

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
Genesis 18 & 19 – Sodom and Gomorrah

Three mysterious “visitors” (two seem to be angels and one of them seems to be God) are on their way to nuke Sodom and Gomorrah (which happens in chapter 19). They stop and pay a visit to Abraham, and reiterate the promise of chapter 17: in a year’s time, he and Sarah will have a child. They also relay to Abraham the following: he needs to “keep the way of the Lord” by doing righteousness and justice; “so that” the Lord may bring about for Abraham what has been promised” (18:19).

Up to this point, the promise of a child and land had been just that—a promise. But now something is added to the deal. It’s like buying a car and being told, as you are about to sign, “Oh, by the way, there are some taxes and fees we need to discuss.” For this to make some sense, we have to remember, once again, that Israelites living at a much later time, during their own national crisis, were the ones responsible for the shape this story will take. They were in exile because of their failure to follow God’s ways. Of course, in Abraham’s time, there was no formal law of God (that didn’t come until Mt. Sinai in the book of Exodus).

So what is “the way of Yahweh” that is referred to here? Well, even at this stage, Abraham is being portrayed by later writers as a law-abiding Israelite. It’s similar to the way Europeans during the Renaissance would paint Jesus and Mary to look like very pale Europeans—the present is painted into the past. We might be tempted to think of this as “distorting history,” but that’s our problem when we read with modern eyes. The Israelites saw this portrayal of Abraham as connecting the present with the past, which we have seen all through Genesis so far.

We will see Abraham described as a law-keeper again in Genesis 26:4-5, when God says to Isaac, “I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed,” “because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, keeping my commands, my statutes and my laws.” What are God’s “charge, commands, statutes, and laws”? This is straight-down-the-middle Old Testament language that refers to the law of Moses, especially Deuteronomy. These are clearly words that reflect a later context, readers looking back at their own history to see that their following God’s ways is nothing else than following in Abraham’s footsteps. Israel’s ancient history was written for the benefit of a much later audience. This does not mean—just so we are clear—that later Israelites simply made up stories. There is little question that later Israelites were building on ancient stories of their people, perhaps written, perhaps oral. But those stories were given their present shape to help make sense of Israel’s identity as a nation in exile.

OUTLINE OF THE ABRAHAM STORY – Genesis 12-25

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| Genesis 12: 1– 9 | God calls and blesses Abram and he moves west into Canaan. |
| Genesis 12: 10– 20 | Abraham risks his blessing in Egypt by giving up Sarai. |
| Genesis 13: 1 –18 | Abraham and Lot divide their territory and Abraham receives Palestine. |
| Genesis 14: 1– 24 | Abraham shows himself a hero and blessed in warfare. |
| Genesis 15: 1– 21 | God renews his promises and makes a covenant with Abraham, but after declaring a curse. |
| Genesis 16: 1– 16 | Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael. |
| Genesis 17: 1– 27 | God renews his covenant and promise of a son, but commands Abraham to take on the sign of circumcision. |
| Genesis 18: 1– 15 | God renews his promise to give a son to Sarah and Abraham. |
| Genesis 18: 16– 33 | Abraham shows his blessing by interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. |
| Genesis 19: 1– 38 | Lot proves to be the only faithful person in Sodom; it is destroyed. |
| Genesis 20: 1– 18 | Abraham risks the blessing to Sarah with Abimelech, the king of Gerar. |
| Genesis 21: 1– 21 | God gives the blessing of a son, Isaac, and sends Ishmael away. |
| Genesis 21: 22– 34 | Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech and his people. |
| Genesis 22: 1– 24 | Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God. |
| Genesis 23: 1– 20 | Abraham lays claim to possession of the land by buying the cave of Machpelah to bury Sarah and himself. |
| Genesis 24: 1– 67 | Abraham arranges a wife for Isaac to continue the blessing. |
| Genesis 25: 1– 18 | Abraham’s death and burial; Ishmael’s descendants; the blessing passes to Isaac. |

OTHER TIMES GOD HAS VISITED ABRAHAM

Genesis 12:7	God appeared to Abram at the Oak of Moreh. "To your offspring I will give this land."
Genesis 15:1-21	Abram has a vision; God cuts a covenant, appearing as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch.
Genesis 17:1	God appears to Abram and changes his name and requires the sign of the covenant – circumcision.
Genesis 18:1	God appears to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre as one of the "three men".

