

The Bible in Context

Assessment I: The Hermeneutical Exercise

Selected Scripture: Genesis 18:21-26

Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. Abraham approached and said, “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous people within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” So the LORD said, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the entire place on their account.” — **NASB**

The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” — **NIV**

The men set out for Sodom, but Abraham stood in GOD’s path, blocking his way. Abraham confronted him, “Are you serious? Are you planning on getting rid of the good people right along with the bad? What if there are fifty decent people left in the city; will you lump the good with the bad and get rid of the lot? Wouldn’t you spare the city for the sake of those fifty innocents? I can’t believe you’d do that, kill off the good and the bad alike as if there were no difference between them. Doesn’t the Judge of all the Earth judge with justice?” GOD said, “If I find fifty decent people in the city of Sodom, I’ll spare the place just for them.” — **MSG**

Translation Comparison & Initial Observations

To analyse Genesis 18:21–26, three translations across the formal-to-functional spectrum were selected: the New American Standard Bible (NASB) for its word-for word literal translation, the New International Version (NIV) for balanced clarity, and The Message (MSG) for a casual, modern day style.

Apart from The Message sounding somewhat more irreverent (“Are you serious?”), the translations are surprisingly aligned. Yet surface clarity does not mean a lack of depth. The very unusualness of this interaction demands hermeneutical investigation. It stands as one of the earliest moments in the Old Testament where a human confronts God—setting a

precedent for Moses and other prophets, in particular Habakkuk,¹ to appeal to divine justice. Abraham quietly, even tenderly, holds God to His own revealed standard of righteousness without losing reverence. The interaction proceeds like a bargaining conversation in an ancient marketplace, ending in verse 33 with God agreeing to spare the city for just ten righteous people. This startling dialogue opens up interesting legal, cultural, and covenantal questions that require thoughtful investigation.

Using the Duvall/Hays framework

STEP 1: GRASP THE TEXT IN THEIR TOWN

What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

In Genesis 18:1–21, three travellers arrive at Abraham's tent and are met with lavish ancient Near Eastern hospitality. Abraham prepares a "tender and good" calf—a ceremonial feast establishing table fellowship with God and His messengers. In verse 22, the narrative forks: the messengers turn toward Sodom, while God remains behind. The intimacy deepens in verse 23 as Abraham "drew near" (Hebrew: *nagash*, נָגַשׁ). Across the Old Testament (e.g. Gen 44:18; 1 Sam 9:18), *nagash* denotes a pivotal moment of reverent confrontation, legal appeal, or personal audience before a figure of authority.

The vivid, terrestrial anthropomorphism—God walking, eating, and conversing as a human—hints at a Jahwist (J) source tradition, which presented founding patriarchs who were deeply human, defined by faith, daring hospitality, and extraordinary intimacy with God. Shared table fellowship provides Abraham with the immediate context and confidence to boldly petition YHWH.

This bold intercession directly fulfils the covenantal requirements set out just prior. In Genesis 17, God commands Abraham to "walk before me faithfully and be blameless." Then, in Genesis 18:19, God reveals His divine intent: Abraham was chosen so he would direct his household to "keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (*tsedaqah* and *mishpat*). Abraham's intercession for Sodom is the first active demonstration of this calling. By holding God to His own revealed standard of righteousness, Abraham proves himself a worthy covenant partner.

In a sort of poetic balance, Abraham's radical hospitality in chapter 18 directly contrasts with the events of chapter 19, where the inhabitants of Sodom violate fundamental ancient Near Eastern laws of hospitality through abuse and hostility. Sodom's underlying sin was not merely general immorality, but egregious pride, greed, and ruthless inhospitality. Indeed, it is the latter that is perhaps the cardinal sin. Ezekiel references it as such much later when talking to (the people of) Jerusalem.²

¹ Habakkuk 1:2–4 "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?"

² "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49)

In pleading for Sodom, Abraham looks beyond protecting his nephew Lot to pose a fundamental theological question: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (v. 25). He challenges whether a righteous remnant ought to preserve an unrighteous majority. His negotiation from fifty down to ten touches on critical ancient civic and social thresholds. In ancient Near Eastern legal structures, ten represented the minimum viable core for a corporate household or civic unit—a principle that later informed the Jewish minyan (the minimum legal quorum for communal prayer). Stopping at ten demonstrates that Sodom was destroyed not from a lack of divine mercy, but because it lacked even a basic moral nucleus.

STEP 2: MEASURING THE WIDTH OF THE RIVER TO CROSS

What are the differences between them and us?

The “ancient reader” here does not apply to people of Abraham’s generation, but the generations following Moses, when these stories began to be told and written down.

Culture & Laws

In the ancient reader’s time, society and governance were structured around the family. Family loyalty and honour often took precedence over man-made laws, with families responsible for punishment and reward. Today, societies emphasise individual rights and elected governance, and citizens are expected to obey the law, even when this means having a family member tried in court —something that would have been unheard of in the time of the patriarchs.

