

Parashah Fifteen

Genesis 18:1-33; Isaiah 33:17-34:12; Luke 8:40-56

Notes by Tim Hegg

HaShem's Visitation

It is remarkable that in our times the issue of God's incarnation has once again been raised as a nagging question. With the post-Holocaust "theology" of modern Judaism teaching that it is impossible (because it is beneath Him) for God to ever participate in material substance, many Messianic congregations are once again being confronted with a crucial question: is it possible for Yeshua to be God in the flesh, to actually be עִמָּנוּאֵל, Immanuel, "God with us?"

At the basis of this question is the notion that God could never take on physicality, because if He did, He would be less than the eternal God, and would, by definition, not be God! This Greek philosophical method of thinking may pose a problem for the western mind, but it did not do so to the ancient Hebrew. God appears throughout the Tanach in the form of a man.

Yet clearly another issue confronts the Messianic believer when this topic is raised: don't the Apostolic Scriptures teach that God is invisible and that no one has ever seen Him? Yes, they do. Consider the following:

No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:18)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1Tim 1:17)

who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen. (1Tim 6:16)

So here we have the proverbial problem: the Scriptures must contradict themselves, for on the one hand they teach us that God is invisible (meaning He does not take on physical form) and yet they also teach us that God appears to people in the form of a man. The attempts to solve this "problem" along classical, Greek logic lines have been legion—sometimes intriguing, sometimes ludicrous, but almost always wrong.

Our *parashah* this Shabbat is one of those texts which head the list of "problem" passages for those who maintain that God cannot take on a physical form: it begins, וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה "HaShem appeared to him."

Simple, straightforward, without any explanation as though some eternal reality has collided with temporal substance—no, just simply, “HaShem appeared to him.”

The heading in the Stone Chumash for this section is “Visiting the sick and hospitality to strangers.” God is the One visiting the sick according to the Sages, because they reckon Abraham to have been circumcised only three days earlier. In other words, he was recuperating from a very painful surgery. Yet in his own pain, he still makes every effort to show hospitality to strangers. (The writer to the Messianic Jews [Epistle of Hebrews] might have had a similar perspective, telling the believers of his day, who were facing much suffering, to nonetheless be generous in welcoming strangers into their homes, cf. 13:2). We actually do not know exactly how much time has elapsed since the end of chapter 17 and our text. But to have Abraham sitting in his tent in the middle of the day does seem a bit strange, unless of course he had already worked in the morning and was planning to continue after the heat died down.

But the Stone Chumash makes another interesting and honest statement, regarding v. 3 and the word אֲדֹנָי, *Adonai*, translated “my Lord.” The Chumash note reads: “According to most interpretations, the word אֲדֹנָי in this passage is sacred.” Indeed, the Sages teach that whenever the scribes wrote the word *Adonai* with the vowel *qametz* under the *nun* (as it is here), this always was a reference to יהוה! This interpretation is corroborated in our text by v. 22: “The men had turned from there and went to Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before יהוה.” This verse contains one of the 18 *Tiqqune Sofrim*, the “corrections of the scribes.” These “corrections” are carefully marked in the notes of the Masorah. In this case, the scribes felt it irreverent to say that *Adonai* remained standing before Abraham (which is how the original text reads). Should the Sovereign of the Universe *stand before* (a Hebraic way of noting service) a mere mortal? So the scribes reversed the order of the sentence, and wrote: “while Abraham was standing before HaShem.” This “scribal correction” verifies beyond question that the ancient scribes recognized the “man” who spoke with Abraham was, in fact, God Himself.

So there you have it! HaShem appears to Abraham, eats with him, talks with him, negotiates with him—and the text carries on as though this is normal. There is not one hint of explanation in the text to overcome what we perceive as an insurmountable problem. What is the viewpoint of our text? *That God has always existed in both invisible and visible form, and that this is an eternal and thus essential aspect of His nature.* To say anything less is to fail to let the text speak in its own words, its own language. How is it that the Scriptures can, on the one hand, flatly state that no one