LOT AND ABRAHAM SYNOPSIS

Chapter 12 – We learn that Abraham leaves Haran and heads to Canaan taking Lot with him.

Chapter 13 – Abraham and Lot return from Egypt and separate. Lot moved to Sodom. Abram moved to Hebron.

Chapter 14 – Lot taken captive and Abram comes to the rescue.

Chapter 18 – Abram talks to God about saving people of Sodom; (for the sake of Lot).

Chapter 19 – Angels visit Lot; townsfolk want them. Lot saved; Sodom destroyed; Lot's wife salty.

ETIOLOGICAL ELEMENTS IN THESE CHAPTERS

Genesis 18:12-15 – The meaning of the name "Isaac" (Sarah laughs).

Genesis 19:22 – The origin of the name Zoar (meaning "little").

Genesis 19:26 – Why the plain of Jordan has humanoid pillars of salt (Lot's wife turned around).

Genesis 19:37-38 – The ancestral origins of the Moabites and Ammonites (incestuous relationship with Lot).

THE IMPENDING DOOM OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH

Genesis 13:10-13 – Destruction foretold.

PARALLELS BETWEEN GENESIS CHAPTER 18 AND 19

Chapter 18

Abraham sitting in the entrance of his tent (18:1)

Abraham goes to meet the three men (18:2)

Abraham bows (18:2)

Abraham's invitation (18:3)

Wash your feet (18:4)

Then you can go (18:5)

Bread is baked (18:6)

Sarah laughed (18:12, 13, 15)

Outcry against Sodom is great (18:20-21)

Sweep away the righteous/the city (18:23, 24)

Spare the whole place (18:26)

Do = destroy [the city] (18:25, 29, 30)

Chapter 19

Lot sitting in the city gateway (19:1)

Lot stands to greet the two men (19:1)

Lot bows (19:1)

Lot's invitation (19:2)

Wash your feet (19:2)

Early tomorrow, go on your way (19:2)

Bread is baked (19:3)

Lot's would-be sons-in-law thought he was joking (19:14)

People's great outcry against the city (19:13)

You will be swept away (19:17)

I'll grant your request (19:21)

Do = destroy [the city] (19:22)

CHAPTER 18 – THE VISITORS AND THE PROMISE

Verses 1-2: *"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. He looked up and saw three men standing near him."* These mysterious visitors (two appear to be angels and one seems to be God) are shown hospitality by Abraham. They confirm God's promise that Sarah will have a son within the next year, though Sarah laughs. But they also say that Abraham needs to *"keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what has been promised"* (Genesis 18:19). The covenant is no longer a one-sided promise.

Think about what this says to the Israelites reading this after they had been taken into exile because of their failure to follow God's ways. Up to this point, we haven't learned what the "way of the Lord" is. We don't get that until the book of Exodus. But for a story written after the exile, the Israelites surely would have known. They are using this story to connect their present to the past. We will see Abraham described as a law-keeper again in Genesis 26:4-5 when God says to Isaac: *"I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."* This is a clear indication that the Israelites were building on ancient stories of their people and shaping them to help make sense of their identity as a nation in exile.

Leaving, one angel tells Abraham the Lord is about to destroy wicked Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham then prays and begs God to spare anyone who is righteous in these cities and not sweep them away with the wicked. In 18:25 it is the first time in the bible that a human questions a divine decision. Moses will take that even further on at least three occasions.

