

# Scripture Study



## What Does it Mean to Know God?: Abraham at Mamre, Lot at Sodom, and Abimelech at Gerar

By [Jeffrey M. Bradshaw](#) · February 16, 2022

*Cover image: J. James Tissot, 1836-1902: Abraham and the Three Angels, ca. 1896–1902.*

*This article is adapted from the detailed verse-by-verse commentary on Genesis 18–20 available at the [Interpreter Foundation website](https://interpreterfoundation.org/category/come-follow-me/old-testament-2022/old-testament-commentary/). (See also <https://interpreterfoundation.org/category/come-follow-me/old-testament-2022/old-testament-commentary/> ). Readers may also consult the commentary for the Book of Moses and Genesis at [Bible Central](#) or within the [ScripturePlus app](#). See also “[Abraham’s](#)*

*[Hebron: Then and Now, part 5: Mamre](#)*.” Among other things, this video features Hugh Nibley’s moving account of Abraham’s encounter with the three messengers in *Genesis 18*.

In Genesis 18, we encounter the story of Abraham’s welcome of the three visitors who announced the arrival of Abraham and Sarah’s long-awaited son, Isaac. Then, in chapter 19, the same messengers go to Sodom to meet with Lot’s family and, ultimately, to destroy the city. Finally, in chapter 20, we read how Abimelech become the second king in Genesis who aspired to marry Sarah.

At first blush, these three stories seem to have little to do with each other. But when we scratch beneath the surface, it becomes clear that there is a common theme that ties them together—and prepares us for the high point in the story of Abraham: the near sacrifice of His beloved son Isaac in Genesis 22–23. What these stories exemplify is what it means to know God in the pointed sense that Jesus described when He taught the central truth of scripture: “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). After a brief exploration of the rich and powerful meanings of “to know” in Hebrew, we will examine how they apply in Genesis 18–20.

## What Does “Know” Mean in the Bible?

In the Hebrew Bible, the verb *yāda‘* (“to know”) and the related noun *da‘at* (“knowledge”) combine two ancient concepts: knowing something with the mind or heart and knowing something physically.<sup>[i]</sup> When used to talk about people, the terms imply a relationship. Specifically, when God or a marriage partner is involved, they usually imply a covenant relationship.<sup>[ii]</sup> If I have calculated 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.<sup>[iii]</sup>

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 the name of this tree as the “tree of penetration of good and evil.”<sup>[iv]</sup> The English word *penetration* is apt 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”<sup>[v]</sup>) but also *physically* penetrated the sacred, symbolic boundary of the garden where the tree was planted in order to pluck its fruit.<sup>[vi]</sup>

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). Going further, 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 also those who keep their covenants with God strive to know and become one with Him (John 17:3, 20–23; 1 Corinthians 6:17).

In Jesus’ account of the final judgment, He used similar symbolism to describe the tragedy of those who, by unfaithfulness to their covenants, disqualified themselves from entering into the presence of God (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:31). To those individuals, He said, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:21–23).<sup>[vii]</sup> In this teaching, we are meant to understand that the Lord knows in a covenant sense only those individuals who have received and kept His covenants.<sup>[viii]</sup> 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.”[\[ix\]](#)

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

Within the context of this covenant understanding of *yāda’*, 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.’”[\[xi\]](#) As we see in the events of Genesis 19, Lot’s “veiling” results, among other things, in his being cut off from divine knowledge.[\[xii\]](#) Going further, it also suggests that at the last day, unlike Abraham, Lot risks not being received into the presence of the Lord.[\[xiii\]](#)

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 failed to fully honor the covenant he had been privileged to receive. For, despite Abimelech’s grievous offense in kidnapping Sarah, God said that He *knew* that the king acted innocently (Genesis 20:6). For this reason—like Abraham and in contrast to Lot—Abimelech was blessed by Abraham.

Paul Gustave Doré, 1832-1883: *Abraham Entertains Three Strangers*, 1866.[\[xiv\]](#)

## Abraham's Hospitality to Strangers

The account of Abraham opens with a simple statement: “And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day” (Genesis 18:1). Although we are given little detail here, rabbinic 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.[\[xv\]](#) As is the usual pattern, Abraham and Sarah's great blessing—the promise of Isaac's birth—came on the heels of yet another trial of his hospitality, as vividly described in Jewish tradition:

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 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.[\[xvi\]](#)

Taken from his groundbreaking illustrated Bible,[\[xvii\]](#) Paul Gustave Doré’s woodcut above shows Abraham at this very moment, just as he began to set off alone for the desert and was dramatically brought to his knees by this sudden encounter with the three divine messengers.