has seen God at any time, and yet plainly say that God has appeared to people? It is really very simple: when God is spoken of as invisible, it is speaking of God as revealed in the Name, or by the designation “Father,” and when God appears to people, it is speaking of the incarnate God, i.e., the Messiah, designated by the name “Son of God,” “Son of Man,” “Immanuel,” “the Word,” as well as other names. Of course, this “simple” reality is infinitely profound! In the midst of our philosophical wrestling with the incarnation of God, we may easily overlook the fact that what is impossible to understand is not that God manifests Himself in the person of His Son, *but that He wants to manifest Himself at all*. After Adam and Eve disobey Him and turn their backs upon Him to follow Satan’s advice, one might logically conclude that HaShem would simply wad the clumps of clay back together and go back to the potter’s wheel to start over! But He does not. Instead, He takes the innocent life of one of His creatures in order to make coverings for His embarrassingly naked people. And though sin clouded their eyes, ears, and mind, God came searching for them in order to call them back to Himself.

Yes, the philosophical roadblocks presented by the opening verse of our *parashah* have often clouded the most obvious message of this passage, which is this: *God cares about His people, and personally attends to the affairs of their lives*. God pays a visit to Abraham! He comes calling on His chosen one to help, aid, encourage, and advance His purposes for him. God is in every way interconnected with the daily lives of His people. What a tremendous reality, and awesome thing, that the eternal God should desire to dwell with mortal men and women!

Yet note how the “problem” our text raises is joined to the blessing it brings: God dwells with His people *in the person of His incarnate Son*. Long before Yeshua came as the man He would forever be, He appears in the history of redemption as the visible revelation of the otherwise invisible Godhead. The mysterious and unexplainable eternal God manifests Himself to His chosen ones in order that they might know Him, and become like Him. He chooses to make Himself known in the “language” of mankind’s existence—in the thought-patterns developed for his mortality.

But instead of accepting the revelation of the invisible God as a wonderful yet deep mystery, the Church, in her ever-increasing chasm with the synagogue, needed to formulate the unexplainable mystery of the Godhead into understandable and logical terms. For some this was impossible, and so Arianism (which denies the deity of Yeshua) became their position. For others, the logical, mathematical systems of Greek thought produced “explanations” for the mystery which later became confessional creeds, the litmus paper for orthodoxy. What one confessed about the “essence”

and “substance” of God made the difference between living or burning!

Has it every struck you that the Scriptures themselves never really attempt to defend what appears to be a blatant contradiction, i.e., that the invisible God shows up as the visible God? Paul, in Acts 20:28, does not even flinch to ascribe blood to God! For him, it was a natural way of thinking. For the western mind, such a statement must lead to an involved philosophical explanation, but for Paul, the blood of Yeshua, freely given on the altar of the cross, was surely the blood of God. For Paul, Yeshua was and is Immanuel, God with us!

And from whom did Paul learn this way of thinking? From none other than Abraham, his father (and ours). Abraham calls the One who appeared to him “the Judge of all the earth” (v. 25), clearly a reference to God. Abraham, the father of the faithful, was himself a man of great faith. He believed what he knew to be true, even when he could not see (i.e., explain) it. What he could not fully explain with the eye of his mind, he nonetheless believed with the eye of faith.

Can we believe God for what He has said, even if our human reasoning cannot provide a “satisfactory” explanation? Can we embrace the invisible God who makes Himself known in the visible Son? Can we live by faith, and not by sight?

And so the invisible God is manifest to Abraham in the pre-incarnate form of a man. He came to Abraham to confirm the blessing He had promised, in spite of the fact that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah had risen to such an extent that it could no longer be tolerated, even by the infinitely patient Creator. So He came to judge the sin of those overcome by their own depravity. Yet in enacting such judgment, He comes to assure His covenant partner, Abraham, that blessing is still his. He does this by giving a direct prophecy of a child that Sarah will bear, a prophecy with a time-frame: “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now the faith of Sarah is tested. Verse 11 literally says, “Sarah had stopped having the periods of women.” That made conception an impossibility. “Now that I am dried up, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?” And the response of the Almighty was: “Is anything too wondrous for HaShem?” The word here translated “wondrous” (the NASB has “too difficult”) is the verb פָּלֵא, *pala’*, which denotes something out of the ordinary, wonderful, miraculous. God was asking Sarah to believe that He could overcome the impossible for her. And then He reiterates his promise: “I will return to you at the set time (לְמוֹעֵד, *lamo’eid*) next year, and Sarah will have a son.” The word “set time” is *mo’ed*, the same Hebrew word used of the yearly festivals. It is from this that some of the Sages suggest

Isaac's birth was on the 15th of Nisan, the first day of *Chag haMatzot*, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, following the Pesach (Passover) seder.

