

## **Genesis 18:1-20:18! Important things to See and Remember about God and us!**

Beginning with chapter 18 and extending through chapter 20, Moses sandwiches **three lengthy chapters** between two great chapters-chapters 17 & 21. Both of these chapters are focused upon **the birth of a son to Abraham & Sarah**. Recall, for a moment, that Moses in chapter 17 announced the **promise of the birth of a son** to Abraham and Sarah (C17). The subsequent fulfillment of that promise- **the birth of Isaac their son one year latter**- will be narrated in chapter 21. So why does Moses intentionally delay the narration of this momentous event- **the birth of Isaac**- so that its narration does not come immediately following chapter 17? What does Moses want us to see concerning these several events that happen in the period just prior to fulfillment of that particular promise of the birth of Isaac?

Beginning in chapter 18, Moses narrates for us- **seven stories**- before the main event concerning Isaac's birth. The challenge for each one of us as readers is: **to wrestle and waddle through these stories**, in order to grasp their individual meanings and how they might fit overall into the main message being told by Moses. Remember, Moses overarching purpose is to convey important truths **regarding God's involvement with Abraham and his family** and through these stories convey important insights regarding **God himself!** Let us take a closer look at these three chapters and see what we can discover about God and ourselves!

**I. Overview of the Seven Stories!** Let us begin our investigation by first forming an **overview** of the seven stories making up these intervening chapters between chapter 17 & 21. Having an overview should help us each to grasp what is going on in each story, what to look for, and how each story contributes to the **main message being told**. Here is my assessment concerning how I see these three chapters divide into seven stories and what I believe is **the main thing** to grasp from each story.

**First story:** The LORD appears to Abraham for the 6<sup>th</sup> time. The LORD promises Abraham for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time that Sarah would give birth to their own son. (Gn. 18:1-15)

**Second story:** The LORD's discussion with his two travelling companions.<sup>1</sup> The story **foreshadows what the LORD is thinking** concerning his impending visit to Sodom and what he- the Lord -was planning on doing by this visit. (Gn. 18:16-21)

**Third story:** Upon hearing of the LORD's intention to "sweep away" Sodom, *Abraham is moved to intercede on Sodom's behalf to save her and the other cities as well.* (Gn.18:22-33).

**Fourth story:** The LORD rescues Lot from a violent local mob. (Gn. 19:1-11) who are furious with Lot and Lot's attempt to protect the two strangers whom Lot graciously offered food and the lodging at his home.

**Fifth story:** The LORD rescues Lot and his family from the ensuing destruction of Sodom and other nearby cities. (Gn.19: 12-29)

**Sixth story:** Concluding final events & comments regarding Lot and his family. (Gn.

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<sup>1</sup> The NIV Bible entitles the first 15 verses of this chapter: **The three visitors**. The details embedded in the story discloses that these three men are not ordinary men, but supernatural visitors

19:30-38)

**Seventh story:** The final & climatic episode of these seven stories involves the story of Abraham and Sarah sojourning in Gerar before Isaac is born. (Gn. 20:1-18) This story involves a potentially threatening incident in Sarah & Abraham's life, along with the tale of God's rescue of Sarah. This is the climatic story comprising the three chapters that are sandwiched between the two chapters focused upon the birth of Isaac. Chapter 20 provides a thoughtful story to ponder regarding Abraham's faith (how he sees and believes in the LORD). This incident surprisingly provides an incredible conclusion to these seven intertwined stories and leaves for us a lasting impression to ponder as well!

We need to ponder and keep this overview in our minds, for it will help us in determining the overall message and enable us to take hold of several takeaways that we are meant to see from this unit. For I believe that these seven stories first of all are meant to enhance **how we see and picture our God**. Secondly, these seven stories also contribute to enhancing our understanding of the unfolding of God's promises to Abraham & Sarah. Now, let us focus our attention upon each of these seven stories, taking note of interesting and important details and how they each contribute to the message being told concerning Abraham & Sarah.

## II. A careful and closer look at these seven stories:

**A. The first story:** (C 18:1-15) The first story that we will look at is a tale about three visitors who pay an unexpected visit to Abraham! It is a story celebrating Abraham & Sarah's hospitality. The first four verses provide just the right amount of details to drag us into this event. What should the alert reader see? Well, let's start with verse one! "*And the LORD appeared to him (Abraham) by the oaks of Mamre (Hebron) as he (Abraham) sat at the door of the tent in the heat of the day.*" This is the narrator's introduction to the story as seen from the narrator's point of view. This is the writer's way of providing a transition from the previous chapter, as well as providing some details for us concerning the setting of the story.

