

The Oaks of Mamre

By Dr. Dave Neale

In the lectionary for the next while, we have the great foundation stories of the faith. We read the creation story of Genesis 1 two weeks ago. Last week it was the call of Abraham; and this week it is the story of the Oaks of Mamre and the fulfillment of the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah. These are the leaps forward of God's relationship to humanity.

This morning's story is one of the most amazing texts of the Old Testament. I feel like I say this all the time! But of all these stories in the Torah, this one truly is singular. Yahweh himself appears at the door of a tent, deep in the Judean foothills, unannounced, in a dusty traveller's tunic, in the heat of a summer afternoon. "Divine events are always surprising."¹

Abraham, hearing the approach of three visitors, rouses himself from his nap to receive them. Little did he know that he was entertaining, not only angels unawares, but the Great I Am.

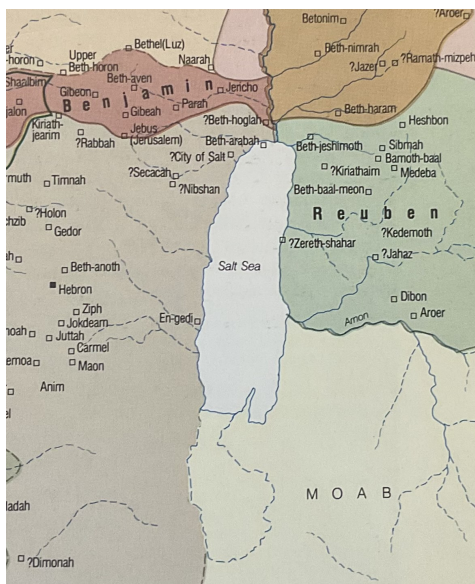
The visitors wash their feet as Abraham offers hospitality. The feet represent royal majesty in the Bible. The Hebrew word for "foot" is *regel* (רגל), from which we get the English "regal." Here, it is a textual clue (v 4), before the visitor is known, that there is royalty present.²

In these brief moments, let's do three things:

- First, we will look at context through a **wide-angle lens**;
- Next, we look into the **slow-motion moments of the Three Mysterious Visitors** – the perspective of the narrative has a lovely, dramatic, slow-motion time characteristic.
- And finally, we'll look at the **lessons of this foundation story** for today.

Wide-Angle Lens

When Lot and Abraham part ways (Gen 13), Lot moves eastward to the beautiful Plains of Jordan. Abraham, turning every way to see that God has given him a choice of all the land of Caanan, moves south to Hebron and the Oaks of Mamre.³



Hebron then became the ancestral home of Abraham after his return from Egypt (Gen 12-13). Abraham and Sarah buried there. Jacob settled there after the death of his father Isaac (Gen 37:5).

David lived there (1 Sam 31; 2 Sam 5). But it was too far from the north and David conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital so he could rule north and south.⁴

The basic landscape of the story from Genesis 12-18 is this:

- To an obscure Mesopotamian nomad God promises progeny greater than can be counted (12:2; 13:6; 15:5-6; 17:2-8, 20)
- These two nomads, Abraham and Sarah, receive the promise, even in faith, but cannot fully believe it. It is understandable to all of us. They “age out” of the child bearing years and it becomes something of an inside family joke. There follows a fair bit of conniving, cynicism, mockery and doubt about the promise of God. They “laugh to themselves,” 17:17; 18:12-16) thinking Yahweh won’t hear.
- “Abraham and Sarah certainly move back and forth constantly between faith and doubt, obedience and disobedience.” (ABD, vol IV, 373)
 - 12:10-20 – to the Egyptians, ‘say you are my sister’⁵
 - 16:1-16 – Abraham lays with Hagar at Sarah’s insistence. **And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarai.**
- 17:15-18 – in response to the reiteration of the promise of progeny the 99 year-old Abraham and Sarah, at different times, “laugh to themselves” at God.
 - In chapter 17 [Abraham] **fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”** (cf. Gen 12:10-20; 16:1-16; 17:15-18; 18:9-15; *ibid* ABD)
 - 18:9-15 – **So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”** There is the comic play on this sarcasm in 18:12-16: **The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’... But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He [Yahweh] said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”**
- **Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”** (Gen 21:6-7). Isaac means “laughter,” an allusion to both the mockery of Abraham and Sarah, and then on to rejoicing. So Yahweh has the last laugh.