The ancient reader was bound by the Mosaic covenant, with its national framework of divine law (Torah), ceremonial purity, and collective accountability. The modern reader is bound by the New Covenant in Christ, where intercession, forgiveness, and justice are mediated through Jesus, and personal prayer replaces animal sacrifice.

Lifestyle & Wealth

Abraham’s people were nomadic, moving as the seasons changed and rarely settling for long. Wealth was measured in livestock, in servants, tents and even wives, all of which were considered property of the patriarch. Generosity was a core virtue. Much of this remained true in the time of the ancient reader, although more people dwelt in towns and cities, movement of whole tribes between areas was still common. Today, stability and home ownership are highly valued; wealth is measured in financial assets, real estate, and material goods. Modern Western culture tends to prioritise personal accumulation over the communal sharing that characterised patriarchal life.

Hospitality

Welcoming the stranger in ancient times was much more than a nice gesture; it was an essential act of preservation. In a desert landscape devoid of inns or public shelters,

travellers could become utterly vulnerable; refusing them hospitality was effectively a death sentence. Hospitality was thus an essential, sacred duty governed by strict unwritten protocols. A temporary contract of peace was established through the washing of feet and the breaking of bread, creating protection for both host and guest. Violating this code by rejecting or mistreating a stranger was considered both a severe moral and civic offence. Today, we often view strangers with caution or suspicion, relying on public infrastructure to care for those in need, and treating hospitality as an optional courtesy reserved mainly for close friends.

Corporate Identity vs. Individualism

Implicit in all of this is the concept of corporate identity. In Abraham's world and that of the ancient reader, an entire community could be saved or condemned based on a righteous remnant—a concept central to Abraham's intercession, and later apparent in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Today's legal and moral mindset is almost entirely individualistic, each person being for themselves, making the ancient logic of corporate solidarity harder for modern readers to grasp.

While there are many other differences—such as the shame/honour code of the past, verses the guilty/innocent dichotomy of modern legalism, or differences in diet, marriage, and political structures—the shifts in covenant, corporate solidarity, and sacred hospitality form the main width of the river to cross in this particular passage.

STEP 3: CROSS THE PRINCIPAL BRIDGE

What is the (core) theological principle in this passage?

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” Clearly the question that Abraham poses is the heart of this passage, the primary theological principle. But there are also two secondary theological principles, intimately bound with the first, namely:

1. **Hospitality:** Although it has been identified that modern man does not hold to the same standard of welcome, and hospitality as does ancient man, I'd still claim that this is a universal principle; that it is poorly practiced in our time does not undermine the agreement between God and Man. Genesis 18 begins with Abraham's open-hearted welcome to the three visitors, which sets the stage for the table fellowship that follows. Sitting at the table with God gives Abraham both the courage and the intimacy to initiate the intercession.³

There is an undercurrent throughout Chapter 18 of God teaching (possibly testing) Abraham what it means to keep a covenant. Hospitality and Table Fellowship are more than abstract social virtues—they are expressions of covenantal righteousness. When viewed side by side with Sodom's brutal inhospitality, and the breaking of the most basic of the Commandments

³ To be precise, Abraham didn't actually sit with the men. He served them, and “*While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.*” To be of service in this way was equally valued in ANE culture.

to “love thy neighbour” we see that this is a deeply engrained value, one shared by God and man, and one at the very heart of the covenantal relationship.

2. Covenantal Partnership: God treats Abraham not as a passive, helpless subject, but as a genuine partner in the covenant. In their interactions there are two very interesting reminders: In verses 17–19, God reminds himself of Abraham's future role and the importance of his household practising righteousness and justice, and in verse 27 Abraham reminds himself he is *nothing but dust and ashes*, leading him to speak with reverence and humility rather than falling into the trap of thinking of himself as equal to God. Both these internal dialogues remind the reader of the essential relationship between man and God. Yes, we can walk with God, but let us not rise above our station, nor engage in humblebragging. True faith does not require silent submission or prideful humility; rather, it empowers the believer to draw near (*nagash*), hold God to His revealed character, and advocate for justice and mercy.

STEP 4: CONSULT THE BIBLICAL MAP

How does this theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?

In this step I am invited to verify the principle/s I identified as being universal by consulting the Biblical Map (the entire scripture) and identifying examples of how the principle/s show up in different times and contexts. This was not difficult to do, indicating the core principle was well chosen, namely, **God's inherent character guarantees that His judgment is always perfectly just, righteous, and fair**, expressed by Abraham as a question to God himself: “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?*”

Old Testament Examples

1. The Distinction Made for Rahab in Jericho (Joshua 2:1–14; 6:22–25)

Jericho was marked for destruction due to its deep corruption and hostility toward God. Despite being a citizen of that city—and furthermore one of whom it is implied was a prostitute—Rahab's service to the Israeli spies, and her turning in faith towards the Israelite God meant that God recognised her repentance and protected her household, thus proving that His judgment is never indiscriminate or cold-hearted, but always meted out fairly and personally.