GENESIS 18 (NRSV)

18 The LORD appeared to Abraham^a by the oaks^b of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures^c of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰ Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?^d ¹⁹ No, for I have chosen^e him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” ²⁰ Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

²² So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.^f ²³ Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶ And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” ²⁷ Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” ²⁹ Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” ³⁰ Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” ³¹ He said, “Let me take it

^a Heb *him*

^b Or *terebinths*

^c Heb *seahs*

^d Or *and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him*

^e Heb *known*

^f Another ancient tradition reads *while the LORD remained standing before Abraham*

upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.”³² Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Source Theory: All of chapter 18 is from the J Source.

18.1–15: The Lord’s visit to Abraham and Sarah.

1: The oaks of Mamre, see 12.6–8n.; 13.18n.

2–8: A description of Abraham’s ideal hospitality parallel to that of Lot in 19.1–11. This motif of secretly divine visitors is widespread in folklore. The relation between the three visitors and the Lord (v. 1) is unclear. The narrative fluidly shifts from speaking of them as a group (e.g., v. 9) to having “the Lord” speak alone (e.g., v. 13; cf. v. 10). Later materials in v. 22 and 19.1 conceive of “the Lord” as one of the three angels (see 16.7n.), though this is not specified in the preceding narrative (“one” in the NRSV of v. 10 is a translator’s addition).

9–15: The narrator uses the theme of Sarah’s laughter (cf. 17.17) to stress the incredibility of God’s promise of a son (eventually Isaac, 21.1–3).

11: Ceased ... after the manner of women, a circumlocution for menopause.

12: Isaac’s name means “he [God] laughs”; other traditions develop the link with laughter as well (17.17–19; 21.6,8; 26.8).

18.16–33: Abraham’s intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah.

17–19: This first speech by the Lord stresses that he speaks to Abraham because he chose him to teach his household the ways of righteousness. In vv. 22–32 the Lord will model such righteousness in his responsiveness to Abraham.

20–21: This second speech by the Lord echoes his decision at Babel to go down and see what was going on there (11.5; cf. divine self-reflection in 3.22; 6.3,5–7; 11.6–7). Unlike vv. 17–19, this speech suggests that the Lord has not yet decided what to do.

22–33: Like Moses (e.g., Ex 32.9–14), Abraham negotiates with an angry God, appealing to God’s righteousness. In this case, however, the terms he ends up winning—aversion of disaster if ten righteous people can be found—do not avert destruction. Thus, this text appears to be a theoretical reflection on God’s righteousness and how many righteous people are required to save a broader group; cf. Ezek 14.12–23.

CHAPTER 19 – SODOM AND GOMORRAH DESTROYED; AMMONITES AND MOABITES BORN

Two angels go to Sodom and Lot invites them in and shows them hospitality. But the men of the city come and surround the house and call for Lot to bring them out. But Lot offers his daughters instead. They decline and still want the men. The men pull Lot back inside and strike the crowd with blindness. They tell Lot that they are going to destroy the place. The next morning, they instruct Lot to leave but he is slow, so they drag him out by the hand and tell him to head for the hills and don’t stop or look back. He flees to Zoar. Sulfur and fire rain down. But Lot’s wife, looked back and became a pillar of salt. Abraham saw the smoke and destruction.

Instead of living in Zoar, Lot went and lived in a cave with his two daughters. They got him drunk and both laid down with him.

Both bore children from their encounters; the firstborn bore a son and named him Moab (the ancestor of the Moabites); the younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi (the ancestor of the Ammonites).



Genesis 19 (NRSV)

19 The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground.² He said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the square.”³ But he urged them strongly; so they turned

aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵ and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” ⁹ But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

¹² Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. ¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.” ¹⁴ So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, “Up, get out of this place; for the LORD is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

¹⁵ When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.” ¹⁶ But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. ¹⁷ When they had brought them outside, they^a said, “Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed.” ¹⁸ And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords; ¹⁹ your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. ²⁰ Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!” ²¹ He said to him, “Very well, I grant you this favor too, and will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²² Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there.” Therefore the city was called Zoar.^b ²³ The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

²⁴ Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; ²⁵ and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶ But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

²⁷ Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; ²⁸ and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace.

