

Genesis 18 – Three Visitors

Brown Community Group November 18, 2018

Communications between God and Abraham are recorded at least four times before chapter 18. In chapter 15 the LORD appears in a vision but the other verses are vague. Some imply direct conversation but that cannot be said for sure.

Genesis 12:1,7 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you...." ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

Genesis 13:14-17 The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵ for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷ Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." ¹⁸ So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD.

Genesis 15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." (and following verses)

Genesis 17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. (and following verses)

God makes his next and possibly most dramatic appearance to Abraham in chapter 18:

The Three Visitors

18 And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³ and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵ while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."⁶ And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes."⁷ And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

While hospitality was expected in that day and age, Abraham's action was above what was expected. Normally, the visitor would approach the master of the house who would then react accordingly. Hospitality would then be offered on an appropriate level. To have a 90-year-old man run to the guests and then bow on the ground would only happen if 1) the master recognized the guests and 2) the guests were clearly superior.

⁹ They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent."¹⁰ The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'"¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son."¹⁵ But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

The verses speak for themselves but one interesting fact is that the LORD promised to return in a year and Sarah will have had her son. The Bible does not give an account of the return but only says the LORD did what he promised.

Now it gets complicated:

16 Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. 17 The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to 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 have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." 20 Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, 21 I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know."

Who was the LORD speaking to? Was Abraham hearing this entire conversation? Why does the LORD speak in first person and then not? In order to answer these questions we need to attempt to answer the following question:

Who were the three men?

Possible answers:

1. **They were just three men.** Most improbable.
2. **They were three angels.** Very possible. The very first verse following chapter 18 says:

Genesis 19:1 The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening...

So it follows that at least two of them were angels and one had stayed behind to talk with Abraham (vs. to follow).

3. **One was Jesus and two were angels.** This is the most accepted version. It fits the two angels travelling on to Sodom. The largest proof is in the text itself. Whenever the text says "LORD" in all caps, it refers to "YHWH" in the original manuscripts. Lower case would be a term of respect such as Abraham used in addressing the visitors. However the phrase "**The LORD appeared to him...**" in verse 1 is quite direct.

The appearance of God is known as "theophany" while the appearance of Jesus is a "Christophany." So which is it?

The third support for this view is in the first person seen in verse 17, "**What I am about to do**" and in verse 19, "**For I have chosen him.**" This is a contrast to the messages given by the angels who accredit God.

4. **This is the Trinity.** Not a common explanation but accepted by several knowledgeable scholars including Augustine, a 6th century theologian. It is not without logical support.
 - a. Abraham looks up to see three men but says "O Lord" and always speaks in the singular as well as all comments from the LORD, even though all actions are plural. This could be explained that Abraham knew whom to address.
 - b. Perhaps the best explanation is in verses 16 through 21 when a council is held between the LORD and others. It seems odd that God would ask advice of angels although a God on earth could speak with a God in Heaven.
 - c. The following chapter, in 19:24, refers to TWO LORDS:

Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven.

- d. This story is retold by the prophet Amos who also refers to two Gods in the destroying of Sodom and Gomorrah:

Amos 4:10-11 "...you did not return to me," declares the LORD. 11 "I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning; yet you did not return to me," declares the LORD.

So what is the answer? Who were they? We do know they were not merely men because of their prophesy and what they do in the next chapter, however, we can only speculate what exactly they were. However, it is clear that they are God or from God to deliver a message – in fact several – and possibly to visit with Abraham.

Takeaways:

1. God keeps his promises – even if the timing is long.
2. With God, all things are possible. Is anything too hard for the LORD?
3. God appreciates righteousness and justice but hates sin.
4. God cares for the feelings of human beings.

Abraham Intercedes for Sodom

²² So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" ²⁶ And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

²⁷ Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." ²⁹ Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." ³¹ He said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

Takeaways:

1. God listens to the requests of men.
2. God is patient.
3. God did not get angry when his judgement was questioned.

Questions

1. Who were the three men?
 2. Compare the actions of Abraham, who ran to the men and fell to the ground, and Sarah, who hid behind the curtain and laughed at the prophesy she longed for. When do we find ourselves being Abrahams and when do we find ourselves being Sarahs?
 3. How did Abraham attack the LORD too harshly (particularly in verse 25)? If possible, think how the LORD might have felt. What was his reaction?
 4. Why might God have wanted to Abraham to know about Sodom and Gomorrah?
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