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## **SPEAK UP: ABRAHAM'S NEGOTIATION WITH GOD AS A TEACHING MOMENT FOR JUSTICE ADVOCACY**

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### **Abstract**

This article investigates Genesis 18:16–33 as a pedagogical theophany that reveals the interplay between divine justice, mercy, and human moral agency. By employing a qualitative and exegetical method rooted in narrative and theological analysis, the study argues that Abraham's negotiation with God functions not merely as intercessory prayer but as a formative act of justice advocacy. Abraham is portrayed as a prophetic figure shaped through dialogical engagement with God, demonstrating that faith entails bold moral reasoning and relational participation in divine purposes. The narrative serves as a theological prototype, encouraging believers to speak out on behalf of the oppressed. Thus, the text offers a compelling framework for cultivating a prophetic and participatory spirituality in contemporary contexts of injustice.

**Keywords:** theophany; divine justice; mercy; Abraham; Sodom and Gomorrah, relational theology; speak up; advocacy of justice

### **INTRODUCTION**

Interactive narratives in the Bible often present a tension between divine sovereignty and human participation. One of the most explicit pericopes illustrating this tension is Genesis 18:16–33, the dialogue between Abraham and God regarding the impending judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. This narrative is highly significant, as it not only portrays Abraham's prophetic action but also highlights the dialogical dimension of the divine-human relationship. The tension between

God's absolute authority and Abraham's boldness to intervene in a divine decision underscores a crucial theological dynamic: Are humans merely passive recipients of divine will or active participants in the administration of justice?

In this narrative construction, Abraham is not simply praying—he is negotiating. The opening analogy to bargaining in a marketplace underscores the human aspect of this dialogue, yet such imagery demands a stronger theological foundation. Theologians such as Terence

Fretheim and Claus Westermann have referred to this moment as a *didactic theophany*, a divine revelation that serves not merely as communication but as instruction. In this context, Abraham is not challenging God's sovereignty but is being shaped through an ethical discourse that engages moral reasoning and prophetic courage.

The primary question raised by this narrative is not merely "Why did God allow space for negotiation?" but rather "What is the pedagogical significance of Abraham's participation in God's decision?" In many systematic theological traditions, God is portrayed as both immanent and transcendent—possessing absolute will yet open to relationship. This narrative presents a dialectical relationship in which Abraham, as the archetype of God's people, models that faith is not blind obedience but active engagement in the discourse of justice. This narrative element forms the central axis of this article.

Therefore, the key research question posed in this study is: How can the narrative of Abraham's negotiation with God in Genesis

18:16–33 be understood as a pedagogical moment that educates believers to speak up in advocacy for justice? This question is not only theologically interpretive but also practically significant for contemporary faith practice, especially in contexts where justice is often suppressed by absolute and systemic power. By framing this narrative within a hermeneutic of justice, this study aims to demonstrate that the interaction between Abraham and God provides a model of faith engagement in confronting structures of social injustice.

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approach based on narrative exegesis, emphasizing theophanic structure, prophetic discourse analysis, and relational theology. By integrating historical-critical and intertextual theological readings, the author aims to demonstrate that Genesis 18:16–33 is not merely a religious-historical account but also contains a pedagogical value that shapes a paradigm of justice advocacy within the Christian faith. In this sense, the text functions not only as an object of interpretation but also as a source for

public ethics and a spirituality of advocacy.

Specifically, this study highlights that God is not a distant being indifferent to the cries of the victims of injustice but rather a God who listens and invites human participation in ethical discourse. Abraham acts not only as an intercessor but as a justice advocate who dares to articulate moral arguments. This reveals that divine justice is not a monologue but is open to human moral deliberation. In this perspective, “speaking up” is not merely a human right but a theological calling that reflects the character of a just and merciful God.