²⁹ So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

³⁰ Now Lot went up out of Zoar and settled in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; so he lived in a cave with his two daughters. ³¹ And the firstborn said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world. ³² Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father.” ³³ So they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. ³⁴ On the next day, the firstborn said to the younger, “Look, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father.” ³⁵ So they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger rose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. ³⁶ Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. ³⁷ The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the

^a Gk Syr Vg: Heb *he*

^b That is *Little*

ancestor of the Moabites to this day.³⁸ The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day.

Source Theory: All of chapter 19 is from the J Source, except for verse 29 which is attributed to the P Source.

19.1–38: The rescue of Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a prominent example in the Israelite tradition of God’s total judgment (Deut 29.23; Isa 1.9; Jer 49.18; Am 4.11).

1: Two angels, see 18.2–8n.

5: The word “know” sometimes has the meaning of sexual intimacy, as in the case of “Cain knew his wife, and she became pregnant.” That is how it is commonly understood in this passage: the people are threatening sexual abuse of the guests. This is possible, and even likely (in light of a parallel story in Judges 19).

8: This could be a conventional negotiating tactic. It could be that Lot is negotiating in a way that he deliberately overstates his offer, saying something he doesn’t mean in an act of “gracious insincerity.” Lot is supposed to make an extraordinary gesture. He offers his own daughters. But no one is supposed to take him up on it. And then, in this horrible town, the gesture does not work. The people only become angry. (In the parallel story in Judges 19, in a similar circumstance, a host offer his own daughter and his guest’s concubine to the crowd. But the guest gives them the concubine. The host does not give his daughter). There is a bit of irony here. Lot offers his daughters to be exploited sexually. His daughters later get him drunk and exploit him sexually.

1–11: As in the case of 18.1–8, the main issue here is hospitality to secretly divine visitors. Here, however, the sanctity of hospitality is threatened by the men of the city who wish to rape (know) the guests (cf. Judg 19.22–30). The primary point of this text is how this threat by the townspeople violates the value of hospitality (contrast 18.1–16). Hospitality is valued so strongly in this context that Lot offers his virgin daughters in place of his guests (vv. 7–8). Nevertheless, this foolish and cruel, unfatherly act has the opposite of its intended effect, leading the townspeople to threaten worse things to Lot than the rape they were going to inflict on his guests (v. 9), and requiring the guests to protect their host (vv. 10–11). Where Abraham was the model of hospitality (Gen 18.1–16), Lot’s actions show him to be a bungling, almost heartless imitator who does not deserve to be the heir of the promise to Abraham.

12–14: In place of Sarah’s laughter (Heb “tshq”) in the preceding hospitality scene (18.11–14), we have here the Sodomite sons-in-law assuming that Lot is jesting (Heb “tshq”).

15–23: Once again, Lot is unfavorably contrasted with Abraham. Where Abraham hurried to serve his angelic guests (18.2,6,7), Lot hesitates at their urging to leave Sodom, requiring them to take him away by force (vv. 15–16). Then, doubting their rescue plan, he asks them to let him stop in a nearby city (Zoar, which means “little”; see vv. 20 and 22 and note a) lest he be caught up in the coming destruction (vv. 17–22). In the end, though Lot claims that he has found a Noah-like favor with his angelic rescuers (19.19; cf. Gen 6.8), this is not affirmed by the angels or the narrator.

24–25: The rain of destruction continues the echoes of the Noah story.

26: This text turns salt formations in the Dead Sea area into a testimony to the truth of the story, asserting that one of those formations was Lot’s wife, who disobeyed and looked back at the cities God was destroying. Such etiological notes (accounts of origin) are common in the Bible, especially in Genesis.

29: This is a Priestly summary of the story, echoing 8.1 and attributing Lot’s rescue to his relation with Abraham.

