

Genesis 18:1-15

“Did Abraham Serve Meat and Dairy Together?”

“Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.’ And they said, ‘So do, as you have said.’ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead *it* and make bread cakes.’ Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave *it* to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed *it* before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. Then they said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ He said, ‘I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’ And the LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, “Shall I indeed bear a *child*, when I am *so* old?” Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.’ Sarah denied *it* however, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. And He said, ‘No, but you did laugh.’”

Within the discussion as to whether or not it is permitted to mix meat and dairy products (per Exodus 23:19; 34:26), something certainly prohibited by traditional Jewish applications of the Torah’s dietary laws, is how to handle the scene of the Lord visiting Abraham in Genesis 18:1-15. Bigger issues in the narrative of Genesis 18:1-15 involve the identity of who the visitors actually were (18:1-3), and the promise given to Sarah that within a year she would have a son (18:9-15). Sandwiched between these is a description of Abraham’s hospitality, and the meal he served his guests (18:4-8). People mainly in the more independent sectors of the broad Messianic movement, but also in much of Messianic Judaism itself, have been known to cite Genesis 18:1-15 as evidence that since Abraham apparently served meat and dairy products at the same time, that there is not a strong Biblical basis for separating out meat and dairy products today. Certainly, a more detailed review of what occurred, and a consideration for some opinions as to what took place, is needed.

18:1-2 The scene opens with the statement, “HASHEM appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day” (v. 1, ATS). It is clearly observed, *v’yeira eilav ADONAI* (וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה), “the LORD appeared to him,” or even “YHWH was seen by him” (Fox).¹ V. 13 later indicates that it is the Lord (YHWH) who was the One speaking to Abraham: “And the LORD said to Abraham...”

While on the one hand, God appearing to Abraham should not be seen as a problem—as an Eternal God can presumably be all-powerful to do whatever He wants—on the other hand some considerable debates have arisen regarding the fact that when Abraham sees God, he sees *sheloshah anashim* (שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים) or “three men” (v. 2). There is no agreement among Jewish or Christian interpreters as to whom these three figures were. Many think that given two angels appearing to Lot in Sodom in Genesis 19:1, that these three figures included the Lord and two of His angels. Many Christians in history, however, seeing how these three figures act together, have considered this to be a revelatory clue dropped for the future Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

¹ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 75.

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That Abraham's guests were not mortal is obvious. But what is to be made from the statement, *v'yishtachu artzah* (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ אֶרְצָה)? While often just rendered as "bowed himself to the earth" (NASU), which would have involved Abraham being "prostrated" (Keter Crown Bible), it is also permissible for v. 2 to be rendered with "worship"—given the fact that God Himself is present. An evangelical Christian resource like the *Archaeological Study Bible* has no problem with asserting that in a scene like Genesis 18, the Patriarch Abraham is not only likely encountering God Himself, but more particularly a pre-incarnate manifestation of Yeshua the Messiah:

"In the early days of humanity, before people had the written Word, before the incarnation and before the Holy Spirit had come to make his abode in human hearts, God sometimes appeared and talked with people. One of the loveliest and most instructive of the theophanies (visible appearances of God) is found in Genesis 18...There is good reason to believe that theophanies before the incarnation of Christ were visible manifestations of the pre-incarnate Son of God."³

A Jewish resource like the *Soncino Chumash*, however, claims that "*The LORD* here means the three angels,"⁴ meaning agents of God who get to somehow claim being God without actually being God proper. Yet, Allen P. Ross, a Christian commentator, would assert in contrast, "These three were **the LORD**."⁵ Gerhard Von Rad perhaps makes one of the most expressed assertions that the *sheloshah anashim* or "three men" are all God:

"In the narrative ch. 18.1-16 the notion that Yahweh appeared with two messengers is not the only one possible; it is not even the most likely. That the three men accepted the invitation together, if we were to think of the two as only a guard of honor to Yahweh, would be just as strange as their common question about Sarah (v. 9). One is therefore inclined to think that Yahweh appeared in all three."⁶

The thrust of v. 14 following, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?", indicates that readers should be careful in limiting God to anything here. *Can God manifest Himself in the form of three human people? Yes. Is there more to God than this?* Presumably yes. There are issues for the developing Christology of the Messianic movement to be explored and probed from Genesis 18:1-2. The association with God and three should be taken as sufficient, internal Biblical evidence, that in spite of some of the limitations of traditional Christian Trinitarianism, it is not a doctrine that is somehow "pagan."⁷ More to the point of the narrative of God appearing to Abraham, about to tell both Sarah and him about the coming birth of Isaac, Walter Brueggemann directs, "The story is an unreflective account of a revelatory disclosure. That is enough. The vacillation of identity heightens the hidden source from which the disclosure comes."⁸ While later questions of God's nature are important, the immediate issue of **God showing up on the scene** is to be fascinating enough.⁹

18:3-5 Abraham speaks, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by" (v. 3, NIV). The Hebrew is actually *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי), a title reserved for God. Among major versions, the ESV is different in not rendering this as "my lord," but instead as "O Lord," an indication that God really was there.¹⁰ Abraham, being a good host, directs, "Please let a little water

² Grk. *LXX kai prosekunēsēn epi tēn gēn* (καὶ προσεκύνησεν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν); "did obeisance upon the ground" (NETS).