So Sarah laughed to herself, not out loud. She did not realize that the wayfarer was, in fact, the Almighty, and that He knew her inner thoughts. She probably thought to herself (with a bit of a snicker), "Oy, is he mistaken!" But then the Stranger called her on it: "Why did you laugh?" Thinking He could not have known her inner thoughts of disbelief, she denied it. She was frightened: "how could this stranger know my thoughts?" But HaShem would not be put off: "No, but you did laugh." God will continue to pinpoint our hidden cache of unbelief until we admit it, and deal with it.

So the promise has been made specific. Sarah would have a son, and she would birth him in the coming year. God's faithfulness to His promise was being manifest, in spite of the unbelief of Abraham and Sarah. The covenant was secure because it depended upon the faithfulness of God.

Now HaShem turned His attention toward Sodom. But He questions whether He should reveal to Abraham His pending judgment upon the city. After all, Abraham was a covenant partner, and part of the promise included a blessing upon all the nations. That would certainly include the people of Sodom. Perhaps the destruction that would come to Sodom would cause Abraham to question the faithfulness of God to His promises.

In recounting the covenant relationship with Abraham, God reveals a most important aspect: the relationship between faith and faithfulness. Note verse 19:

For I have chosen him, so that he may command 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 upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.

Now here we have a remarkable text. Abraham has been chosen to pass on the ways of HaShem to the next generation, so that they will also walk in obedience to God and His commandments. And the result?—so that the blessings of the covenant promised to Abraham would be realized. But were not the covenant promises unconditional? How is it that only when the children and household of Abraham keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, that the covenant blessings will be realized? The answer is simple yet profound: Those who participate in the faith of Abraham, who have God's ways written upon their hearts, will keep God's ways of righteousness, and will therefore experience the blessing of God. God does not bless the unrighteous—He judges them. Rather, it is God's plan to make His chosen ones righteous by changing their hearts to love and obey Him. As a result, they receive His continued grace and blessing.

So the true descendants of Abraham (cf. John 8:39ff; Rom 2:25ff) are those who live out the faith of Abraham—who keep the ways of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. Note the stark contrast between Abraham and his descendants and the inhabitants of Sodom. God has promised to bless Abraham and his descendants, but He has come to destroy the people of Sodom. Verse 21 is curious: “I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.” Why would the Almighty, Who has already demonstrated His ability to know the secret thoughts of Sarah, need to “go down” to Sodom to investigate their debauchery? Is it possible that He went, as a man, and proclaimed the ways of HaShem to prove once again their unwillingness to submit to God? Perhaps His going there was the last piece of evidence submitted for the verdict of “guilty.”

In the final paragraph of our *parashah*, we have the famous interchange between Abraham and God, in which Abraham bargains for the people of Sodom. It may well be that Abraham had Lot and his family in mind. Surely he would do all in his power to spare their demise.

What exactly was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? We know that they were idolaters, and that their idolatry had grown to include all manner of immorality (all idolatry is inevitably linked to sexual sin). Jeremiah 23:14 says:

Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: the committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; and they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one has turned back from his wickedness. All of them have become to Me like Sodom, and her inhabitants like Gomorrah.

Ezekiel (16:49) gives this notice:

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy.

In the end, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is summed up as a total disregard for the life of one’s fellow man. Making themselves into their own gods, they were entirely self-consumed. When the life of another human being is of no importance, the bottom of depravity has been reached. In our own times, abortion is a frightening litmus test of our own national depravity.

Abraham is witness of the opposite perspective. Even the godless strangers of Sodom are his concern. He wagers with the Almighty for the souls

of Sodom. Surely the righteous Judge of all the earth would not destroy the righteous with the wicked. But in the end, not even ten righteous ones are to be found in Sodom. The reality of mankind's depravity was evident, "that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5).

The contrasts of our *parashah* are heightened by the reading of the *haftarah*. Here, through the prophet Isaiah, the faithful promise of God to His chosen ones is reaffirmed. God will save His people from the nations and bring them to their Land where they will dwell in safety. No longer will they fear the nations but will put their full trust in Hashem. They will proclaim: "For Adonai is our judge, Adonai is our lawgiver, Adonai is our king; He will save us!" (Is 33:22). For their sins will be forgiven (v. 24) meaning that they will have come to faith in Yeshua. The only difference between Israel and Sodom is God's elective love.

