

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE BOOK OF
GENESIS
Chapters 18-50

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G. YAHWEH'S VISIT TO SODOM (18:1-33)

1. ABRAHAM THE HOST (18:1-15)

- 1 *Yahweh appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the opening of the tent as the day grew hotter.*
- 2 *He looked up and spotted three men standing beside¹ him. Upon seeing them he rushed from the opening of the tent to meet them, and bowed to the ground.*
- 3 *He said: "My lord,² if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by your servant.*
- 4 *Let a bit of water be fetched so that you may bathe your feet and rest yourselves under the tree.³*
- 5 *I will get a morsel of bread so that you can be refreshed.⁴ After that you may go on — now that you have come by your servant." They answered: "Very well, do as you have spoken."*
- 6 *Abraham went quickly back to the tent to Sarah. "Hurry," he said, "three seahs⁵ of fine flour, knead and make cakes."*

1. Cf. Gen. 28:13 for the combination *nāṣaḅ 'al* to express again the appearance of a divine being to a mortal; also Amos 7:7; 9:1. For *nāṣaḅ b'* involving theophany, see Num. 22:23, 31; Ps. 82:1; 119:89; for the related verb *yāṣaḅ* (only Hithpael) in similar contexts see Exod. 34:5; Num. 22:22; 1 Sam. 3:10. See also *nāṣaḅ* (Niphal) in Exod. 33:21; 34:2; Deut. 29:9 (Eng. 10); and *yāṣaḅ* (Hithpael) in Exod. 14:13; 19:17; Deut. 31:14; Josh. 24:1; Ps. 2:2.

2. The MT here has ^א*dōnāy*, "Lord," implying thereby that from the beginning Abraham recognizes God as God. My translation "my lord" reads the text as ^א*dōnī*. It is unlikely that Abraham, had he known his visitor to be God himself, would have offered him water for his feet and food for his stomach. Such an early recognition by Abraham of God would also run against the idea of the gradual revelation of God's identity to Abraham in this narrative (vv. 10, 13, 17-22). See the lengthy note by Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 129. He harmonizes the sing. of v. 3 and the pls. of vv. 4-5 by suggesting that Abraham through some means identified one of the three as leader, and spoke to him in v. 3. Out of courtesy he included the other two in vv. 4ff. It is also possible to read the consonants as ^א*dōnāy*, "sirs," as if Abraham is addressing all three men, but to do so one would have to change "your eyes," "do not pass," and "your servant" in the rest of the verse from sgs. (as in the MT) to pls. (as is done by SP).

3. ^ע*ṣ* occurs approximately 320 times in the OT, the vast majority of which the LXX translates by *zylon*. On the few occasions that ^ע*ṣ* is translated by *dendron* (as here, v. 8; 23:17; Num. 13:21; and about 12 more times), what is meant is a big tree. See B. Paradise, "Food for Thought: The Septuagint Translation of Genesis 1:11-12," in *A Word in Season: Essays in Honour of William McKane*, ed. J. D. Martin and P. R. Davies, JSOTSup 42 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), p. 194.

4. The verb *sā'aḅ* means "to sustain (with food)" in Judg. 19:5, 8; 2 Sam. 24:15 ("time of sustenance, dinnertime"); 1 K. 13:7; Ps. 104:15.

5. The seah is a measure for flour and cereals (1 Sam. 25:18; 1 K. 18:32; 2 K.

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- 7 And Abraham ran to the flock, and took a tender and choice calf, gave it to the young man, and he quickly prepared it.
- 8 He then took curds and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and placed these before them. He was standing by them⁶ under the tree while they ate.
- 9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked. "In the tent," he replied.
- 10 One (of them) said: "At this time next year⁷ I will surely return to you, and by then⁸ Sarah your wife shall have a son." Sarah had been eavesdropping at the opening of the tent which was just behind him.
- 11 Abraham and Sarah were elderly, advanced in days;⁹ Sarah had reached menopause.¹⁰
- 12 Sarah laughed inwardly,¹¹ saying: "Now that I am worn out,¹² shall I

7:1, 16, 18); its exact size is uncertain. Suggestions range from about one-tenth of a bushel to one-third of a bushel (*IDB*, 4:834-35), or from about 7 to 12 dry quarts (*ISBE*, 4:1050-51).

