

Abraham's Three Visitors

18: 1-8

DIG: Who were the three visitors? How do we know? How can angels appear as men? Even with hospitality of strangers being mandatory in the Near East, how does Abraham go the extra mile for his three visitors? Why is he in such a hurry?

REFLECT: Whom can you serve in the name of Messiah this week? Do you have a sense of urgency about your ministry? What evidence is there of it? How eager are you to hear what the Lord has to say to you? Are you standing close enough to ADONAI that you can hear His gentle whisper (First Kings 19:12)?

ADONAI appeared to Avraham. **The rabbis teach that God came to visit him as he was recovering from circumcision (17:9-14).** The place was near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting, apparently praying and meditating, at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day, or early in the afternoon (18:1).

Abraham looked up (18:2a). There are three places in Genesis where Avraham looked up or lifted up his eyes. They are some of the most important moments of his life. The *first* is when the LORD told him: Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east, and west. All the Land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever (13:14b-15). The *second* is here where Abraham looked up and saw the Lord and two angels. And the *third* will be when ADONAI will provide a ram caught in a thicket (22:13-14). Each time these words are very significant.

To his surprise, he saw three men standing nearby (18:2a). The reader knows that one of these three men is really the preincarnate Jesus Christ, and the other two men will later be identified as angels (19:1). **The rabbis teach these were merely three angels. They teach that one was to bring news that Sarah would give birth to a son, the second to overthrow Sodom, and the third to heal Abraham.** Although there was nothing in the outward appearance of the three strangers to suggest they had come from heaven, Avraham somehow sensed that they were very special visitors, to be used by ADONAI in some way to answer his prayers.²⁹⁸

When Abraham saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground (18:2b). The phrase bowed low is actually the Hebrew word *shachath*, the usual word for worship. In fact, this is the first time it is used in the Scriptures. His whole manner suggests a sense of urgency. Although it was the custom to be very hospitable toward guests, this was clearly more than normal hospitality. Avraham was really treating these men like royalty.

Avraham said to the leader: If I have found favor in your eyes Adonai (or my Lord), do not pass your servant by (18:3). Now Adonai, which is one of the names of God, means *the One who claims obedience and service*. But the same name is used as a title of respect for men, so this does not necessarily prove Abraham recognized Him as the Lord. However, he might have suspected that this stranger was the Lord because of the way he acted. So the name Adonai, would have been proper in either case. However, if Abraham did have suspicions about this being the Lord, they would vanish very soon.

Because the rabbis do not believe that one of these three was ADONAI they have come up with three options to get around the obvious. The rabbis' first option is that Abraham is merely addressing the leader of the three angels, so the word does not imply deity. The second option is that Abraham was really praying to God Himself before attending to his guests. The third option was that Avraham recognized that they were angels, and therefore, called them by their Master's name, O Lord.

Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way - now that you have come to your servant. It would not be fitting that they would leave without partaking of his hospitality. Very well, they said: Do as you say (18:4-5). You get the sense that Abraham is in a hurry to get these courtesies taken care of so he could learn what the visitors had to say.

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. Quick, he whispered: Get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread (18:6). This is the beginning of a tradition in both Jewish and Arabic cultures that three seahs of fine flour make up a fellowship offering. In the Jewish tradition it is to be unleavened. First Samuel 25:18 tells us Abigail made sufficient provisions for David and his band of outlaws with five seahs of parched grain. The trench Elijah dug around the base of the altar at Mt. Carmel, which was then filled with twelve jars of water, was large enough to hold two seahs of seed (First Kings 18:32).²⁹⁹ These two references suggest that Sarah's three seahs was a very large quantity for only three men.

Then he ran to the herd and personally selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who again hurried to prepare it (18:7). This shows that Abraham was going well beyond the bare minimum of hospitality.

He then brought some butter and milk (side dishes to bring out the taste of the meat and to diminish their thirst.³⁰⁰) and the choicest calf that had been prepared, and set these before them (18:8a). Because this was before the commandments of the Torah, Abraham served both milk and meat together. Today this is forbidden by rabbinic law because Jews must separate dairy from meat products, but because the rabbis teach that the Torah always existed they have to come up with an explanation here. They say that Abraham served both butter and milk as soon as it was prepared, then he served the meat from the calf later. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree (18:8b). This is one of the most human-like appearances of the Lord in the entire TANAKH. He did not appear in the form of a vision, as in Chapter 15, nor was it in the form of a spoken word, as in Chapter 17. It was a divine appearance as a Guest, thus making this a time of friendship and fellowship with the Lord for Abraham.

It might seem strange that angels would eat human food. They don't have to, but evidently it is possible for them to do so. In order to communicate with mankind, they frequently appear in the Scriptures as men. This appearance is not a ghostlike, unsubstantial appearance, but in every way physical and real. There is no way of explaining how this happens. Angels are spirits (Hebrews 1:14), but evidently ADONAI allows them to appear in human form when necessary. It is probably something like the appearance of Yeshua to His apostles when He took broiled fish and ate it in their presence (Luke 24:42-43). The Lord Himself taught that, in the resurrection, we ourselves will be like the angels in heaven (Matthew 22:30); and there is an indication that the activities in the New Jerusalem will include eating (Revelation 22:2 and 14).³⁰¹

As Abraham stood by these three visitors, he was very eager to know why they had come. He had been thinking about ADONAI's promise of a son for him and Sarah, and somehow sensed that they had something to do with His promise.