Ultimately, in a world marked by oppression, marginalization, and systemic violence, Abraham’s narrative is profoundly relevant. It teaches that faith is not passive but proactive in pursuing justice for the oppressed. Through Abraham’s model, Christians are encouraged to understand their spirituality not merely as an inner experience but as a vocation to defend the vulnerable with a courageous voice. This is the pedagogical meaning of the negotiation: God is forming His

people to become prophetic voices amid an unjust world.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research method employed in this study is qualitative, utilizing a library-based exegetical approach. The primary focus is an in-depth analysis of Genesis 18:22–33, with an emphasis on its literary structure, historical context, and theological motifs. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the narrative as a didactic theophany—one that not only reveals divine intent but also invites human moral reasoning. By integrating insights from biblical theology, relational theology, and ethical reflection, this study seeks to explore how the dialogue between Abraham and God serves as a pedagogical model for contemporary justice advocacy. Ultimately, this research aims to explore the narrative’s implications for the development of a prophetic and participatory spirituality that empowers believers to speak out against injustice.

### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the text, this

research involved analyzing its structure in depth, elucidating its meaning and context, and exploring the theological themes present within and surrounding the text.

### **Theophany Type-Scene Structure**

Genesis 18:16-33 is one of God's encounters with a man, described in anthropomorphic language. However, this is not just a style of language because this narrative explicitly tells the story of the meeting between God and man. This event is called theophany (Windsor, 1972)

Encounters between YHWH in human form can be found in other parts of the Pentateuch, such as God's encounter with Abraham at Mamre, which is recorded before this event (Gen. 18:1-15). There are also other well-known events, such as Jacob's struggle with God (Genesis 32:22-32) and God's encounter with Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-20). Delapp wrote, "This pattern, then, can be summarized as follows: (1) the Genesis story presents a context of threat and human doubt, (2) YHWH visibly appears, (3) YHWH restates his promise (DeLapp, 2018, p. 18).

In the context of Genesis 18:16-33, a similar theophany-type scene structure can be observed. In Genesis 18:1-15 it is described that YHWH appeared to Abraham to confirm that Abraham and Sarah would have a son (18:10). Based on Delapp's argument, I organize the structure of Genesis 18:16-33 as follows:

#### **Human doubt**

Sara doubted (18:12-15)

#### **YHWH appears**

Conversation of YHWH with Abraham (18:17-21)

#### **YHWH restates his promise**

God's Promises (18:22-33)

Based on the *theophany type-scene* structure above, it can be concluded that theophany events often occur when people face worries and doubts. In this context, Abraham and Sarah received confirmation regarding God's promise of offspring. Abraham's conversation with God also confirmed God's previous promise. The narrative of Abraham and God's conversation can be seen as a prologue (or first half) to prepare the reader for the epilogue (second half), which is the catastrophe that leads to divine rescue.

### **Explanation of Text**

### *God's Consideration*

In verses 17-19, the reader can see the LORD's monologue, which contains the reasons why God engaged in a conversation with Abraham regarding the punishment of Sodom. Here are some things that can be interpreted from the LORD's soliloquy:

In verse 17, "Shall I hide..." This expression, according to Wenham (2014, p. 18), indicates that Abraham was acting in the role of a prophet. This is in line with the statement of the prophet Amos, "Will disaster come upon a city unless the Lord does it? Surely, the Lord God does nothing without revealing the secret to His servants, the prophets (Amos 3:6b-7) (Wenham, 2014). In His monologue, God established Abraham as a prophet, namely someone who was especially close to Him and was given the gift of knowing God's plans. In the Bible, God calls humans to fulfill a similar role. For example, Moses, Jeremiah, or Daniel (see Ex. 32:12-14; Num. 14:17-19; Jer. 7:16; 11:14; Dan. 9:15-19).

