

**Introduction**

Only Abraham is described as “*the friend of God.*” No other personality, not even Moses or David is given this designation in the Bible. **JAMES 2:24.** If your Bible knowledge is good you may counter this claim with, “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (**Ex. 33:11 NIV**) but the Bible does not go so far as to describe Moses as “the friend of God.” This title is ascribed to Moses in later extra-biblical rabbinic literature.

James introduces this friendship as a second result of Abraham's active faith: *he was called the friend of God.* The NIV separates this statement from the quotation of **Genesis 15:6**, implying that it is not a second scriptural text. This is appropriate, since the precise phrase is not found in the Old Testament. However, two Old Testament verses call Abraham 'the one loved by God' ( אֱהָבָה *ahab*, beloved) (“Abraham Your friend” NIV) (**2 Ch. 20:7; Is. 41:8**; cf. also **Isaiah 51:2** and **Dan. 3:35** LXX, cf. JB) and the title was a popular one for Abraham in intertestamental literature.<sup>1</sup> James cites it as an indication of the privileged status Abraham was given on account of his deep faith and practical obedience.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?*

<sup>22</sup> *You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;*

<sup>23</sup> *and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God.*

<sup>24</sup> *You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:21-24)*

In many ways the passage we are looking at is a demonstration of what friendship with God is about.

**GOD’S RELATIONSHIP WITH ABRAHAM**

A key passage in this chapter (Gen 18) is the description God gives of His relationship with Abraham.

**Gen 18:17** *The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,*

The God who created the universe and upholds it by His Mighty Power debates about whether to tell Abraham about His intentions about the evil city of Sodom. Should He take Abraham into His confidence?

Why would the Almighty be posing this question? There are two reasons.

First, God knew Abraham.

"Because I know him," says God of Abraham, "that he will command his children and his household after him that they shall keep the way of God, to do *zedakah* (righteousness) and justice." (18:17-19) <sup>3</sup>

The NIV translates this verse "For I have chosen him" (יָדָא *yada*) but it could just as accurately be translated, "Because I know him." Like an anchor in the middle of this chapter the things that precede and follow this statement are dependent on it. It is the relationship between God and Abraham that determines God's actions and Abraham's faithful response. This echoes the connection that James made earlier of the relation between faith and faithfulness in actions. (James 2:21-24)

Second God had made a covenant for Abraham.

*Gen 15:18 On that day **the LORD made a covenant** with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,*

***Gen 17:2 And I will make my covenant** between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."*

Nehemiah reminds us that God keeps His covenants.

***Neh 1:5 I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments;***

Why is this relevant for us you may be asking? It is because we are in relationship with God on the same basis as Abraham. First we are God's friends.

***John 15:14 You are my friends** if you do what I command you.*

***John 15:15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends,** because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*

***John 15:16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.***

Second we are relationship with God on the basis of His covenant with Jesus.

***Heb 10:16 "This is the covenant** that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws upon their heart, and on their mind I will write them," He then says,*

***Heb 10:17 "and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."***

If we are indeed in a relationship with God, on the same basis as Abraham, is it so far fetched to think that God would share His thoughts and plans with us? Is this not what Jesus said was the difference between being slaves and friends? That we would know what our Master is doing. This gives prayer a new dimension- that we can converse with God about the things that are important to Him.

What is God's plan for South Africa, for the Middle East – if we are to pray according to the will of God then we should at least learn to converse with God about them.

The passage (Gen 18) begins with a verse that seems to be out of place.

<sup>1</sup>The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

So here we have Abraham sitting in the shade of his tent and contemplating an appearance of God. The Rabbis debated the reason this verse appears as it does. There is no other instance in the Torah of God revealing Himself to His creatures without the express purpose of delivering a message, uttering a blessing or a promise, or issuing a command. What message, if any, did the Almighty deliver in this instance?

The Rashbam (a Hebrew acronym for רשב"ם (Rabbi Shmuel son of Meir) (c.1085 - c.1158), Rambam (Moses ben Maimon; in Hebrew he is known by the acronym of רמב"ם (Rambam.) and others maintain that this opening verse is nothing more than a title to the story that follows, a general statement, the particulars of which, are elaborated on in the succeeding narrative. In other words, the succeeding verses from verse two onwards do not constitute a detached narrative of new events but are merely an intensely concrete elaboration of the Cryptic introductory statement in the first verse. This is the point made by Rashban in his commentary:

"And the Lord appeared unto him"—How?

Through the arrival of three angels in the guise of men.

Other Sages, whom Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi, ר"ש, better known by the acronym Rashi, 1040 – 1105), and Ramban (רמב"ן Nahmanides - Moshe ben Nahman Gerondi 1194 – c. 1270) echo, have a different interpretation:

"And the Lord appeared to him"—to visit the sick. According to R. Hama bar Hanina (Hanina bar Hama רב אמינה died ca. 250: ): It was the third day since Abraham had been circumcised and the Holy One blessed be He came to inquire regarding his health.<sup>4</sup> Both opinions are praiseworthy and we can learn from them both instead of rejecting one and accepting the other.

Unlike most of us, Abraham's predominant experience of prayer was of God taking the initiative to speak to him. Throughout his life it was God who made contact with Abraham. God did this in many ways.

A He appeared to Abraham

**Gen 12:7** *The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.*

**Gen 17:1** *Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless.*

**Exo 6:3** and I **appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them.**

A He came in a vision

**Gen 15:1** After these things the word of **the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."**

A He spoke to Abraham

**Gen 12:1** Now **the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; Gen 13:14; Gen 15:13; Gen 17:2**

Quite how God spoke to Abraham we are not told. Whether it was an audible voice or within Abraham's own thoughts we do not know. The important point that these occurrences illustrate for us is that God is not silent – He speaks.

