham walking along with them to see them off.” Through the inclusion of this detail, readers are meant to understand that Abraham’s hospitality continued to the very end of the visit. The verse also provides a pause in the narrative where God outlined the reasons behind His intentions for Sodom to Abraham.

18:19. “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household . . . and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment.” Perceptively, Robert Alter paraphrased the literal Hebrew phrase “For I know him” to read “For I have *embraced* him.”³² The terms “justice” (*tsedeq*, “righteousness”) and “judgment” (*mishpat*, “justice”) were repeated as part of Abraham’s pleas to the Lord to spare any righteous residents of Sodom.

According to Nahum Sarna, Abraham was granted the “singular privilege” of knowing God’s intentions “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.”³³ God

30 Spencer W. Kimball, “When the World Will Be Converted,” *Ensign*, October 1974, 3–11.

31 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 130n10.

32 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:58.

33 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 131.

welcomed Abraham's desire to "reason" with Him (compare Isaiah 1:18, Doctrine and Covenants 50:10). The dialogue was another demonstration that Abraham's kindness was not self-serving but extended freely to all, in likeness of the Father's parental concern. Abraham passed this test with flying colors.

18:20. "their sin is very grievous." What were the sins of Sodom? Jeremiah 23:14 cites "adultery, false dealing, and the encouragement of evildoers," while Ezekiel, per Sarna's translation, 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." As Sarna explained, "The indictment of Sodom lies entirely in the moral realm, there is no hint 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."³⁴

Modern readers will notice the obvious omission in the list above, namely, acts of homosexual behavior between men. Genesis 19 indicates that the men of the city of Sodom intended to engage in homosexual acts with Lot's guests, something explicitly condemned in Leviticus 18:22; 20:13. However, a 2021 article by Stephen O. Smoot provides a helpful corrective to discussions that feature an almost exclusive emphasis on the purely sexual dimension of the Sodomites' depravity. While the intention to "humiliate foreign visitors through a heinous act of sexual violence" "was a clear component of the sin of Sodom," the focus of the narrative in its larger context is on the contrast between Abraham's charity for all and the general lack of human decency of the men of Sodom, especially toward the poor and the stranger.³⁵

18:22. "Abraham stood yet before the Lord." The verse provides a second pause in the narrative where Abraham's silent standing hints that he was considering how to express his concerns for the righteous in Sodom, notably the family of his own nephew. It seems that the foremost of the three messengers, here named as "the Lord," conversed with Abraham while the two other messengers had apparently already gone to Sodom to begin a firsthand investigation "to see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it" (Genesis 18:21).

18:32. "Peradventure ten shall be found there." Ronald S. Hendel commented about the dialogue between Abraham and the Lord:

With great diplomacy and humility, [Abraham] argues that God must be just (v. 23), and even more that God must be merciful (v. 24). When God grants Abraham's plea (v. 26), Abraham presses his advantage and in a remarkable rhetorical exchange talks God down from fifty righteous to ten (v. 32).

³⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, 132.

³⁵ Stephen O. Smoot, "Abraham and the Stranger at Sodom and Gomorrah," *Public Square Magazine*, August 5, 2021, <https://publicsquaremag.org/faith/abraham-and-the-stranger-at-sodom-and-gomorrah/>.

There is an element of humor in the Middle Eastern custom of haggling, here not over the price of goods, but the proper balance of justice and mercy and the fate of Sodom. As it happens, Abraham prevails in establishing the right moral principle, but God still destroys the cities, since of all of its inhabitants only Lot and his immediate family are not wicked.³⁶

Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw

Related verses

Genesis 18:16–22

Genesis 19:1–11. Lot’s Family, the Messengers, and the Sodomites

19:1. “When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them.” About Lot’s gradual transformation from an outsider to a city dweller in Sodom, Nahum Sarna wrote: “Lot lived formerly in a tent ‘near Sodom’ (13:12). Now he has become a townsman and resides in a house inside the city (compare vv. 4, 10ff.). Although he has changed his style of life, he still preserves the virtue of hospitality.”³⁷

But contrasting the conventional nature of Lot’s welcome to the extravagant efforts of Abraham to assure the comfort of his guests, Ronald S. Hendel wrote: “Lot’s hospitality to the strangers, although genuine, is not as gracious as Abraham’s in the previous chapter (18:1–8). Whereas Abraham *ran . . . to meet them*, Lot *rose to meet them*. Whereas Abraham served *cakes of choice flour*, Lot served *unleavened bread*. Whereas Abraham *stood by them . . . while they ate*, at Lot’s feast they ate together: *and they ate*. These are subtle denigrations of Lot by comparison with Abraham.”³⁸

19:2. “My lords.” In verse 2, the contrast between Abraham and Lot continues. While Abraham seemed to recognize the strangers as divine early on in his encounter, Lot was slow to understand who they represented. According to Brian Doyle, “the differences serve to distinguish the characters of Abraham

36 Ronald S. Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Fully Revised and Updated*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al., rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 28–29n18:22–23. See Don Waisanen, Hershey H. Friedman, and Linda Weiser Friedman, “What’s So Funny about Arguing with God? A Case for Playful Argumentation from Jewish Literature,” *Argumentation: An International Journal on Reasoning* 28, no. 4 (2014): https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2179&context=bb_pubs.