And the Apostolic portion, detailing the manner in which the incarnate One comes to heal and to overcome the woes of sin, speaks the same message. Like HaShem, coming to Abraham and bringing news of life, so Yeshua came to secure forever the promises of the Gospel spoken to the patriarch.

Two miracles of healing are mentioned in our Apostolic text: one of a woman who had a haemorrhage of blood for twelve years, and the second, a girl of twelve years who was so sick she died before Yeshua could heed her father's request for help. The account, full of intrigue, tells the story of God's marvellous love. Yeshua and His talmidim had been going from city to city teaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. In their travels they had gone to the regions of the Gerasenes, which most scholars associate with present day Jerash, about 22 miles from Amman, Jordan. There Yeshua had cast out demons from two individuals. Upon returning to the Galil, the people were anxious to meet Him, and particularly a man named Jairus, whose 12 year old daughter was very sick. We only know that this man was an "official of the synagogue," (v. 41), but we cannot be certain what office he held. However, if his name is based upon the Hebrew יְעִיר (*ya'ir*), there is an interesting play on terms. For this word means "He (God) will awaken" (from the root עָוַר, cf. 1Chron 20:5 for an example of the same name with *Qere/Ketiv*), the very thing that would be accomplished for his daughter.

But before Jairus could make his way to summon Yeshua for help, another incident occurred. A woman, plagued by a flow of blood for 12 years, had come secretly to touch the Miracle Worker in hopes of being healed. Thinking He would not notice, she touched His *tzitzit* and was instantly healed (the Greek word κράσπεδον, *kraspedon* is the word used in the Lxx to translate *tzitzit* and is the word found in our text as well). Of course, any pious Jew would have realized that she had just made Him

unclean by such a touch. But what is interesting is that Yeshua, though not seeing her, was aware that “power had gone out” of Him for her healing. Having stopped to inquire who had touched Him, the lady presented herself, and He declared to her, “your faith has made you well. Go in shalom.”

Here we learn an interesting lesson about faith. One could hardly claim that the woman’s faith was perfect or even very mature. Did she think that had she openly sought Yeshua’s healing, He would have avoided her like so many others doubtless had done during her years of uncleanness? Did she think that Yeshua healed by way of “magic,” and that touching Him would convey such magical powers to her? Actually, neither of these questions is pertinent, for the primary point is that she believed Yeshua was able to heal her. Her act of touching His *tzitzit* was, in itself, an act of faith. Here is a demonstration of “faith as small as a mustard seed” that, though small, still accomplished much. Dear reader, is your faith only the size of a mustard seed? Well, that is sufficient to lay hold of the salvation and blessings promised by the Giver of faith! Do not fear—through such faith you can be made whole!

We might presume that this miraculous healing was viewed by Jairus as an unnecessary interruption to his more pressing needs. His daughter was at death’s door and time was of the essence. As he approached Yeshua, hoping to get His attention, the fateful news arrived: his daughter had died. There was no longer any need to trouble the Master about her, or so he thought. But when Yeshua heard the news, He echoed the words proclaimed to the faithful remnant of Israel by the prophets of old: “Do not fear! Only believe.” When Yeshua arrived at the home of Jairus, He met the people weeping and mourning the death of one so young. He immediately told them, “Stop weeping. She has not died, she is merely sleeping.” So incredible were His words that the people snickered at His suggestion. But he took the lifeless child by her hand and said, “Yaldah, Kumi” (יָלְדָה קוּמִי, “child, get up!”). Immediately she arose, and Yeshua instructed them to give her something to eat.

Our story, then, comes full circle: the One Who appeared to Abraham and promised the birth of Isaac, is the same Yeshua Who restores life to the dead. Even as Sarah’s dead womb was no obstacle to the Giver of Life, so the death of Jairus’ daughter presented nothing impossible to the Creator Himself. For Sarah, the problem was that her flow of blood had stopped. The woman in our Gospel text had just the opposite problem: a flow of blood that would not stop. Neither problem was too difficult for God. He brought a child to the barren Sarah and healed the woman with the flow of blood. And in bringing back to life the daughter of Jairus, He proved Himself, once again, to be the Giver of life. With God, nothing is impossible.