The writer wants us to see several things. 1) Abraham is at his tent. Abraham is sitting and tired. Perhaps he is dozing! It is the middle of the day the time of day when the sun is very hot. 2) Implicitly, we can infer from what is said that this event takes place only a short time after the 5<sup>th</sup> appearance to Abraham which occurred when Abe was 99 years old.<sup>2</sup> 3) My interpretation of this event is the following: Abraham wakes up from his dozing and realizes that he has been caught off guard by the appearance of three visitors.<sup>3</sup> This makes him embarrassed! He wants to make amends by quickly serving his "unknown guests. A clue to the mystery of the identity of these visitors is signaled from the very beginning verse as "the LORD appeared to him."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham was 99 years old when the LORD appeared to him. (Gen. 17:1) Abraham was explicitly said to be 100 years old when Isaac was born. (Gen. 21. 5)

<sup>3</sup> There is a strong emphasis on Abraham running and quickly doing things to make his guests feel comfortable.

<sup>4</sup> This is the third appearance of the LORD to Abraham so far.

Beginning with verse three, the narrator tells the story of how Abraham graciously provided water and an elaborate meal for these three unknown visitors so that they could be refreshed and then continue on their journey. Without delay these three visitors accept his offer. The story then describes how Abraham quickly rushed to take care of his guests “watching them eat” while he was “*standing by them under a tree watching them eat.*” (vs. 8)

The final seven verses (vs. 9-15) then narrate a surprising twist and an end to the story. Rather than the expected statement that after the end of the meal the three men set off and continued on their journey, the writer focuses upon something else. (vs.16) The narrator continues telling his story, this time his story focuses upon how the three men had a conversation with Abraham. Let us take a closer look now at this conversation.

The careful reader should see the following: 1) One of the three visitors knows that Abraham wife name is **Sarah not Sarai**. 2) This visitor knows not only her name, but also promises- that this old woman who is well past child bearing age woman- that she will have a son in a year. (Twice vs.10 and vs. 14 the LORD tells Abraham this fact. 3) This visitor knows that Sarah is in the tent and **that Sarah laughed!** 4) This is exactly the same response that Abraham had to the news of Isaac’s anticipated birth.<sup>5</sup>

How did this visitor know this? The same way that the LORD knows about Sarah’s name! Why did both Sarah and Abraham laugh? They both laughed because the announcement of the birth of son to them is considered so impossible to happen to a couple **in their condition at such an advanced age**.<sup>6</sup> So this announcement for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time - this monumental disclosure - is the reason for both Sarah and Abraham laughing! They laugh because it is so ridiculous to think that such an event-the birth of a son to them is possible! This sets the stage for the 2<sup>nd</sup> story.

**B. The second story:** The LORD discloses his intention to visit to Sodom. (vs.16-21). This second story is closely tied to the events and the main theme of the first story. It involves God’s revelation to Abraham of something important that apart from the LORD’s disclosure to Abraham, it would **remain unknown** to Abraham. This story is focused around a conversation that the three men are having with each other as they set upon their journey<sup>7</sup> to Sodom. Presumably, the three men’s conversation together concerns discussing the nature of their impending visit to Sodom<sup>8</sup>-the city that Lot had lived for the past 15 years.

Specifically, the writer signals the intent of this visit from the beginning and ending of this second story. In verse 17, the writer enables us to overhear a key part of the conversation happening between the three men. “*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...?*” This rhetorical question focuses upon one of two main ideas of this second story! **God will not hide the purpose** of their visit to Sodom. The first two verses and the last two verses of this short unit of six verses dwell upon this idea of the LORD disclosing his fact

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<sup>5</sup> Gen. 17:15-16

<sup>6</sup> Remember what was said earlier concerning Sarah “She was barren unable to have children.” (Gen.11:30

<sup>7</sup> Gen 18:16 “then the men set out from there ... and Lot went with them.” To where? Sodom. See vs.16, 22

<sup>8</sup> Sodom is often mentioned in conjunction with Gomorrah and other nearby cities. Gen. 13:12, Gen. 14.

finding mission to Abraham! Four out of six verses of this 2<sup>nd</sup> story focuses upon *the LORD revealing the mission of these three* visitors to Sodom to Abraham. The LORD and his two emissaries are going to get a closer look in order to determine **the right response to this great outcry** coming from Sodom. The following story and the gap existing between the two stories, leads me to believe that Abraham has been told by God of the threatening judgment that looms over Sodom. This is a main point of this story, but not the only point.