6. Or, "he himself waited/was waiting on them."

7. The exact force of *kā'ēt hayyā* here and in v. 14 (and in 2 K. 4:16, 17) — "about the living time"(?) "at the time of life"(?) — is open to question, although all agree that it refers to some time in the near future. Is it a reference to the period of pregnancy, i.e., 9 months (see Skinner, *Genesis*, p. 301; see also A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908], 1:72, who gives "the time required for the embryo to be born"). Support for the translation "at this time next year" is found in the Akkadian expression *ana balaṭ*, lit., "to life," used in the sense "next year." See R. Yaron, "KA'ETH HAYYAH AND KOH LEHAY," *VT* 12 (1962) 500-501; O. Loretz, "*k't hyh* — 'wie jetzt ums Jahr' Gen 18,10," *Bib* 43 (1962) 75-78. If *hayyā* is an adjective, the absence of the article is strange. Accordingly, Yaron reads *hayyā* as a noun, not an attribute of *ēt*, "at this time, next year." G. R. Driver ("A Lost Colloquialism in the Old Testament," *JTS* 8 [1957] 272 n. 2) notes that the omission of the article before *hayyā*, whether adjective or participle, is correct, since it is not merely a descriptive epithet but has predictive force. He cites Gen. 37:2; Ps. 94:3; Jer. 16:16; Ezek. 34:13; Hag. 1:3. Cf. GKC, § 118u; BDB, p. 312a; O. Margalith, "More Samson Legends," *VT* 36 (1986) 397 n. 2; idem, "Some Aspects of Terms Denoting Time in the Bible" (Hebrew), *Beth Mikra* 89-90 (1982) 198-200. The translation "at this time next year" is supported by the parallel phrase in 17:21 *baššānā hā'aheret*, which clearly means "by this time next year."

8. On the use of *w'hinnēh* with temporal force, see D. J. McCarthy, "The Uses of *w'hinnēh* in Biblical Hebrew," *Bib* 61 (1980) 337.

9. For the phrase "goes/going in days" see Gen. 24:1; Josh. 13:1; 23:1; 1 K. 1:1. Days are seen as something through which one moves. Cf. S. J. DeVries, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 44 n. 60. The use of the participle indicates that the process of aging is not yet fully completed, suggesting that Sarah may be able yet to bear a child. But the next phrase in the verse ("had reached menopause") precludes that possibility.

10. Lit., "there ceased to be for Sarah the way of [as?] women." The problematical *ka-* in *ōrah kannāšim* is best explained as an illustration of construct *k* in Biblical Hebrew. See F. Andersen, "A Short Note on Construct *k* in Hebrew," *Bib* 50 (1969) 69.

11. For Heb. *tišḥaq sārā b'qirbāh* cf. *UT*, 75:1:12-13: 'il yzḥq bm lb wygmš bm kbd, "El laughed in his heart and exulted in his inward parts." See H. L. Ginsberg, "Ba'lu

- experience pleasure,¹³ even though¹⁴ my husband is old?"
- 13 Yahweh said to Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh, saying: 'Will I indeed¹⁵ really give birth even though I am old?'"
- 14 Is anything too demanding for Yahweh? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and for Sarah there will be a son."
- 15 Because she was afraid, Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh." But he said, "No,¹⁶ you laughed."

For a last time Abraham is given advance notice of Isaac's forthcoming birth. This happens while Yahweh and his entourage journey to Sodom to inspect the situation there. Abraham appears in two distinctly different roles within this chapter. In the first half he is the polite, deferential host who treats his visitors with the greatest respect. In the second half of the chapter he appears as the outspoken intercessor who pleads before Yahweh on behalf of Sodom. There is also a blatant contrast between how Abraham hosted his visitors (ch. 18) and how the Sodomites hosted the same delegation (ch. 19).

1 At the completion of an earlier revelation Yahweh had vanished from Abraham's sight (17:22). Now he reappears, this time in the heat of the day, as Abraham rests by his tent, located in a cluster of trees at Mamre.¹⁷

and his Brethren," *JPOS* 16 (1936) 140 n. 3. See also M. Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves? Narrative Modes of Representing Inner Speech in Early Biblical Fiction," *JBL* 111 (1992) 583-85.

12. The verb for "worn out," *bālā*, occurs again in Deut. 8:4 and 29:4 (Eng. 5) to refer to the clothing and shoes that did not wear out as the Israelites traversed the wilderness. The word is used only one more time (in adjectival form) in reference to a woman. Ezek. 23:43 mentions a woman who is grown old or jaded with adultery.

13. The word for "pleasure" (*'eḡnā*) has strong connotations of sensual and sexual pleasure. See BDB, p. 726b. It is also to be associated with the primeval garden, Eden (*'ēden*), "the garden of delight."