In verse 18, God reaffirms His promise to Abraham. Abraham's descendants would become a great

and mighty nation, through which God's blessing would be bestowed upon the earth. According to Fretheimer, this conversation between God and Abraham is indirectly related to Abraham's interaction with foreign people of different backgrounds from his own. (Fretheim et al., 1996)

In verse 19, God has "chosen" (יִדְעָתִי) literally "for I have known him." This word is also closely related to the expression of love (Keil & Delitzsch, 1866). God set Abraham as an example for his children and descendants to "walk in the way that the Lord has shown. Specifically, the path expected by God is "righteousness and justice." There is thus a clear intention from YHWH to build a community of believers who practice "righteousness and justice." Lyons stated, "The decision to reveal what YHWH is doing is made because of the promise of Gen. 12.1-3, and Abraham's descendants will become a blessing to the nations in part because they had been 'encouraged' to walk on the way of YHWH by the example of Sodom. It is not taken based on a short-term view of the promise that would see Sodom itself being blessed in

Abraham in the present” (Lyons, 2002, 184).

Held argues, "God wants Abraham to train his descendants to do what is just and right, but Abraham cannot teach what he has not yet learned. Abraham needs to learn how to stand up for justice and plead for mercy, so God places him in a situation where he can do just that. Subtly, the text communicates a powerful lesson, one that is learned all too slowly, if at all, by those of us blessed with children: We cannot teach our children values that we do not embody. If Abraham is to father a people who will stand up for what is good, he will first have to do so himself." Regarding verse 19, there is an intention from God to use the events of Sodom and Gomorrah as a "teaching moment." Not only to Abraham but also to his descendants. Through this event, the LORD has theological didactic intentions, especially related to justice and righteousness (Held, 1).

### ***Outcry of People***

What was the crime of Sodom and Gomorrah? What made this city worthy of God’s punishment? The

reader is given incomplete information about the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 19 afterward may provide some clues about the crime. However, it is interesting to see that one of the reasons God had to act was because of the "outcry" against the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Some scholars see a connection between the “outcry” and other passages in the Old Testament (Fields, 1997). There are several narratives in which God hears the cries of people. For example when the Israelites cried out to God, “Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant” (Exodus 2:23-24). Another more dramatic example is the killing of Abel by Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10). Both Abel and the Israelites were in an oppressed position. Their rights were trampled upon. They had no ability or opportunity to retaliate (DeLapp, 2018).

Was the cry to Sodom and Gomorrah the cry of those who experienced violence and hostility, as

Genesis 19 shows? This narrative does not provide a definitive answer. However, we can conclude here that God responded to humanity's cries of injustice and unrighteousness.

### ***God and Abraham's Negotiation***

This narrative positions Abraham as a man who is not insolent. Abraham was not a protestor against God's decision. Many times Abraham avoided God's anger and used polite conversation strategies. Abraham proposed that Sodom and Gomorrah could escape punishment if there were 50 righteous people. The number dropped to 10.

Why did Abraham end up engaging in the above bargaining? In the first request, Abraham seemed to be "teaching" God, "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death 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?" From the bargaining process, what exactly did Abraham ask for? It is not clear from the text what Abraham's motive was. Lyons concludes with several possible interpretations, including: (1) Abraham wanted the righteous in Sodom to be saved; (2)

Abraham wanted to save Sodom; (3) Abraham wanted to save Lot (Lyons, 2002).

However, upon examining Abraham's request, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, Abraham wanted the judgment to be carried out justly because God is a just Judge. Secondly, Abraham was concerned that the righteous, who were the minority population, would be affected by God's decision. Thirdly, Abraham wanted a distinction between the sinners and the righteous.

Scholars still differ on whether Abraham wanted a separation between the sinners and the righteous or Abraham wanted God to cancel the punishment on Sodom because there were righteous people in it. The vagueness of Abraham's proposal was met with a clear answer from God. God saw that the presence of the righteous in the city could cancel the punishment. God saw that there was an aspect of collective or corporate salvation in His decision. However, this condition was not achieved. YHWH did not show His objection to being involved in this bargaining process. YHWH still answered all of Abraham's

requests. YHWH remained there until Abraham was finished with his arguments. Held gives an interesting interpretation; the point, instead, is how far God will go in teaching Abraham to speak up in the face of injustice. God is willing to humble Himself by standing and waiting for Abraham in order to ensure that He intervenes on behalf of the innocent (Held).