Sandwiched between the disclosure of His actions to Abraham are two verses focused upon declaring why God has disclosed his plans regarding the future fate of Sodom to Abraham. (vs.18-19). I believe that a careful examination and pondering of these two verses will demonstrate that Abraham was given access to this confidential information regarding Sodom before it happened, **because he and his offspring are favored by God**. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of two main points that are made by this second story.

Briefly, here is my justification of this point. The stories involving Abraham and Sarah so far have maintained that Abraham & Sarah's greatest blessing is that God has chosen them to be in a covenant with Him! So far we have also learned from the stories that we have read that to be in a covenantal relationship with the LORD of heaven and earth **has its privileges**. Knowing what sometimes happens in the future is one of them. Why Abraham? Simply stated: **The LORD chose Abraham!** This leads all of us to ask the related questions: The LORD chose Abraham for what?

Two key essential<sup>9</sup> reasons are highlighted that we should see for why the LORD disclosed what he was going to do concerning Sodom, but more importantly why Abraham should be granted this knowledge ahead of time. 1) God promised to bless him so that in turn through Abraham **"all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him."**(vs. 18) 2) God chose Abraham and commanded Abraham to make known and teach the way of the LORD and do what is right" to his children and his family. By implication: Abraham's children would pass on this truth about God to their family and household as well.

**C. The third story: Abraham rightly responds to God's revelation. God listens!** (Gn. 18:22-33). This third story is closely related to the previous story(s). A careful reading of this story will demonstrate that the story is centered upon Abraham's passionate intercession with God on Sodom's behalf. This third story presupposes the awareness that Abraham has concerning Sodom. Abraham understands the intent of the LORD' upcoming visit to Sodom- **the threatened destruction of that city!** The majority of the 12 verses of this story focuses upon Abraham's passionate pleading to God to spare the city, if only a few people in the city are **following the way of the LORD and doing what is right**. The implicit point of the story is that God who is righteous will do what is right and not destroy the city as long as there are righteous people living in that city.

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<sup>9</sup> Two key issues are stated, but this is not meant to be a comprehensive statement.

**D. The fourth story: The LORD's two emissaries rescue Lot from an angry mob.** (Gn. 19:1-11) This is the 4<sup>th</sup> of seven stories in this subunit of seven stories primarily focused upon Abraham and his family. Yet, the three upcoming stories that are told in chapter 19; however, are primarily focused upon Lot and his family! Why? I am not sure! It is interesting to note that two of the stories demonstrate that God **cared for and remembered Lot and his family** by rescuing them from two lethal threats to their well being. Let us take a closer look at the first story that is narrated for us in the first eleven verses of a fairly long chapter of 38 verses. Even though the ESV version entitles this section of eleven verses as "God rescues Lot", the LORD seems to have disappeared from the scene at the conclusion of his intense negotiation with Abraham at the ending verse of the previous chapter. "And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham." **Where did He go?**

This is not a dumb question for 4<sup>th</sup> story revolves around the visit of two of the men who had visited Abraham that very same day that they are now visiting Lot in Sodom. But, **where is the LORD?** He is absent, but he is present! For it is the LORD who sends his two emissaries to investigate what is going on in Sodom. These two men will then carry out his orders depending upon their investigation!

Instead of a report of concerning their anticipated investigation, we get a report of a disturbing violent event that happened to these two strangers who were graciously and hospitably being taken care of by Lot and his family after dinner. Briefly and suddenly the narrator reports the lead precipitating event of the entire chapter. A mob of young and old men surround Lot's house. This crowd of men then attempt to abduct and do violence (rape) the two visitors who are staying with Lot and his family. Details of what they said and their actions reveal **the violent evil intentions of the mob**.