31–33: Getting their father drunk and exploiting him sexually has an echo of the story of Noah who got drunk and Ham walked in on him in the tent.

37–38: This episode suggests that two of Israel’s closest neighbors, the Moabites and Ammonites in Transjordan, originated in incest. Mistakenly assuming that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was so total that there is no one else on earth by whom to have children (19.31), Lot’s daughters get their father drunk so that he will conceive with them. The themes of drunkenness and (implicit) nakedness are reminiscent of the story of Noah and his sons (9.20–27).

LOCATION HISTORY

Oaks of Mamre (just outside of Hebron; 20 miles south of Jerusalem in an open valley)

What is significant about this location? The Oak of Mamre (a single tree) was believed to be an ancient tree (a holy tree) that was supposed to have grown there since the beginning of the world; believed to represent the center of the world.

Patriarchal Period The site first appeared in chapter 13, where Abram had built an altar to the Lord. It appears again in chapter 14 where Abram led his trained men to rescue his nephew Lot from the hands of his kidnappers. In Genesis 23, Abram will buy the field and cave of Mechpelah (Hebron; “facing Mamre”) and bury Sarah in the cave. This becomes the

place where all the patriarch couples were buried (Sarah and Abraham, Genesis 25:7-10; Rebecca and Isaac, Genesis 35:27-29; and Leah and Jacob, Genesis 49:29-33).

Times of Joshua and Judges The spies visited Hebron and near there cut the cluster of grapes (Numbers 13:22). It was taken by Joshua and given to Caleb (Joshua 10:36-37; 12:10; 14:13). It became a Levitical city and a city of refuge (Joshua 20:7; 21:11). One of Samson's exploits was the carrying of the gate of Gaza "to the top of the mountain that is before Hebron (Judges 16:3).

Days of the Monarchy David, when a fugitive, received kindness from the people of this city (1 Samuel 30:31). Six of David's sons were born there (2 Samuel 3:2). Here, Abner was treacherously slain by Joab at the gate (2 Samuel 3:27), and the sons of Rimmon, after their hands and feet had been cut off, were hanged "beside the pool" (2 Samuel 4:12). When David became king of Judah, it was his royal residence, and he resided there for seven and a half years (2 Samuel 5:5) until he captured Jerusalem and made that his capital (2 Samuel 15:7). It was here that David was anointed as King over all Israel (2 Samuel 2:1-11; 1 Kings 2:11).

Later History After the revolt of the Jewish leader Shimon Bar Kockba against the Roman occupiers in the second Roman-Jewish War, (132-136 CE) many Jews were captured by the Romans and sold into slavery under the Oak at Mamre. The cause of the Revolt: Hadrian had abolished circumcision because he considered it a mutilation and Bar Kockba claimed to be the Messiah who believed Jeremiah had prophesied that the Temple would be rebuilt seventy years after its destruction, as the First Temple had been after the Babylonian exile.

ZOAR – צֵעָר, one of the five cities of the Plain (along with Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim). Four eastern kings led by Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, defeated these five cities in the valley of Siddim (Gen. 14:1–12). God allowed Lot to flee from Sodom to Zoar before he destroyed Sodom and the other three cities with fire and brimstone (19:18–23). Zoar is mentioned later in connection with the destruction of Moab (Isa. 15:5; Jer. 48:34). The exact location of Zoar is uncertain; it may be at the site of es-Safi, located about five miles south of the Dead Sea.

SODOM – סֹדֹם, one of the five cities of the Plain (Gen. 13:12; 19:29). Abraham's nephew, Lot, chose Sodom for his residence, though the people there were wicked, "great sinners before the Lord" (13:8–13). Sometime later, the king of Sodom joined with the kings of the other four cities (Gomorrah, Admah, Bela [Zoar], and Zeboiim) to fight an invading coalition of four eastern kings (of Shinar, Ellasar, Elam, and Goim) in the Valley of Siddim. They were soundly defeated, and Lot was taken captive. Abraham pursued the invading kings and rescued Lot as well as all of the booty taken from Sodom. Upon his return, he was met by the king of Sodom at the Valley of Shaveh. There, the priest Melchizedek blessed him, and the king of Sodom said that Abraham could keep the possessions he had recovered, but Abraham refused (14:1–24).