³ *Archaeological Study Bible*, 29.

⁴ Cohen, 86; also Scherman, *Chumash*, 18; Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 63.

⁵ Ross, in *BKCOT*, 59.

⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 204.

⁷ Consult the article "What Does the Shema Really Mean?" by J.K. McKee, appearing in his publication *Confronting Yeshua's Divinity and Messiahship*.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 158.

⁹ Some Messianic Jewish discussion on Genesis 18:1-2ff appears in Asher Intrater, *Who Ate Lunch With Abraham: The appearances of God in the form of a Man in the Hebrew Scriptures* (Peoria, AZ: Intermedia Publishing Group, 2011), pp 1-9.

¹⁰ Alexander, in *ESV Study Bible*, 81, further explains,

"The term here (Hb. 'Adonay) is a distinctive one for God in the OT (e.g. 20:4). The polite term of respect 'my lord' (Hb. 'adoni) has a slight difference of spelling, affecting the last vowel (e.g. 23:6). The ESV text renders the Hebrew, while the

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be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree" (v. 4). He then proceeds, as v. 5 details, to offer his guests some bread:

"I fetch a morsel of bread [*pat-lechem*, פַּת־לֶחֶם], 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'" (RSV).

18:6-8 The preparations for the meal begin. "Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Quick, three seahs of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!'" (v. 6, NJPS). While English versions often only have "three measures of fine flour" (NASU, et. al.), *shelosh se'im qemach solet* (שְׁלוֹשׁ סְאִים קִמּוֹחַ סֹלֶת), which Alter has actually rendered as "three seahs of choice semolina flour," was no small amount. An ancient *seah* (סֵאָה), measured somewhere in the range of "12.148 litres (= 10.696 qts.)" (*CHALOT*).¹¹ That a significant luncheon of some kind is being readied, is fairly detectable. Vs. 7-8 further state how a calf and curds and milk would be provided at this meal:

"Then Abraham ran to the cattle, took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the youth who hurried to prepare it. He took cream and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed these before them; he stood over them beneath the tree and they ate" (ATS).

Abraham's hospitality to his guests is undeniable. He has prepared a significant feast for them. The *Archaeological Study Bible* is right to describe, "Hospitality was one of the most highly regarded virtues of the ancient world. Social protocol required an actual meal to exceed what was first offered. Thus Abraham ordered fresh bread, a calf and a mixture of milk and yogurt. The fresh meat was particularly generous—not a normal staple in the ancients' daily diet."¹² *IVPBBC* further details how the meal served would have been consistent with others in the Ancient Near East:

"The three seahs of flour (c. twenty quarts) used to make bread again reflects Abraham's generosity to his guests. The method of baking, since nomadic people lacked ovens, would be placing the dough on the sides of a heated pot or dutch oven. This produced a slightly raised, circular loaf of bread. Curds (yogurt) and milk are served along with the meal as customary side dishes and normal byproducts of the herd."¹³

Abraham's generosity, given the desert and bedoin culture of him and his party, caring for their flocks and herds, was most significant. Christian commentators and examiners, are not so focused on how the meal Abraham served *was served*, but more on the fact that Abraham freely gave out of his abundance—to a visitor who was God. John E. Hartley simply states, "After Sarah and the servant had prepared the food, he set before his visitors **curds** (a rich yogurt made from milk fat), **milk**, and tender veal."¹⁴ Jewish interpreters, given later instructions like Exodus 23:19 and 34:26, from which traditional applications requiring the separation of meat and dairy products are derived, have understandably been a bit more keen to think about how the meal Abraham set before his guests was prepared and served.

It is witnessed in some Jewish resources on the Torah, that various Jewish interpreters have concluded that the milk products served by Abraham were served first, and were then followed by the meat products. J.H. Hertz' *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, for example, asserts, "the guests were given curd and milk to slake their thirst and refresh them (cf. Judges IV, 19), and then followed the meal proper, which consisted of the calf. This procedure would be quite in accord with the dietary laws."¹⁵ The Orthodox Jewish *ArtScroll Chumash* similarly states, "First Abraham served the dairy items, for they required little preparation. Only after his guests had slaked their thirst and hunger did he bring out the full meal that consisted of calves' meat."¹⁶ Of course, as v. 8 acknowledges, the

footnote represents the different spelling. If the spelling in the Hebrew text is correct—and there is no reason to doubt it—then Abraham recognizes that one of his visitors is a divine manifestation."