37 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 135n2.

38 Ronald S. Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Fully Revised and Updated*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al., rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 29n19:1–3.

(daylight, he sees/understands, he addresses his visitors as ‘My Lord’) and Lot (darkness, lack of understanding, addresses his visitors as ‘my lords’).³⁹

Remember that the name Lot is related to a Hebrew root that signifies “wrap closely, tightly, enwrap, envelop”⁴⁰ and has the meanings of “covering; veil; covered; concealed; myrrh.”⁴¹ The name seems to be related to the character of Lot, who in contrast to Abraham, had no access to hidden, divine knowledge of who the visitors were and what God intended to do.

19:5. “Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them.” The context and phrasing strongly indicate the intention of the men to commit homosexual rape.⁴² However, there may be even more to the story. In his brilliant exegesis of Genesis 18–19, Brian Doyle argued that the key Hebrew term in the story (*pethakh*, “door”) “is a point of access, a place of encounter with the divine, associated with the Tent of Meeting and the Temple.”⁴³ The righteous are admitted through this door, whereas the wicked are excluded. Summarizing the contrasts between Abraham, Lot, and the men of the city, Doyle wrote,

Abraham recognizes immediately and gains access to the divine; Lot gets off to a poor start but the ‘veil’ cloaking his understanding is gradually lifted as he is brought into the presence of the divine, thus allowing him to express recognition thereof later in the text; the people of Sodom ultimately recognize the divine presence but their response echoes their character—a proud and greedy demand to have access to the manifest divine presence that would have been little more than ridiculous to the narrative’s earliest audience.⁴⁴

Though Doyle probably went too far in insisting that *yādaʿ* has no sexual connotation in the Sodom story, his arguments support the idea that *yādaʿ* may include the idea of spiritual ignorance in addition to its allusion to sexual misbehavior. In the wordplay on *yādaʿ* describing the initial spiritual ignorance of Lot and his later awakening to divine knowledge, ancient readers would have recognized resonances with the story of Adam and Eve.

39 Brian Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door’: The Function of *Pethach-Deleth* in Genesis 18–19,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 4 (2004): 434.

40 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 53.

41 Judson Cornwall and Stelman Smith, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 160.

42 Ronald S. Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Fully Revised and Updated*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al., rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 29n19:4–5.

43 Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door,’” 447.

44 Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door,’” 446.

19:9. “*And they were angry with him.*” The italicized words below were added or revised in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 19:9–12. Among other things, the modifications strengthen the interpretation that the threat posed by the men of Sodom was sexual in nature:

And they said unto him, Stand back. And they were angry with him.

And they said among themselves, This one man came in to sojourn among us, and he will needs now make himself to be a judge; now we will deal worse with him than with them.

Wherefore they said unto the man, We will have the men, and thy daughters also; and we will do with them as seemeth us good.

Now this was after the wickedness of Sodom.

19:8. “*Behold now, I have two daughters.*” The italicized words below were added or revised in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 19:13–15. Among other things, the modifications strengthen the description of Lot’s moral resistance to the men’s entreaties and reinforce the idea that the men are both “angels of God” and “holy men”:

And Lot said, Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, *plead with my brethren that I may not* bring them out unto you; and *ye shall not* do unto them as *seemeth* good in your eyes;

For God will not justify his servant in this thing; wherefore, let me plead with my brethren, this once only, that unto these men ye do nothing, that they may have peace in my house; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.

And they were angry with Lot and came near to break the door, but the angels of God, which were holy men, put forth their hand and pulled Lot into the house unto them, and shut the door.

19:11. “*blindness.*” Sarna translated this as due to a “blinding light,”⁴⁵ not to the usual kind of sightlessness. Compare 2 Kings 6:18.

Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw

Related verses

Genesis 19:1–11

⁴⁵ Sarna, *Genesis*, 136n11.

