

NOTES ON GENESIS 18:1-15

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In seminary you probably were taught that this story comes from the J writer. That's not an irrelevant detail, but it locates our version of the story in time and place. It's for an audience in Jerusalem in the time of David and Solomon. The innovation of David and Solomon in ancient Israel was to establish hereditary kingship by a single family. For the roughly two hundred years prior to this, Israel had chosen specifically not to have kings. It sought to be a nation of villages, bound together by bonds of collaboration and mutual aid. Women had prominent roles in national life, and governance was often by ordinary people of talent and wisdom rather than the few high and mighty who qualified for rule only by birthright. The hereditary kingship that David and Solomon established built a national capital and centralized national institutions of governance, all dominated by male leadership, especially male leadership of the emerging elite classes. Now talent mattered less than whether you had the right chromosomes and the right ancestry.

Turning to the story itself, it is critically important to keep in mind the difference between what the anonymous omniscient narrator knows and tells us, and what Abraham knows and what Sarah knows. These are not the same thing at all, but most interpretations overlook this. In v. 1 the narrator knows and tells us that God appears to Abraham. We and the narrator know this, not Abraham. In v. 2 when Abraham looks out in the heat of the day, all he sees are three men traveling by his encampment. He rushes to invite them to stop and rest with him, not because he knows who they are, but because that is the requirement of the code of hospitality in his culture. By making this invitation he not only fulfills his role as host, but he places his guests under the obligations of the same code of hospitality, thereby protecting his migrant family who have no other protection. When he addresses them in v. 3, his salutation is often mistranslated or misunderstood. He does not say, "my Lord," meaning God, but "my lords," meaning something like "kind sirs." This is mirrored in his reference to himself as "your servant." With this language he positions himself as the willing servant of his guests whom he treats with the utmost deference. If we watch carefully everything Abraham actually does or says, he is always the hyper-gracious host, but he never gives the slightest sign that he recognizes who his guests really are. All the explicit references to God are in the mouth of the omniscient narrator who keeps us in the know.

Now what about Sarah? If there's anyone in this story who recognizes that the guests are actually God, it's Sarah who betrays her recognition by the fear that leads her to deny her own laughing voice. Moreover, the plot of the story falls into two portions: vv. 2-8 which are mostly action, mostly by Abraham, and vv. 9-15 which is entirely dialogue. The dialogue starts off between the men and Abraham, but quickly becomes a dialogue between the men/God and Sarah alone. Abraham fades into the background and Sarah takes center stage. So the narrator turns out to be a bit of a trickster in telling us that God appeared to Abraham in v. 1; God really seems to have stopped at the Oaks of Mamre to appear to Sarah. We tend to miss this because a tendency to value males over females causes us to take the narrator at his word, and to assume that Abraham is necessarily the central character here. That same tendency also causes us to read God's words to Sarah in v. 15 in a chiding or reproving tone of voice, when the text indicates no such thing. What if we chose a different tone of voice? Is God saying to Sarah, "yes, you did laugh, and it's OK; we're still cool"? Thus in a context where women's role in the life of the nation is being marginalized, and in which the role of everyone who does not belong to the privileged classes is ignored and denied, this is a story of God appearing to, choosing, and accepting a migrant woman who cannot contain her laughter.