“A very moving story,” said Hugh Nibley.[\[xviii\]](#)

When Hugh Nibley was an old man, he often admitted how moved he was by the story of Abraham, saying: “He seemed to be generous to the point of lacking common sense.”[\[xix\]](#) 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?’[\[xx\]](#) The scene, as . . . André Parrot . . . remarks, ‘is as magnificent as it is strange.’”[\[xxi\]](#)

Aert de Gelder, 1645–1727: *Abraham and the Angels*, ca. 1680–1685. [\[xxii\]](#)

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*. [\[xxiii\]](#) Those so privileged are invited to emulate the enumerated 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 Avraham, for it was built in his merit.” [\[xxiv\]](#)

Who were the “three men” that appeared to Abraham (Genesis 18:2)? Doctrine and Covenants 29:42–43 tells us that since the time of Adam and Eve, God has sent forth “angels to declare ... repentance and redemption, through faith on the name of mine Only



Begotten Son.” Ancient texts also speak of three messengers who appeared to warn, protect, and instruct Adam and Eve and of their efforts being resented and opposed by Satan.[\[xxv\]](#) 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.[\[xxvi\]](#) Similar accounts of divine instruction about the coming of the Savior are also given concerning other prominent Old Testament figures, including Abraham who, we are told, “looked forth and saw the days of the Son of Man, and was glad” (JST Genesis 15:12; compare John 8:56). With reference the messengers who are often charged to bring such tidings, 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. [\[xxvii\]](#)

Although some Jewish traditions imply that Abraham recognized his visitors immediately, Genesis seems to indicate otherwise. Textual details in the Bible suggest that Abraham was not giving the three men special treatment because he knew they were divinely sent. Rather, he extended to these three unique visitors the same lavish bounty that he would have to any stranger.

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.[\[xxviii\]](#)

J. James Tissot, 1836-1902: *Sarah*, ca. 1896–  
1902.[\[xxix\]](#)

Ancient readers would have immediately recognized that when “Sarah laughed within herself” (Genesis 18:12), the Hebrew verb used, *yitshaq*, is identical to the Hebrew form of the name Isaac that was introduced in Genesis 17:19.[\[xxx\]](#) In chapter 17, Abraham had laughed at the idea that Sarah would bear a son. Now Sarah laughs *with* him—and their doubtful laughter will be ultimately transformed to become the laughter of rejoicing. Additional references to laughter occur four times in the span of a few verses (verses 9, 12,

13, 15).

The messenger responds to Sarah’s skeptical laughter with a question, “Is any thing too hard for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14). 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 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.”[\[xxxii\]](#)

Though Abraham and Sarah had been preparing for the arrival of Isaac for decades, it was not until that moment 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.”[\[xxxiii\]](#)

Abraham’s Entreaties for Sodom.[\[xxxiii\]](#)

## Abraham Insists on Mercy for the Righteous of Sodom

Before continuing the story, scripture gives us the meaningful detail that Abraham walked “along with [the three messengers] to see them off” (Genesis 18:16). Through the inclusion of this detail, readers are meant to notice 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.

How is it that God trusts Abraham enough to tell him what He is about to do? Because, said the Lord, Abraham has kept his covenants. Because, said God, returning to the theme of covenant knowledge, “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” (Genesis 18:19).

Perceptively, Robert Alter paraphrased the literal Hebrew phrase “For I *know* him” to read “For I have *embraced* him.”<sup>[xxxiv]</sup> Importantly, the Hebrew terms for “justice” (*tsedeq*, “righteousness”) and “judgment” (*mishpat*, “justice”), which the Lord used to describe Abraham and his household, were repeated by Abraham himself when he pled 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.”<sup>[xxxv]</sup> God 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 additional test with flying colors.

Genesis 18:20 tells us that the sins of Sodom were “very grievous.” What were those sins?

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.”[\[xxxvi\]](#)

Modern readers will also notice another obvious omission besides idolatry in the list above, namely, acts of homosexual behavior between men. Of course, Genesis 19 does explicitly suggest that the men of the city of Sodom intended to engage in homosexual acts with Lot’s guests, an act specifically condemned in Leviticus 18:22 and 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.[\[xxxvii\]](#)

The charity and kindness shown by Abraham to every stranger is manifest in his dialogue with the Lord over the fate of Sodom, as we read in Ronald S. Hendel’s apt description:

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). 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.[\[xxxviii\]](#)

