

Notes on Genesis 5

Intercession and Judgment

(Genesis 18:16 - 19:38)

Fretheim Explores Genesis,
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000

Key Themes

- ◆ Intercessory Prayer
- ◆ Theme of Divine Judgment

Background

- ◆ Biblical Notes:
 - Elsewhere in the Old Testament the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is referred to about 20 times, more than any other story in Genesis (whereas the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is not referred to anywhere else!)
 - In Chapter 13, Lot chooses the Jordan valley (a land as rich as the Garden of Eden) for his flocks and chooses to live in Sodom. When Lot and his family move there, the city was known as evil.
- ◆ Notes on Geology and Geography:
 - Sodom and Gomorrah probably located just south of the Dead Sea.
 - This area is a barren wilderness.
 - It lies within a geographic rift that extends from Turkey and Armenia into East Africa.
 - The lowest point along the rift is the Dead Sea, 1305 feet below sea level. Dead Sea has a 35% salt content.
 - Extensive sulfur (= brimstone) and bitumen deposits and petrochemical springs present
 - Earthquakes can occur
 - An earthquake with associated fires and explosions of petrochemical springs may what destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah

God May Have New Truths to Speak to Us. Divine Revelation is On-going

- ◆ In Genesis 18 we witness a dialog in the mind of God:
 - God is concerned something must be done to check the evil in Sodom and Gomorrah.
 - In Genesis 18:17: God considers whether his concerns should be shared with Abraham.
 - “God does not want to hide from Abraham what God is about in the world. God does not want to keep God’s people ignorant as to what God is doing” (Fretheim).
 - God is not interested in hiding from us

- ◆ 16th chapter of gospel of John: Jesus will send the Spirit to lead us into the truth.
 - We do not have all the truth about God in hand. God may have new truths to speak to us.
 - The more we know about God, the more God is a mystery

God is Slow to Anger

- ◆ God hears the outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah
- ◆ Yet God moves to judgment slowly. He consults Abraham. “He is eager to avoid judgment whenever possible.” (Fretheim)
- ◆ Ezekiel 18:32: God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone.
- ◆ “God will go to great lengths to find a different future.” (Fretheim)

Intercessory Prayer

- ◆ God has not made a final decision about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and God consults with Abraham. God is interested in what Abraham thinks. Abraham’s input is important. He brings “new ingredients” into God’s thinking.
- ◆ “God has so entered into relationship with us that God is not the only one who has something important to say. What human beings think, what human beings say will contribute in a genuine way to the shape of the future. God has determined that people’s insights are important for the shaping of the future.” (Fretheim)
- ◆ When we pray, We give to God our insight, our energy and passion, our decisiveness. We bring new possibilities to God’s thinking.

Will Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What’s Right?

- ◆ Abraham’s intercession before God is very blunt
- ◆ Abraham’s argument presumes a “moral order” that even God is bound by. And God accepts this presumption.

The Sin of Sodom

- ◆ A common notion: the sin was homosexual behavior.
 - However the story’s focus is more on sexual *violence* and savage inhospitality (the threatened gang rape of the visitors in Lot’s house).
 - Jesus uses this text in reference to hospitality to strangers
- ◆ Furthermore:
 - Ezekiel Chapter 16:48-55: speaks of a wide range of sins of Sodom and Gomorrah: neglect of poor and needy, greed, luxury.
 - God uses language of outcry when speaking of the sins of Sodom: this is language used for those oppressed.
- ◆ The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are thus wide-ranging and complex, sins we ourselves cannot say we are free from.

A God who Works for Good in the Midst of Great Evil

- ◆ Lot's offers his own daughters to the mob to spare the young men
 - this is to be condemned, and raises the question to what degree the sinfulness of Sodom has changed Lot
- ◆ Lot's daughters later have incestuous relations with Lot, which appears to be an example of how sin begets sin, "What goes around comes around."
- ◆ A son results from this union: Moab, who is progenitor of Ruth, who is a progenitor of Jesus.
- ◆ "Even out of the worst of family situations, God can bring goodness, life, and blessing to the world." (Fretheim page 476 in the New Interpreter's Bible)

Moral Order Effects Cosmic Order: the Judgment of God Reflected in the Negative Consequences of Sin

- ◆ The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an ecological catastrophe.
- ◆ The text links human sin and negative effects on the environment: "Moral order effects cosmic order."
 - This does *not* mean that natural disasters are judgments of God. Natural disaster are part of the free workings of nature.
 - The text *does* imply that human sin can negatively effect the natural world and accumulate to such a degree that it may lead to a natural disaster.
- ◆ More generally, the fact that there are negative consequences of sin (the principles "We reap what we sow" and "What goes around comes around") is a means by which God mediates the effects of sin so that sin and evil do not go unchecked in the world. That there are negative consequences to sin is a reflection of divine judgment against sin and evil.

Why did Abraham stop at 10 people? Corporate Justice: The "Critical Mass" of Righteous People to "Leaven" a Sinful Community

- ◆ Why should the righteous and the good seem to fare no better than the wicked?
- ◆ A number of righteous people in a community can effect how that community lives, grows, and moves into the future.
 - Their righteousness can outweigh the accumulative effects of sin and evil (Reverse of the "bad apple" theory). That is, a few righteous people can mediate or "leaven" the effects of sin and evil in a community to such a degree that the community can still move into the future that God intends.
 - For such a critical mass of the righteous, God will spare the wicked. (And it may appear the wicked fare as well as the righteous).
- ◆ However, there must be a "critical mass:" of such people. The reality is that at a certain point, the number of righteous will be unable to sufficiently reverse the effects of sin and evil. Abraham may have stopped at 10 righteous people in recognition of this.
- ◆ We don't know what the "critical mass" of righteous is for our communities.

- “We should pray and we should act as if we indeed make the difference in a given situation, so that what we have to say, and what we have to do, will help shape the future of the society of which we are apart . . . so we act as if we truly make a difference for the future. . . And God will take what we say and what we do into account in moving into the future” (Fretheim).

References

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm#bible2>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.