This lead story involving Lot ends with two short verses forcefully detailing how these two visitors who had come "under the shelter of (protection) of Lot-instead, **save Lot himself**". So these men instead of being protected by Lot, intervene and protect Lot from a certain danger. They (the two visitors) reach out and pull Lot to safety from the angry mob. These two men who are identified from verse one as angels then strike these men who are seeking to harm and do violence against Lot! The two angels "strike with blindness." the men of Sodom who were forcefully trying to break down the door and are left "groping for the door" wondering perhaps what had just hit them! This immediately sets up and transitions the reader for the 5<sup>th</sup> story. This is the story of how the LORD through his two angels spare Lot and his family from the imminent destruction of Sodom and the surrounding cities of the plain.

**E. The fifth story: The LORD rescues Lot! He destroys Sodom!** (Gn.19:12-29). This is the sixth out of seven stories concerning Abraham and Sarah in the interim period before Isaac's birth. The writer lingers a bit upon describing **the destruction of Sodom**. This is second of two stories highlighting the theme of God rescuing Lot and his family. This rescue is given almost twice the amount of verses as the account of God's first rescue of Lot. The majority of the account and the dominant impression to be gained from this story is the

**complete destruction of Sodom** and surrounding cities of the valley. Four times the narrator talks about the destroying Sodom.<sup>10</sup> Three times the writer refers to “escaping from the disaster that is about to sweep away the city.”<sup>11</sup> The writer maintains this dominant impression of destruction by additionally referring to this disaster as “*overthrowing the city*”<sup>12</sup>

This is the dominant impression to be gained from the story. God does destroy it. Yet, surprisingly there is only the briefest factual account of its destruction. There are no gory details. Indeed, Lot and his family are commanded-not to look back and see for themselves what exactly happened. What is important for us to see is that God kept his promise and spared Lot and his family. And two minor but important points also must be noticed concerning this story. 1) First, Lot does not take God seriously! He lingers! He and his family barely escape from this disaster. 2).How about Abraham! What was Abraham thinking when this destruction happens? The writer gives us only the tiny tantalizing statement: “*And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD (and interceded with the LORD). And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley and behold*<sup>13</sup>*the smoke of the land (coming from the cities as well) went up like the smoke of a furnace.*”(Gen. 19: 27-28)

**F. The Sixth Story: Concluding story of Lot & his family.** (Gn. 19: 30-38) This concludes the account concerning Lot and his family. It is a strange and unsettling story involving Lot’s daughters. Of all the stories that could have been told why this story? I do not know. Yet, it may have be part of Moses overall plan to briefly mention the connection between two of Israel neighboring countries Moab and the Ammonites. Moses explicitly said to the people of Israel whom he was leading to the land promised to them: “not to harass the Moabites for their land was promised to them who are described as being “descendants of Lot”. Deut. 2:9

**G. The Seventh Story: Abraham & Sarah’s sojourn in Gerar.** This is the final event narrated for us in the period before Isaac was born. (Gen. 20: 1-18) The previous story regarding Lot’s daughters is a strange and bewildering story. This seventh and final story is both a strange **and a fascinating climatic story!** I think it perfectly concludes the narration of key events involving Abraham and Sarah. This story has importance for us as readers because of its position occupying the final episode of a series of seven stories. Of all the things that happened to A & E in this period before the climatic event of the birth of Isaac, Moses chooses this story and the lesson(s) that flow from this story! Moses wanted to impress upon God’s people something important that he wanted us to see and remember. So what is so important to see this story?

To most readers, including myself, this story while interesting only seems to highlight Abraham own self induced failure to learn a lesson that he should have learned years earlier.

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<sup>10</sup> Gen. 19: 12, 13 (twice), 29

<sup>11</sup> Gen 19:15,17

<sup>12</sup> Gen. 19:21, 25, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Word behold is often used to signal to the reader “hey pay attention this is important.”

Abraham tries once again to protect himself by pretending once again that Sarah was his sister. Once again this strategy backfires! God once again intervenes to save Sarah and Abraham. God does not delay this time as he did earlier. The LORD immediately steps into the story by way of a dream to Abimelech in order to save Sarah! This is a good story!

Yet, is there more to learn from that story than simply the lesson that God once again intervened and saved Abraham from his own stupidity and from Abraham's lack of depending upon the LORD to protect them? Yes there is! What could it be? Why was Abraham so stupid to try this ploy or ruse a second time? Answer: It may be true that Abraham failed this time around, because he did not remember to trust God! But, why did Abraham fail this time to trust the LORD to protect them? A careful look at this story will show that Abraham's failure at this point might be due to something else, besides his failure to trust God to protect him! What could that be?