Sodom is best remembered in the Bible as a thoroughly wicked city destroyed in an act of divine wrath. According to the Genesis narrative, God made the plan to destroy Sodom (and its sister city Gomorrah) plain to Abraham, who then bargained with God for the city's salvation, arguing that the righteous should not perish on account of the unrighteous. God agreed that if ten righteous people could be found there, the city would be spared (Gen. 18:17–32). Two angels then went to the city and stayed at the house of Lot. At nightfall, the men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that Lot turn the visitors over to them, so that they could rape them. Lot refused, even to the point of offering to let them rape his virgin daughters instead. The angels then told Lot and his family to flee the city, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed when God rained sulfur and fire upon them from heaven (19:1–28).

In later biblical literature, Sodom is cited as a warning of God's wrath and potential judgment (Deut. 29:16–28). The general point is stated succinctly in 2 Pet. 2:6: "By turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes (God) condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly." Isaiah notes that the preservation of a remnant prevents Israel from becoming like Sodom (1:9–10; cf. Amos 4:11; Rom. 9:29), but he says that Babylon will become like Sodom (13:19; Zeph. 2:9 says this of Moab). Jeremiah notes that when a city or nation receives the kind of judgment visited upon Sodom, it becomes totally desolate, so that no one lives there (49:18; 50:40). Lam. 4:6 indicates that the exile of Judea was a worse chastisement than the destruction of Sodom, apparently because the suffering was prolonged, while Sodom "was overthrown in a moment." Ezekiel offers an extended allegory of Jerusalem and her elder sister Samaria and younger sister Sodom (16:44–58). Rev. 11:8 may have this passage in mind when it refers to Jerusalem as the city that is prophetically called Sodom. Elsewhere in the nt, Jesus says that on the day of judgment the people of Sodom will fare better than the residents of towns that do not welcome his followers (Matt. 10:15; Luke

10:12) or, specifically, the residents of Capernaum, who have not repented in spite of the great miracles he worked there; indeed, he says that Sodom would have remained until this day if his miracles had been performed there (Matt. 11:23–24). He also says that the judgment to come upon the earth on the day the Son of Man is revealed will be just like what befell Sodom in the days of Lot (Luke 17:28–30).

The sin of Sodom is construed differently. In Isa. 3:9, the blatant aspect of its sinfulness is emphasized: people “proclaim their sin like Sodom” when “they do not hide it.” Jeremiah likens the prophets of Jerusalem to Sodom, because they “commit adultery and walk in lies” and “strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness” (23:14). In Ezekiel, the “guilt of Sodom” is defined quite specifically: the people of Sodom “had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things” (16:49–50). In Jude 7, the people of Sodom are said to have “indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust.” Most interpreters think that the “unnatural lust” referred to here is an allusion to sex between humans and angels (cf. Jude 6, which alludes to Gen. 6:1–4). If, instead, it refers to a desire for men to have sex with other men, then this would be the only passage in the Bible that calls attention to that aspect of the Sodom story.

THE SIN OF SODOM – Ezekiel 16:48–54 (NRSV)

⁴⁸ As I live, says the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. ⁴⁹ This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. ⁵⁰ They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it. ⁵¹ Samaria has not committed half your sins; you have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed. ⁵² Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have brought about for your sisters a more favorable judgment; because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous. ⁵³ I will restore their fortunes, the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes along with theirs, ⁵⁴ in order that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all that you have done, becoming a consolation to them.