Over time the purpose of God is sustained, in spite of the seemingly overwhelming obstacle of our human frailties – Sarah conceives and bears a son at an advanced age, the ancestral home becomes the residence of the king who carries Israel to greatness.

Three Mysterious Visitors

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. (Gen 18:1)

The day is hot, all have retreated to the tent to rest in the mid-day. Here, in the hour least expected, visitors suddenly appear.⁶ Abraham does not recognize them, but according to hospitality accorded to all

visitors, he rises to prepare a meal for them. A little water, a little bread he modestly promises them. Then the whole house is set in motion. Fresh cakes, a ***calf, tender and good***. However, Yahweh is incognito, accompanied with two angels as companions.⁷ The other two angels go off to the town of Sodom while Yahweh and Abraham negotiate whether God will spare the city for even ten righteous souls.

“This was of appearing, to be sure, is so strange and singular in the Old Testament that it must belong to the peculiarity of this tradition and this tradition only.”⁸

Then he took the curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them under the tree while they ate. (Gen 18:8)

As Yahweh, yet unknown to Abraham, quietly eats the meal prepared for him, silence under the oak tree, as Abraham stands respectfully to the side.

What Do We Learn for Our Lives?

I think the teaching of this story is this. In telling about the on-again off-again faith of his chosen couple, Abraham and Sarah, we are to understand that God’s purpose is eternal. That our frailty notwithstanding, God’s timeless presence accomplishes all it ordains.

The theology of the idea is contained in this remarkable verse from Ecclesiastes:

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is... (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

Practically, we see that, here in our story today, at the extreme limit of despair of non-fulfilment, at the point where the promise appears to have been merely the empty words of a powerless deity, at the point when the very history of God dangles in peril by a silvery thread: the promise of a son is realized.

Decades after the initial call, Yahweh comes unbidden, unrecognized to the door of the tent. Here, quietly taking the meal of cake and calf in the shade, with the noonday heat all around, Yahweh visits his people.

Do you think God is not with you? Do you think that just because you can’t see God, that God is not near? Do you think that you just haven’t done enough to warrant the blessing of God?

Here is the gospel, the good news! Like the founding family of our faith, we too are frail, we too fail in faithfulness and obedience, but ... ***if we are faithless he remains faithful...*** (2 Tim 2:13).⁹

¹ *Genesis*, G. von Rad, p.206.

² Listen to this epiphany to Moses and the elders from Exodus 24:10-11: ... ***and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet (regelin) was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness... and they beheld God, and they ate and drank.***

This is but one of the many one author called the “latent subtleties and intimations” the story contains. You may also recall Jesus to washes not Peter’s head, but his feet, and thus bids the disciples to treat one another as royalty (John 14:1ff) .

³ Philologists suggest the Mamre oaks are at an old Ammonite “Sanctuary of the Alliance”; *The Atlas of the Bible*, Rogerson, p. 98.

⁴ The connection between Abraham and David at Hebron is not lost on us. God is eternal. Never forgetting. Never stymied by the mere frailties of humanity.

Ironically, Absalom, David's rebellious son, instigates his revolt from there, which probably appealed to the residents since their village had been eclipsed by Jerusalem as the abode of King David.

⁵ 15:2 – **"You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."** Abraham seems to inform God that, having no heir, one of his slaves will inherit this promise.

⁶ Yahweh "appears" in verse one but in vs 2 three men are at this door.

⁷ Not surprisingly, some Christians see an allusion to the trinity but this is not supported by the text. It's just Yahweh, accompanied by two angels.

⁸ (von Rad, p. 205). It's a theme in this part of the story. Both Lot (at his door in Sodom, 19:1) and Abraham (at Mamre, 18:1) entertain angels unawares. **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.** (Heb 13:2). In the *Odyssey* by Homer we have a similar type of divine visit mentioned, "Aye, and the gods in the guise of strangers from afar put on all manner of shapes, and visit the cities, beholding the violence and the righteousness of men." (XVII, von Rad, p. 205).

⁹ E. E. Urbach, the great Jewish scholar of rabbinic Judaism, wrote the magisterial book, *The Sages: The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud*. He describes the portrait of God as both the Nearness and Distance of God; the Omnipresent and Heaven, the Immanence and Transcendent. Our story show how both can be true at once.

We see "...the future as one with the past in an eternal present through the continuing operation of the everlasting divine laws. This bending back of the eschatological hope on to a reality already potentially given in the present..." (Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 476)