

LS — Week 4 Response

There is so much one could comment on in Genesis 18; one hardly knows what to expect; everything is unexpected. From the beginning we are immediately surprised when Yahweh is equated with “three men”, using exactly the same turn as in Revelation 5 when John’s attention is directed to the Lion of Judah and he turns and sees “a lamb looking like it had been slain”. As in a dream we recognize a friend whose appearance is different from in real life, the narrator is somehow aware of the true identity of the three men. The material appearance of Yahweh, the human image, and the possible premonition of trinity are massive surprises at this stage.

Abraham “runs” to greet them like the prodigal son’s father and addresses them as “Adonai”, brilliantly disguising the alternative reading of Yahweh in a plausible context: “Adonai” literally means “my lords”.¹ The usage suggests an explanation of a retronym (a move Genesis frequently employs). His hospitality continues to surprise us. He insists that they stop before continuing and says that after they’ve eaten they “may go on”² — an insistence not in the style of our modern invitations, and later he will later detain Yahweh longer with his negotiations. He offers them a “morsel of bread” to “refresh their hearts” (not their bodies), but then surprises them by having a massive feast prepared with bread made from 16 kg of the finest flour, curds, milk, and a “good tender calf” — a feast to which he must have invited a great company, again foreshadowing the prodigal son. Sarah then surprises us by being reluctant to join them (despite having worked to prepare the table) and refusing the divine message, again like the older brother in the parable.

Despite the grand welcome, they never enter the tent but eat under a tree as in Eden.³ Also as in Eden, Yahweh’s confrontation of Sarah comes in the form of an ingenuous question: “Why did you laugh?” But she does not behave like Adam and Eve; we are disheartened to see that unlike they who admitted the guilt but blamed others, Sarah has moved onto the next stage, denial of the sin and gaslighting (which fails to work with Yahweh). Nevertheless, one more shock awaits when Sarah’s laughter (*tsakhaq*) becomes the name of the son of the covenant (*yitskhaq*): God has the last laugh.

All this before the section this week’s articles are interested in...!

I’ve always been impressed by Abraham’s question “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?”⁴ and seen it as licensing much in our relationship with God. If Abraham is willing to ask this, it means we can speak our minds to God; we can challenge God; we’re allowed to feel that his actions are unjust; we can try to push him to other actions; we can feel anger and indignation. In other words, reading this for the first time had much the same effect on me that reading the Psalms does when we see how shamelessly David speaks to God and expresses his feelings.

¹ Note that his use of “lord” doesn’t itself imply theophany; often in the OT people substitute “my lord” for “you” and “your servant” for “I” as a sign of courtesy.

² Incidentally, the word for “continue” literally means “cross” (in the sense of “traverse”), also the root of “Hebrew” and the crossing of the Jordan. Yahweh’s “crossing” through the land is an act characteristic of His people.

³ The name “Eden” means “pleasure” and is the same word Sarah uses in verse 12. “Shall I have Eden?” she asks. (Also note that the Hebrew does not include the word “this”; translations that say “this pleasure”, thereby implying the joy of having a son, bowdlerize the fact that she asks whether she will have *pleasure* at all anymore.)

⁴ Hebrew “judge” and “do right” are the same root in different inflections: “Won’t the just one do justice?” This makes “Far be it from you!” even stronger: it’s analytic, not synthetic. If God doesn’t do *mishpat*, he’s no *shophet*.

I was surprised, though, to see how amusingly wheedling Abraham is here. He uses transparent formulae like “Now that I’ve been so bold... don’t be angry” when bargaining harder and harder. Instead of saying “forty-five” he says “five less than fifty” so he can call it “destroying the city for the lack of five”. And while God keeps using the active “If *I* find thirty,” Abraham insists on the passive “If thirty *are found*.” There was a movie adaptation I saw as a kid where after this conversation Abraham and Sarah draw up a list of all the righteous people they know in Sodom, but they run out of people at seven or eight. It’s a funny image but it does capture the cheekiness in Abraham seemingly implying that one might disagree with God’s accounting. All this goes to our point, however: behaviour like this, quite human behaviour, does not actually offend God. When our heart is in the right place, he views our tactics like a professor of mine once lovingly described his children trying to sweet-talk him for candy: “They have their ways!” I agree with Brueggemann that this conversation is founded on Abraham discerning the theological truth that innocence should trump guilt (cf. James 2:13: “Mercy triumphs over judgement”), and I think it’s likely because of this selflessness that God is willing to patiently hear Abraham’s case.

There are many implications for teaching.

- As discussed in depth in the articles and in our conversation, we should give serious ear to our students’ complaints as God does to Abraham’s, and be prepared to make concessions when they align with what is best.⁵
- We should be judges who do right; that is, we should check our actions by our intentions and character and bring them into alignment. Too often we fall into the philosophical trap of “It’s right because God said it” and by analogy “We’ll do it my way because I’m a qualified, educated, experienced teacher.”⁶ Abraham challenges us to realize that God is a poor judge if he won’t judge rightly, and we’re poor teachers if we let position justify decision. This may seem like an obvious point, but hey, even God needed the reminder.
- On the flipside, we can also be Abraham and challenge our own superiors in this way.
- We should privilege innocence over guilt, the good over the bad, mercy over judgement. Some students quickly earn our scepticism through one or more mistakes and make us inclined to read their overall character in that light. We look for the spot somewhere on the garment. Instead, we should look for a point of light somewhere in the darkness. We should have Abraham’s faith and act as though the ten “percent” innocence is enough to define the whole person’s outcome. This, I think, pleases God all the more when we act this way despite (as we saw in Genesis) there not even being the ten Abraham hoped for.
- To return to the opening, we should be hospitable to all in case they be angels (Heb 13:2).

⁵As a mildly cynical aside, making concessions and then doing what you know is the best decision anyway (as God does here) can be an effective management strategy, since it lets students feel heard and that they’ve won a little...

⁶ I have a so-called “Master of Teaching” degree from OISE that I *know* is identical to a BEd in content, and yet I’m tempted to bring it up sometimes as if it added more weight to what I say and do.