A FEW OTHER MENTIONS OF SODOM & GOMORRAH

Deuteronomy 29:22–25 (NRSV)

²² The next generation, your children who rise up after you, as well as the foreigner who comes from a distant country, will see the devastation of that land and the afflictions with which the Lord has afflicted it— ²³ all its soil burned out by sulfur and salt, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, unable to support any vegetation, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord destroyed in his fierce anger— ²⁴ they and indeed all the nations will wonder, “Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?” ²⁵ They will conclude, “It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.

Isaiah 13:19 (NRSV)

¹⁹ And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.

Jeremiah 50:40 (NRSV)

⁴⁰ As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbors, says the Lord, so no one shall live there, nor shall anyone settle in her.

Amos 4:11 (NRSV)

¹¹ I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a brand snatched from the fire; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord.

MOABITES – The people descended from Moab, Lot’s son. They were closely linked with their northern neighbors, the Ammonites, with whom they later shared a border. Moab is known from several ancient sources. According to the inscriptions of Pharaoh Ramesses II (ca. 1250 BCE), an Egyptian army passed through Moab and plundered some cities. According to the Bible, contacts between Moab and Israel came in the attempt by Moses to negotiate a safe passage for the Israelites through Moabite territory, i.e., the plateau east of the Dead Sea bordered on the north by the Arnon River and on the south by the Zered (Judg. 11:17). Other sources note that Moab’s territory was given to it by God (Deut. 2:9), yet the Moabite king Balak hired a prophet/diviner named Balaam to curse the Israelites (Num. 22–24). Israel camped in

the plains of Moab before entering the promised land, territory north of the Arnon River extending as far north as “opposite Jericho” (Num. 35:1; Deut. 1:5). This brief sojourn was remembered as detrimental to Israelite religion (Num. 25). Contact between Moab and Israel is mentioned in Judges, where a Moabite king named Eglon had extended his control over Benjaminites in the hill country and valley near the City of Palms (probably Jericho). This account is another indication that Moabite territory extended at times considerably north of the Arnon River. A left-handed Benjaminite assassinated Eglon, providing a period of peace for the region (Judg. 3:12–30). The story of Ruth is also set in the period of the judges and concerns the manner in which this Moabite woman came to Bethlehem, ultimately married, and became King David’s great-grandmother. Both Saul and David fought with the Moabites, the latter subduing them (1 Sam. 14:47; 2 Sam. 8:2). Moab’s history remains somewhat obscure in the accounts of the divided monarchy, as Moab is mentioned only occasionally (2 Kings 3; 13:20; 24:2). Prophets often spoke against Moab (Isa. 15–16; Jer. 48; Zeph. 2:8–11).

AMMONITES – A people who lived east of the Jordan River, in the area of the modern state of Jordan. The capital city was called Rabbah. Its ancient remains are located in the heart of modern Amman. According to Gen. 19:30–38, a son was born to Lot, Abraham’s nephew, named Ben-ammi. This child is reputed to be the ancestor of the Ammonites. His half brother is Moab, ancestor of the Moabites, who lived south of the Ammonite region. Conflicts between the Ammonites and Israel arose early in their respective political histories. Sometime after the Israelites had entered the land of Canaan, they were defeated by a coalition of Ammonites and Philistines. Jephthah, the son of Gilead and a prostitute, rallied Israel to battle against them (Judg. 10:6–11:40). In later battles, the Ammonites were defeated by Saul at Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam. 11) and then by David at Rabbah (2 Sam. 11:14–21). Much that happened to the Ammonites after those defeats is obscure, but the defeats by Israel did not subdue them permanently. As the political fortunes of both Israel and Judah waned in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, Ammonite culture continued to develop, a conclusion substantiated by both epigraphic and artifactual evidence. Ammonites referred to in later biblical literature include Tobiah in the book of Nehemiah (2:10, 19; 4:3) and Achior in the book of Judith (5:5; 6:5; 14:5). See also 1 Macc. 5:6; 2 Macc. 5:7