¹¹ *CHALOT*, 251.

¹² *Archaeological Study Bible*, 29.

¹³ Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, 50.

¹⁴ Hartley, *Genesis*, 178.

¹⁵ Hertz, 63.

¹⁶ Scherman, *ArtScroll Chumash*, 79.

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order of the food served was *chemah v'chalav u'ben-ha'baqar* (חֵמָאָה וְחָלָב וּבֶן-הַבָּקָר), “butter, milk and the calf” (Keter Crown Bible) or “cream and milk and the young ox” (Fox).¹⁷

Messianic readers of vs. 6-8, upon seeing various Jewish interpreters conclude that milk products were served first, and then later meat products were served—might think that this is splitting hairs a bit, or that later Jewish applications of the dietary laws have been anachronistically read into what Abraham actually did. Yet it cannot be avoided that in an Ancient Near Eastern world with no refrigeration, and certainly where the meal set before Abraham’s guests had to be prepared, that milk products could have been set before his guests first, and the meat products later, given the amount of time it would have taken to butcher a calf and roast it. It is not outside the realm of possibilities at all for the meat products to be served later, even accounting for some of the traditional times of digestion required by later Judaism to eat a milk or meat item, followed by the another.

18:9-15 Abraham and his guests were apparently eating together for some time, as his wife Sarah was listening from the tent door as to what was happening (vs. 9-10). Any of the discussions which transpired are not recorded, but what is acknowledged is that given the advanced age of Abraham and Sarah (v. 11), Sarah laughed when she was told that within a year she would give birth to a child (vs. 12-15). If the meal was actually served to Abraham’s guests in various courses, with milk products served first, then followed secondly by meat—and this took several hours—it is possible that Sarah did overhear some of the conversation between Abraham and his guests, which would have been focused around Abraham’s faithfulness and steadfastness. If this kind of talk did take place, then it can serve to highlight some of Sarah’s momentary human weakness in being told she will have a son, but one which was obviously overcome further on (Hebrews 11:11ff).

18:1-15 application Among kosher-friendly Messianic people today, will be those who read Genesis 18:1-15 from the perspective that Abraham served meat and dairy products at the same time, and thus the separation of meat and dairy by later Judaism is widely inappropriate. And, there will be those following traditional Jewish interpretations of Genesis 18:1-15 who will conclude that Abraham served dairy products first, followed later by meat products, essentially adhering to later codified applications which would call for the separation of meat and dairy. Reflective of this latter view would be Eby, in his 2012 book *Biblically Kosher*:

“In this narrative, Abraham shows hospitality to angelic visitors. Does this suffice as proof of the permissibility of meat and dairy together?”

“We should note, first of all, that the text does not suggest that the curds and milk were combined with the calf in a single dish. Nor does it say that they ate them both at the same time.

“Rather, the Talmudic sages point out the superfluous words ‘that he had prepared’ (literally, ‘that he made’). Since it is already obvious that the calf was prepared, what additional information is communicated by this phrase? They explain that this indicates that each food was brought when it was ready [b. *Bava Metzia* 86b].

“Selecting, slaughtering, and cooking a calf takes considerable time, even when done hastily. If the curds and milk were already prepared, it would make sense not to have his guests wait, but to serve the meal in courses. A long drawn-out meal in courses would be more extravagant and in keeping with the culture...

“The text is silent about how the meat and dairy were prepared and served; the simplest reading does not by any means suggest it was a single dish. We might speculate that the foods were served together. We might speculate that they were served separately. Both positions are equally speculative, so from a strictly biblical viewpoint, this passage cannot be used as proof of either position.

“Even if Genesis 18 were an example of meat and dairy served together, it does not give us license to do so. This narrative is not given in a legislative context. It is a recounting of what actually happened in the real world, not a set of instructions for us to follow. We cannot look at the

¹⁷ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 76.

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events in Abraham's life and say, 'Since he did it, so can I.' That would be a misuse of those stories. After all, the main point in this narrative is the hospitality of Abraham, not his recipes."¹⁸

Many Messianic people today who believe that it is acceptable to eat meat and dairy products together, not considering it to be in violation of the dietary laws, will appeal to Genesis 18:1-15 to substantiate their position. While they are free to think that separating meat and dairy products is not explicitly required by the Torah, they should not approach Genesis 18:1-15 haphazardly, as though everything at the banquet Abraham served the Lord was prepared and brought out all at once. A little more caution and understanding for those who hold to a slightly higher level of kosher, which will involve separation of meat and dairy, is to be advised. For surely, such people have evaluated Genesis 18:1-15 as well, and all of us might need to give one another a wider berth at times.

¹⁸ Aaron Eby, *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), 103.

Indeed, our bigger issue with Eby should be that he labels the visitors, "angelic visitors," which may beg a number of poignant questions about his (low) Christology.