Genesis 19:12–29. The Destruction of Sodom

19:15. “And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot.” Genesis scholar Ronald S. Hendel described the scene:

Lot is ineffectual and rather comic as he fails to convince his prospective sons-in-law to flee (v. 14). He hesitates to leave himself, so that the angels seize him and his family and drag them out of the city (v. 16). He also resists the angels’ instructions to flee to the hills and pleads for a closer refuge, the little city of *Zoar* (which means “little,” vv. 20, 22). Though Lot is a buffoon, his wife is even worse off, for she cannot resist a peek at the cities’ destruction in spite of the angels’ command *not to look back*. For this tragic flaw, she becomes a part of the landscape of the Dead Sea region, *a pillar of salt*.⁴⁶

André Chouraqui read Lot’s request to go to Zoar differently than Hendel. He saw Lot as preferring a home in a more “civilized” place than in the appointed mountain retreat: “Lot is panic-stricken as he considers the austere solitude of the desert mountains near Sodom. In living the easy life, he’s gone soft and has lost the qualities of a true Hebrew.”⁴⁷

19:24. “*Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.*” The locations of the five cities of the plain that were destroyed have proven impossible to identify with any certainty. A new phase of excavation began in 2005 at an archaeological site in Jordan called Tall el-Hammam. The excavators have suggested the possible identification of the site with the biblical Sodom and found evidence that the city was destroyed cataclysmically by an airburst. However, outside researchers have raised legitimate questions about some aspects of these conclusions.⁴⁸

Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw

Related verses

Genesis 19:12–29

⁴⁶ Ronald S. Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Fully Revised and Updated*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al., rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 30n19:12–23.

⁴⁷ André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992), 198n19.

⁴⁸ Ted E. Bunch et al., “A Tunguska Sized Airburst Destroyed Tall el-Hammam a Middle Bronze Age City in the Jordan Valley near the Dead Sea,” *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 18632 (2021): 1–64, <https://nature.com/articles/s41598-021-97778-3.pdf>. Gordon Govier, “Sodom Destroyed by Meteor, Scientists Say. Biblical Archaeologists Not Convinced,” News and Reporting, Christianity Today, September 24, 2021, <https://christianitytoday.com/news/2021/september/sodom-meteor-biblical-archaeology-tall-el-hammam-airburst.html>.

Genesis 19:30–38. The Birth of Moab and Ammon

19:30. “*Lot went up out of Zoar, and dwelt in the mountain.*” Lot, out of fear, changed his mind about living in Zoar and retreated to the mountain as the angels had originally instructed.

19:32. “*Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him.*” Fearing they would have children no other way, Lot’s daughters planned to conceive by their father.

19:37–38. “*and the firstborn bare a son, . . . Moab. . . . And the younger, she also bare a son, . . . Ben-ammi.*” These sons are the traditional ancestors of the people of Moab and Ammon.

Nahum Sarna found it “difficult to understand the point of this episode since neither people plays any role in the patriarchal narrative.” For several reasons, he rejected the common argument that the story was created to connect hated rival peoples to a shameful story of origin. Though there is a “law prohibiting Israelite intermarriage with them,” the law “is conditioned on Israel’s wilderness experience and is not based on the incestuous origin of these people. Indeed, their right to live peaceably in their respective homelands is acknowledged as God-given in Deuteronomy 2:9, 19. It should also be remembered that King David is descended from a Moabite woman, a fact clearly attested in Ruth 4:17–22.”⁴⁹

Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw

Related verses

Genesis 19:30–38

Genesis 20:1–18. Sarah and Abimelech

Nahum Sarna summarized the situation as the chapter opens: “Following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham resumes his wanderings. Once again Sarah is taken away by force, this time to the harem of Abimelech, king of Gerar, who has been misled into believing that she is the patriarch’s sister.”⁵⁰

Abraham was a foreigner, unprotected and subject to the same kind of maltreatment that readers just witnessed in Sodom. Forewarned by his previous experience with Sarah in Egypt, “Abraham now takes the initiative in passing off Sarah as his sister. He does not ask her for permission to do so.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 139.

⁵⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 140.

⁵¹ Sarna, *Genesis*, 141.

The story here seems to be another lesson in contrasts: Lot, the half-hearted Hebrew vs. Abimelech, the God-fearing pagan; then, the morally and socially bankrupt Sodomites vs. Abimelech, the blameless monarch. Once again, the righteous Abraham played the role of a peace-seeking intercessor.

20:3–8. “God came to Abimelech in a dream by night.” God did not condemn Abimelech for having taken Sarah but warned him that she was another man’s wife. Abimelech replied by telling God that he had done so innocently, having been misled by Abraham. Note that the king relied on the same argument for God’s justice that Abraham used in defense of the righteous of Sodom: “Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?” (The idea being that if the king died, the nation, which is dependent on the king for its welfare, would also suffer.)⁵²

God acknowledged the king’s integrity and promised that if Abimelech restored Sarah to Abraham, he would be blessed through Abraham’s prayers on his behalf. Significantly, in verse 7, Abraham was called a “prophet” (*navi*)—the first time this word is used in the Bible.

In the last two verses of the story, we learn that Abimelech and his wives were barren throughout the episode but began to bear children after “Abraham prayed unto God” on their behalf.

Source

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Related verses

Genesis 20:1–18

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⁵² Sarna, *Genesis*, 142.