First of all let me break this chapter down even further in order for us to be better able to see what is going on by the structure of the story. The story is comprised of only 18 verses! It is made up of four unequal sections. First section: (v.1-2) This first section introduces us to the action of the story extremely quickly. Abraham & Sarah sojourn at the very southern end of the land of Canaan-Gerar ruled by Abimelech. Abraham tells Sarah: "*tell the people in Gerar that you are my sister.*" Abimelech the king of Gerer sees and then takes Sarah to be his wife and to have sexual relations with her because she is his wife.

Second section :( v.3-7) God wastes no time! God immediately confronts Abimelech in a dream that he has done something very wrong by taking Sarah to be his wife! Abimelech is as good as dead! Abimelech responds in the same dream protesting his innocence to God! God agrees with Abimelech, but warns him to return Sarah to Abraham –her real husband- otherwise Abimelech is a dead man.

Third section: (v. 8-13) This section is the real climax to the story! This 3<sup>rd</sup> section is made up of only six short verses. Whereas the previous section focused upon God's conversation to Abimelech, this section focuses upon Abimelech confronting Abraham of the wrong that Abraham perpetrated against him and his people by saying that Sarah was his sister! How do we know this! The narrator draws attention to this issue three times in this short section showing us that this is his main concern! "Abimelech after summoning Abraham to confront him on this issue said: "*What have you done to us?* And similarly "*And how have I sinned against you* (meaning what have I done to you) *that you have brought on me and my kingdom this great sin* (by your deception). Finally, "***What did you see that you did this thing?***" Three times the same question is asked but in different ways by Abimelech who is trying to get Abraham to admit **that Abraham did something wrong** by perpetrating the impression that Sarah was his sister.

Yet, Moses the narrator has something else for us to see! Abimelech in addition to trying to get Abraham to admit that claiming Sarah as his sister was wrong, Abimelech relentlessly presses Abraham to do something more! Abimelech wants to know Abraham's

mindset or thinking that would have lead him to do something so wrong! ***“What did you see that you did this thing?”*** This is the critical question that the text raises for us to consider! It is brilliantly brought to our attention by Abimelech! It is the main critical issue confronting anyone reading this story! Why did Abraham project this blatant falsehood upon Abimelech and his people? The average reader is easily convinced that Abimelech has done what is right, not Abraham! Both questions by Abimelech are intended to get Abraham to confess the reason for Abraham’s deliberate deception. Abraham’s answer is a major clue to discovering Abraham’s motivation for his deceptive action. But, Abraham’s answer is only a partial answer to discovering the real basis for his ploy. Let us quickly take a closer look and for ourselves conclude what should be seen from this story!

What was Abraham thinking or seeing? The narrator leaves us little doubt on answering this critical question for Abraham in the very next verse responds to Abimelech’s question saying: ***“I did it (the deception) because I thought there is no fear of God in this place and they will kill me because of my wife.” (v.11)***

This is clearly what Abraham was thinking! Right? No! This is not the main motive behind the actions that made Abraham commit himself to a plan that had backfired once before when Abraham & Sarah sojourned in Egypt. Remember the lesson that Abraham should have learned earlier in Egypt! Abraham should have learned to trust God to protect Sarah and himself, rather than revert to a deception. So why then did Abraham commit this same error twice? The writer gives us a clue! **The fear of God!**

Abraham should have already had a powerful awareness of God being El Shaddai! Abraham had plenty of time and experience to know that –the LORD- who had revealed himself as El Shaddai was all knowing, all powerful, and **fully able to make things happen.** The surprising twist in this story is not that Abimelech and his people did not fear God. Abimelech did! Abraham ironically did not fear God as much as he should have. This was missing in his mindset. This is the main thing missing in Abraham’s thinking. This is what Abraham was failing to see at this moment when he was sojourning with Sarah in Gerar. For it is my contention that Moses wanted us to see that this understanding of God as El Shaddai – the awesome all powerful God that Abraham and Sarah believed in was fully able to protect and provide for them and their offspring as they continued their journey in the land of Canaan. This is what we should daily remember too!