## Lot's Lackluster Welcome and Spiritual Blindness

We are told in the opening verse of Genesis 19 that when Lot saw the messengers at the gate of Sodom, “he rose to meet them.” The ancient reader would have found it significant that Lot is no longer portrayed as a pastoral outsider like Abraham but instead has become a city dweller. “Happily, although he has changed his style of life, he [apparently still preserves [something of] the virtue of hospitality.”[\[xxxix\]](#)

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.”[\[xl\]](#)

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 (daylight, he sees/understands, he addresses his visitors as ‘My Lord’) and Lot (darkness, lack of understanding, addresses his visitors as ‘my lords’).”[\[xli\]](#)

Remember that the name Lot is related to a Hebrew root that signifies “wrap closely, tightly, enwrap, envelop”[\[xlii\]](#) and has the meanings of “covering; veil; covered; concealed;

myrrh.”[\[xliii\]](#) 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.

J. James Tissot, 1836-1902: *The Sodomites*, ca. 1896–  
1902.[\[xliv\]](#)

Soon the men of Sodom entered Lot’s courtyard. They asked, “Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may *know* them” (Genesis 19:5, emphasis added). The context and phrasing including the word “know” strongly indicate the



crude intention of the men to commit homosexual rape.<sup>[xlv]</sup> However, it seems there is 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.”<sup>[xlvi]</sup> 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.<sup>[xlvii]</sup>

Though Doyle probably went too far in insisting that *yāda‘* has no sexual connotation in the Sodom story, his arguments do support the idea that *yāda‘* in this context includes the idea of spiritual ignorance in addition to its allusion to sexual misbehavior. In the wordplay on *yāda‘* 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.

Among other things, the italicized modifications in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 19:9–12 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.*

In contrast to the King James Translation of Genesis 19:13–15, the Joseph Smith Translation depicts Lot’s moral resistance to the men’s entreaties—contradicting the idea that he intended to abandon his daughters to the depraved desires of the assembled men. [\[xlvi\]](#) The men were struck with “blindness.” This was not the usual kind of sightlessness, but rather a divinely produced phenomenon that might better be translated as a “blinding light.” [\[xlix\]](#)

Anat Eshed Goldberg: *Salt Sculpture with the Dead*  
*Sea in the background.*[\[1\]](#)

## **Lot's Reluctant Departure from Sodom and the Tragic Consequences**

Despite the urgency of the messenger's warning and the impressive show of divine power in driving away the hostile crowd, Lot and his family were slow to act and had to be "hastened" by the angels the next morning (Genesis 19:15). Ronald S. Hendel described the scene as follows:

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*.[\[ii\]](#)

The locations of the five cities of the plain upon which the Lord "rained ... brimstone and fire ... out of heaven" (Genesis 19:24) 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 of the site have suggested the possible identification of the site with the biblical Sodom and see evidence that the city was destroyed cataclysmically by an airburst. However, outside researchers have raised legitimate questions about some aspects of these conclusions.[\[iii\]](#)

André Chouraqui sees Lot's initial request of the angels to go to Zoar as his 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."[\[iii\]](#) Even after the angels granted his wish to go to Zoar, Lot continues to vacillate. Out of fear, he changed his mind about living in Zoar and finally retreated to the mountain as the angels had originally instructed (Genesis 19:30).

The remoteness of their mountain drives Lot's daughters to despair. Having left their intended husbands in Sodom and convinced they would have children no other way, they plan to deceive their father and conceive by him (Genesis 19:32). The two sons they later bear become the traditional ancestors of the people of Moab and Ammon, hated rivals of

Israel thus connected with a shameful story of their origins (Genesis 19:37–38).

The theme of knowing played out at the end of the chapter emphasizes the physical rather than the spiritual sense of *yāda'*. In describing the incestuous actions of the daughters, the account says that they “la[id] with” their father,” deliberately avoiding the Hebrew word for *knowing* that appears elsewhere in Genesis to describe covenantal marriage relationships. Emphasizing the same lesson by direct negation, we read that Lot was drunken and “perceived [*yāda'*] *not*” what his daughters had done (Genesis 19:33, 35).

## **Abimelech, an Honorable King, Is Warned and Blessed by the Lord**

Nahum Sarna summarized the situation at the opening of Genesis 20: “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.”[\[liv\]](#)

Abraham was a foreigner, unprotected and subject to the same kind of mistreatment that readers have 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. [This time, he] does not ask her for permission to do so.”[\[lv\]](#)

Surprisingly, God did not condemn Abimelech for having taken Sarah but instead simply warned him in a dream that she was another man’s wife (Genesis 20:3–8). Abimelech replied by telling God that he had taken Sarah 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.)[\[lvi\]](#)

In the end, God freely forgave Abimelech. Why was that? Although Abimelech did not know the Lord, the Lord nonetheless knew him. God said to the king: “I *know* that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart” (Genesis 20:6; emphasis added).