The relationship between the adoration of God and the service of one's fellow human beings is demonstrated by Abraham and taught by Jesus in the summation of the Torah (Matt 22:36-40). The transition from the contemplation of God to the hospitality shown to the three strangers may seem like an interruption of a sublime moment but to the writer of the Torah the one is a natural outworking of the other. The Rashbam is certainly correct to equate the arrival of the strangers with the revelation of God.

Abraham's righteousness (*tzedakah*) is a trait which Abraham cultivated to the extent that it came to define his very identity.

3 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he **hurried** from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

4 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by.

5 Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree.

6 Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

7 So Abraham **hurried** into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread."

8 Then he **ran** to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

Abraham is in a hurry. Notice the description of the way he goes about offering hospitality. We are told twice that he hurried and once that he ran. His enthusiasm to fulfill the requirement of hospitality is indicative of the inspiration he had drawn from the appearance of God.

**God's Promise and Sarah's Laughter**

- 9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.  
"There, in the tent," he said.
- 10 Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.
- 11 Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.
- 12 So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master<sup>f</sup> is old, will I now have this pleasure?"
- 13 Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'"
- 14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."
- 15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."  
But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

**Abraham Pleads for Sodom**

- 16 When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.
- 17 Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"
- 18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.
- 19 For I have chosen (know) him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Abraham's guests had another mission to attend to that day: to destroy the city of Sodom and its four sister-cities, "Because the cries of [the victims of] Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous." Abraham's love of his fellow man does not allow him to stand by silently:

- <sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous  
<sup>21</sup> that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."  
<sup>22</sup> The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

### **GOD'S WILL IS NOT ALWAYS SELF-EVIDENT.**

Listening to some believers talk you could be excused for thinking that in their own estimation, their wills had become synonymous with God's will.

In the reading from **Gen 18** Abraham dares to question God.

Many believers are afraid to question as though somehow it is a sign of faithlessness.

However, Abraham's questions have nothing to do with a loss of faith. Two things make Abraham question The first is the character of God as he knew Him and the second is the seeming injustice in God's proposal.

**Gen 18:23** *Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"*

**Gen 18:24** *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?*

**Gen 18:25** *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?**"*

This was God, but not God as Abraham had known and loved Him. Everything he had known about God was in question – he just could not make sense of it. He is dismayed as he stands before a God he no longer understands.

How we question when God no longer seems to make sense is very important. There are some who because they cannot make sense of an event or an attribute of God turn to unbelief and their own understanding to resolve the issue. This is often a ruinous choice.

Abraham questions God in the context of faith seeking understanding.

It is one thing to plead for mercy on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom it is another matter altogether to question the character of Almighty God.

**Gen 18:27** *Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, **I who am but dust and ashes.**"*

**Gen 18:27** *And Abraham replied, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. (NNAS)"*

Abraham is torn between his fear of the Almighty (which was considerable) and his yearning that the God of Justice should be who he has known Him to be in the past.

You cannot have a living relationship with God and never stand where Abraham stood in this situation. I am reminded of a statement by the great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, *"We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have the answers."*

Questions about God's ways and thoughts are inevitable.

Three examples of the apparent injustice of God can be found in the;

A choosing Jacob and rejecting Esau even though Jacob had stolen his birthright,

A or God's strange wrath against Uzzah who stretched out to stop the ark of the covenant from falling and was struck down dead,

A or the strange justice of the clearing of the Promised Land by violence against it's Canaanite inhabitants.

If we close our minds to everything about God that we find uncomfortable we are going through empty motions when we pray. We end up praying to an idol, a god that we have fashioned with our own imaginations, a god for our own comfort – not God as He really is. True prayer is a response to the true God as He reveals more and more of Himself to us through His Spirit and His Word. This encounter with the God is often an uncomfortable experience – take Isaiah for example;

*Isa 6:5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"*

As Abraham negotiated with God he discovered Him to be the same God of the covenant only bigger and more awesome. Abraham became aware of how little he knew God – this righteous God whose judgements were beyond comprehension. Abraham is left with the knowledge that God is and remains righteous and just. His confidence in God had developed and he had grown as a man of God through this encounter in prayer. He is left to contemplate with awe the wonder of God and His creation.

Abraham Heschel writes, *"Awe precedes faith; it is at the root of faith. We must grow in awe in order to reach faith. We must be guided by awe to be worthy of faith. Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of die religious Jew. It is "the beginning and gateway of faith, the first precept of all, and upon it the whole world is established." (Zohar Vol 1 pg 11b).* In Judaism, *yirat hashem*, the awe of God, or *yirat shamayim*, the "awe of heaven," is almost equivalent to the word "religion." There is thus only one way to wisdom: awe. Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a market place for you. The loss of awe is the great block to insight. A return to reverence is the first prerequisite for a revival of wisdom, for the discovery of the world as an allusion to God. Wisdom comes from awe rather than from shrewdness. It is

evoked not in moments of calculation but in moments of being in rapport with the mystery of reality. The greatest insights happen to us in moments of awe.<sup>5</sup>

What about you?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cf. Philo, *On Sobriety*, 5b; *On Abraham*, 273; Jubilees 19:9.
- 2 Moo Douglas J. James Tyndale New Testament Commentaries.
- 3 Parshah of Vayeira from [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)
4. Leibowitz, Nehama. *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) Israel*. Maor Wallach Press
5. Heschel, Abraham, J. 1955 *God in Search of Man*. New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.