CHAPTER II

THE DIALOGUE ON JUST PUNISHMENT (Gen 18:16–33)

Gen 18:16–33 provides a unique example of the dialogue between Abraham and the Lord. The passage cannot, apparently, be ascribed to the original Yahwistic account of the destruction of Sodom, whose basic framework is preserved in chapters 18 and 19. The view generally prevalent amongst recent commentators is that the text in its present form emerged after the fall of Jerusalem in 587, and it does in fact have the character of a theological reflection on the problems of righteousness and justice, characteristic of the Exilic and post-Exilic periods.¹

But recognition of the uniqueness of these verses does not imply adequate comprehension of their message. Many exegetes become so involved with questions of literary criticism that they fail to consider the distinctive features of the passage. Equally, they are excessively attracted to other passages dealing with the same, or some similar, theme.² Unfortunately, such comparisons are usually inorganic and superficial, and often obfuscate the text instead of clarifying it.³

Examination of existing work makes it clear that attention must be concentrated on the immediate context and the verses under consideration. Only by so doing is it possible to ascertain their theological starting point and the origin of the thinking they enshrine. It is the present structure of the text that gives us an understanding of its content.


1. Structure and Setting of Abraham’s Plea

In searching for the deeper meaning of the dialogue between Abraham and the Lord, we must consider its setting: Gen 18:1–19:29, something that is especially necessary because the text evolved over a lengthy period. Its current state indicates that all the events took place within the relationship of the three men that appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (18:1). The three men appeared as guests and as the bearers of the Lord’s message and the executors of his will. The nature of the local inhabitants emerges as a result of the visit of this mysterious trio, which is also linked to the reason for the destruction of Sodom and Lot’s deliverance. Abraham and Lot show exemplary respect and offer a generous welcome, whereas the people of Sodom abused outrageously the sacred law of hospitality. So we have here on the one hand an affirmation of the righteousness of Abraham and Lot, and on the other a portrayal of the extreme iniquity of the city-dwellers.

It is clear, from the declaration in 18:17, 20–21 and from the carrying out of the punishment of the people of Sodom directly after their transgression (19:4–9), that this final test was decisive. The destruction of the city had already been virtually decided on because of “the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah,” but God wanted to be sure beyond all question that the sin was in fact so great that destruction had become inevitable. As he puts it: “I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me.” Only after the final outrage is perpetrated, does he decide to execute his judgment. This episode is of crucial importance because, in the context of the whole, it demonstrates clearly that no one who had witnessed such events could defend Sodom or doubt the divine righteousness. Equally clearly, there emerges the rightness of the miraculous deliverance of Lot and his family.

What is the role in this context of 18:16–33, in which Abraham comes into prominence in so curious a fashion?

In 18:16 we read that the men (from 18:2 number three is inferred) set out from Abraham’s encampment near the oaks of Mamre in the direction of Sodom, yet 19:1 states that two angels came to Sodom. Plainly, 18:17–33 was a later insertion into the original framework of the story of the divine decision regarding the destruction of Sodom and its execution. This enlargement of the text brought about the differences in number and designation. In 18:2 and, by implication, 16 there are three men, in 18:22 two men and the Lord, and in 19:1 two angels, so v. 22 must indicate that the three “men” consisted of the Lord and two angels and that ultimately only the latter went on to Sodom, while the Lord remained with Abraham. This verse divides vv. 17–33 into two sections: in vv. 17–21 the Lord is speaking, in vv. 23–33 the initiative passes to Abraham, who pleads that Sodom should be spared.