2. The Judgment on King David (2 Samuel 12:1–14)

After David committed adultery with Bathsheba⁴ and arranged the murder of her husband, Uriah, to cover up his crime. God showed no partiality in His sentencing of David, demonstrating that His justice applies equally to everyone, regardless of status or privilege.

⁴ Or, as some would claim, raped. As none of Bathsheba's responses are noted it is impossible to judge if she was a willing party in the deceit, or a victim of it.

There are many examples, but these two stand out as stark illustrations of how God's uncompromising holiness and impartiality operate alongside His deep mercy, holding all to the same standard of justice.

New Testament Example: Romans 3:23-26 ⁵

Humanity has fallen so far, and in its collective guilt before God, is unable to satisfy the demands of divine justice. It has become necessary for God to take human form, but God could not simply ignore or wave away sin without compromising His holy character. Instead, God chose a radical solution to reach people without surrendering any element of righteousness and justice: He took on human flesh,⁶ bearing the penalty of sin. In this way God could be both just (demanding a true penalty for moral evil) and the justifier (extending mercy to those who trust in Jesus). The cross reveals the perfect harmony of God's justice and mercy.

Secondary Principles

As to the secondary principles of Radical Hospitality and Covenantal Partnership we can find many examples of each in both the Old and New Testament.

Radical Hospitality examples:

Genesis 19:1-3 — Lot welcomes the angels into his home

1 Kings 17:8-16 — The widow of Zarephath welcomes Elijah.

2 Kings 4:8-17 — The Shunammite woman welcomes Elisha

In the New Testament we find all four Gospels to be filled with stories of Jesus' radical hospitality: who he chooses to be with, who he invites to join him, and the different homes he dines in. Radical hospitality is so much a focus we can see the gospels as an upturning of social convention as it was practiced at the time, with perhaps the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) being the starkest example.

Covenantal Partnership examples

Genesis 17:1-16 — Men and Women included in God's covenant

Exodus 19:3-8; 24:3-8 — The covenant includes the whole community of Israel

Deuteronomy 29:10-13 — The foreigner is included in the covenant community

Galatians 3:28 — No distinctions: we are all one in Jesus Christ

⁵ It is actually difficult to choose a single piece of scripture for this, as the same message comes across in Roman 5:8-9, "*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*", 1 Peter 2:24, "*Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree*", and 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.*" — to name a few.

⁶ It would be equally accurate to say: He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who took on human flesh...

STEP 5: GRASP THE TEXT IN OUR TOWN

How should Christians today live out this theological principle?

God's perfect justice and righteousness remain relevant to Christians today, despite the differences between Abraham's intercession for Sodom and modern life. This truth is a rock to hold fast to in an ever-changing world.

Christians often struggle to understand suffering, especially when they expect God to intervene. Although we may not always understand His presence in our struggles, we can respond in faith rather than fear, trusting in His righteousness. Knowing that God welcomes us despite our flaws allows us to pray openly and honestly, hiding nothing from Him.

Like Abraham, we can bring difficult questions before God, even when we hope for immediate answers. Abraham's intercession did not save Sodom, yet it remained meaningful, revealing his character and bringing him into dialogue with God. Our own requests, however impossible they may seem, can likewise reveal our character and bring us closer to Him. Faith does not mean avoiding difficult questions; Abraham's bargaining with God reminds us that He welcomes our involvement. Otherwise, we risk becoming passive passengers rather than living fully as people created in God's image.

The passage also highlights the continuing importance of hospitality and covenantal partnership. Today, suspicion of strangers can lead to rejection and prejudice. The horrific story of the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19–21) illustrates the devastating consequences when hospitality, justice, and the protection of the vulnerable break down.

It is encouraging to remember that many charities in the UK have Christian origins, and that many Christian organisations continue to care for those in need today. Perhaps we need to extend that more into our daily lives, seeing the Living God in each person we encounter. It's not called *Radical* Hospitality for nothing.

Remembering our place in God's covenant can also guide our choices. Perhaps the seemingly trite question "What would Jesus do?" is more profound than we realise. Life is full of crossroads, and none of us can navigate it alone. Having committed our lives to Jesus, who better to guide us?

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The Bible, NIV and KJV versions.

Appendix I — analysis of word types

The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

— New International Version

Verbs Pronouns Adjectives Conjunctions Figures of Speech

Most notable thing here is that the adjectives are almost exclusively “righteous” and “wicked” hinting towards the key principle of the text.

Appendix 2 — the text in context