14. Lit., "and." Here and in v. 13 *waw* introduces a circumstantial clause of concession, which is best translated "even though, although." See GKC, § 141e.

15. H. L. Ginsberg (*The Legend of King Keret* [New Haven: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1946], pp. 42, 44) cites Gen. 18:13, 23, 24 and Amos 2:11b as instances of *'ap* indicating a question in the OT. In each of these cases, however, *'ap* is prepared by a *he*-interrogative, showing that *'ap* itself does not indicate a question. See BDB, p. 65a.

16. The expression *lō' kī*, to express denial, is found here and in 19:2; 42:12; 1 Sam. 8:19; 1 K. 3:22. Y. Hoffmann seems to go too far when he says that never in Biblical Hebrew is absolute denial expressed only by the use of *lō'* as an independent clause, but that with *lō'* is required an additional word ("Did Amos regard himself as a *nāḥī*?" *VT* 27 [1977] 209-10). Here we have an adversative element introducing the positive statement after the negative one: "No [your denial in v. 15a is untrue], but you did laugh." See Z. Zevit, "Expressing denial in Biblical Hebrew and in Mishnaic Hebrew, and in Amos," *VT* 29 (1979) 505-8, and p. 508 n. 6.

17. For other references to "terebinths/oaks" of Mamre cf. 13:18; 14:13. Both of

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The visit of Yahweh to Abraham in the hottest part of the day (cf. 1 Sam. 11:11; 2 Sam. 4:5) contrasts with his "visit" to Adam in another garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8).

2 To his surprise Abraham sees¹⁸ *three men* in front of him. Yet, for reasons unclear to us, he addresses only one of them in the following verse. Indeed, one of the interesting features of this section is the shift back and forth from singular to plural. Thus: v. 2, three men; v. 3, all singular; v. 4, second person plural; v. 5, again the second person plural; v. 9, plural; vv. 10-15, singular; v. 16, plural; vv. 17-21, singular; v. 22 begins with the plural but ends with the singular; vv. 22b-33, singular.¹⁹

A similar shift from plural to singular, or from angels to God, occurs in ch. 19. At Sodom Lot is met by two angels whom he addresses (v. 2) as "my lords" (*'ādōnay*).²⁰ A few verses later (v. 17) we read: "when they [the angels, Lot's *'ādōnay*] had brought them outside [Lot and his family], one of them said. . ."²¹ Then follows v. 18: "He [Lot] replied to them [the angels], 'Oh, no, my lord'" (sing., *'ādōnāy*)!

The same fluidity between God and angels is found in 21:17 (the angel is distinct from God) and 18 (the angel is identified with God). Judg. 6:7-24 provides the lengthiest illustration of this dynamic transfusion between angel

these verses designate this spot as Abraham's dwelling place. In 14:13 Abraham receives at Mamre a human visitor with chilling news (Lot has been captured). In 18:1ff. he receives divine visitors with happy news (Sarah will shortly have a child). 13:18 is the only text that refers to Mamre as a place of worship. 23:17 locates Mamre near the cave of Machpelah where the patriarchs and their wives were buried. The OT does not refer to Mamre outside Genesis. After citing postbiblical references to Mamre, R. de Vaux suggests that the silence in the rest of the OT about this site is due to the embarrassment of orthodox Yahwism over a syncretistic cult that flourished there (*Ancient Israel*, 2:292-93). Note that Jerome's rendering of Heb. *'ēlōn* ("terebinth, oak") by *convallis* (in 12:6; 13:18; 14:13; 18:1) and *vallis* (Deut. 11:30; Judg. 4:11), "plain, valley," is anticipated by Targ. *mysr*.

18. Lit., "he lifted up his eyes and saw. . ." On the idiom "to lift up one's eyes" see S. C. Reif, "A root to look up? A study of the Hebrew *nś' yn*," *Congress Volume: Salamanca, 1983*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 36 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 230-44. Reif notes (p. 243) that "there is some conscious intellectual decision associated with the element of sight in the phrase *nś' yn*. This may take the form of an understanding that arises out of the sight." He then refers to Gen. 18:2, 4 as illustrations of this point.

19. Singular	Plural
v. 1	v. 2
v. 3	vv. 4-9
vv. 10-15	v. 16
vv. 17-21	v. 22a
vv. 22b-33	

20. In contradistinction from Abraham's "my Lord" in 18:3 (*'ādōnāy*).

21. LXX, Vulg., and Pesh. read "they said." But MT has the sing. form, and I suggest for the sing. the translation "one (of them) said," as in 18:10.

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