God promised Abimelech that if he restored Sarah to Abraham, he would be blessed through Abraham’s prayers on his behalf.<sup>[lvii]</sup> 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 (Genesis 20:17–18).

The story of Abimelech can be seen as a fitting conclusion to our three-chapter-lesson in contrasts. Readers are meant to compare Lot, the half-hearted Hebrew, to Abimelech, the God-fearing pagan. They are also to see a tragic difference between the morally and socially bankrupt Sodomites and Abimelech who, despite his ignorance of Abraham’s Lord, was an upright and blameless monarch. Going further, we are meant to see that as in each of the preceding stories about the righteous Abraham’s life, he once again played the role of a peace-seeking intercessor with perfection.

With these three stories as an introduction to the Old Testament concept of *knowing*, we are prepared to read chapters 21 and 22, where Abraham came to *know* God through a supreme test of faith. Abraham’s final trial reminds us of the stirring account of handcart pioneer Francis Webster: “We became acquainted with [God] in our extremities.”<sup>[lviii]</sup> 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.”

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[i] 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.

[ii] See, for example, 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).

[iii] 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).

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

[v] “Penetrate,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed February 12, 2022, [https://etymonline.com/word/penetrate#etymonline\\_v\\_12617](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).

[vi] 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.

[vii] Here, as in the majority of occurrences of *yāda'* in the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament, the Hebrew term is translated by the Greek *ginōskō*.

[viii] 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.

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

[x] 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), 551n23.

[xi] 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.

[xii] 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.

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

[xiv] Public Domain, <http://catholic-resources.org/Dore/Images/OT-012.jpg> (accessed



February 12, 2022).

[xv] 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.

[xvi] 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.

[xvii] J. J. Bourasse and P. Janvier, eds. *La Sainte Bible: Traduction Nouvelle Selon la Vulgate*. Tours, France: Alfred Mame et Fils, 1866.

[xviii] See Nibley's telling of the story of Abraham and the three angels in an excerpt from "Faith of an Observer" included at the end of "Abraham's Hebron: Then and Now part 5: Mamre," <https://youtube.com/watch?v=MNvHd5MzIoc&t=7s> .

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

[xx] Nibley translated this statement from Micha Joseph bin Gorion (Berdichevsky), *Die*

*Erzväter* (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).

[xxi] 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.”

[xxii] Public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aert\\_de\\_Gelder\\_009.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aert_de_Gelder_009.jpg) (accessed February 12, 2022).

[xxiii] 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).

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

[xxv] For an example from Jewish tradition, see Matt, *Zohar*, 237–238, Be-Reshit 1:37b. For examples from the Mandaean tradition, see Mark Lidzbarski, ed., *Ginza: Der Schatz oder*

*das Grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, J. C. Hinrichs, 1925), 263–264.

[xxvi] 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.

[xxvii] 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).

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

[xxix] Public Domain, <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/26287-sarah> (accessed February 12, 2022).

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

[xxxi] Spencer W. Kimball, “When the World Will Be Converted,” *Ensign*, October 1974,

3–11.

[xxxii] 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.

[xxxiii] <http://www.whysisrael.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/abraham.jpg> (accessed February 16, 2014).

[xxxiv] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:58, emphasis added.

[xxxv] 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.

[xxxvi] Sarna, *Genesis*, 132.

[xxxvii] 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/>.

[xxxviii] 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](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2179&context=bb_pubs).

[xxxix] 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.

[[xli](#)] 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.

[[xlii](#)] 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.

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

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

[[xlv](#)] <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/26284-the-sodomites> (accessed February 12, 2022).

[[xlvi](#)] 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.

[[xlvii](#)] Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door,’” 447.

[[xlviii](#)] Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door,’” 446.

[[xlviii](#)] 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

[xlix] Sarna, *Genesis*, 136n11. Compare 2 Kings 6:18.

[l] <http://www.anatashed.com/gallery/salt-sculptures> (accessed February 12, 2022).

Goldberg's sculptures are crystallized in the Dead Sea Waters. See her 2020 installation of Salt Forrest at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkyTAMB9inU> (accessed February 12, 2022).

[li] 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.

[lii] 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>.

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

[liv] 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.

[lv] Sarna, *Genesis*, 141.

[lvi] Sarna, *Genesis*, 142.

[lvii] Significantly, in verse 7, Abraham was called a “prophet” (*navi*)—the first time this word is used in the Bible.

[lviii] 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.”

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