### **Theological Themes**

Several themes can arise in the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah. Many interpretations emerge from the story. These range from questions about the nature of God's violent texts to reinterpretations of sexual orientation. There are a few things that I will point out here:

#### ***Justice and Salvation***

God's justice is demonstrated by His involvement in the process of punishment. He does not distance Himself and passes judgment with a blind eye. Chrysostom comments:

I am going down to see." I mean, does the God of all move from place to place? No indeed! It does not mean this; instead, as I have often remarked, he wants to teach us by the concreteness of the expression that there is a need

to apply precision and that sinners are not condemned on hearsay, nor is sentence pronounced without proof.

In carrying out the judgment,

God involved human beings as partners in the decision. Lyons concludes that at the end of the conversation between YHWH and Abraham, both parties agree that the primary focus is to save the city of Sodom based on the presence of good people in it, perhaps just one person. However, it is not yet clear whether women (or children) would be considered good people or not. If YHWH found one good person (the gender is still unclear), the city would be saved. God's decision not to punish the wicked, in this case, was an act of justice for other good people rather than for the benefit of the wicked (Lyons, 2002).

Abraham's "objection" is presented in this narrative. Abraham argues that it is inappropriate for the wicked to be saved because of the righteous. At the end of the Sodom narrative, the reader can see that YWHH's action is for the wicked to be punished, and the righteous, no matter how few, will be saved by God.

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### ***Relational and Open God***

God engaged Abraham in the conversation. God "opened" himself to discourse and Abraham's requests. This shows that in Israel's faith, God is both transcendental and relational. In this narrative, we see God not only as a distant and unreachable sovereign but also as a God who is actively engaged in human relationships and open to dialog. Carlson, from a Pentecostal perspective, argues that it can be said that the openness of God is operative in any community that believes the Holy Spirit will respond to the community's actions or inactions. Charismatic experience presupposes that God has neither unilaterally nor non-negotiably chosen the future (Carlson, 2012).

First of all, God showed His generosity by allowing Abraham to speak and plead for the safety of the cities. This showed that God cared about people's concerns and prayers, and He did not ignore their voices. Furthermore, God was open to listening to Abraham's arguments and was willing to follow a bargaining process with him. This demonstrates that God is not rigid in His decisions but relatively flexible and responsive

to people's prayers and objections. God's willingness to come down to the human level to dialogue with Abraham confirms His open and relational nature (Pinnock, 20).

### **Implication**

I see the conversation between Abraham and God not only as intercession but also as a "teaching moment," a pedagogical opportunity designed not only for Abraham himself but also for all his descendants. I offer this perspective to see the other side of the narrative as a teaching moment for human beings to speak out for justice.

This approach aligns with the way some scholars interpret biblical narratives from an oppressive perspective. For example, William Herzog, in his analysis of the parable of the Talents, points out that the third servant, who is often seen as a failure, can be seen as a "whistleblower." He is the one who dares to speak out for truth and justice in an unjust system. In the same way, the narrative of the negotiation between Abraham and God can be interpreted as an invitation for human beings to speak up in defense of the rights of the innocent, especially those from

minority groups in number, race, or religion (Herzog, 1994)

The call to speak up for justice is not only Abraham's responsibility in the biblical text, but it is also one of the primary vocations in Christianity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, emphasized the importance of the struggle against authoritarianism as a form of faithfulness (Brown, 2019). In a broader context, Martin Luther King, Jr. also emphasized that justice must be fought for through nonviolence, which is essentially a manifestation of justice advocacy rooted in Christian values (Burrow, 2014).

Based on these views and a deeper exploration of the narrative of the negotiation between God and Abraham, we can see how the Bible provides an example for humanity to be proactive in advocating for justice, not only as a story of intercession but also as an invitation for every generation not to remain silent in the face of injustice but to speak up and act for the truth.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Abraham's negotiation with God in the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative reveals a theological balance between divine justice and mercy. His intercession reflects not only concern for the righteous but also a deep engagement with God's relational nature. This act of negotiating with God underscores that faith entails more than obedience—it involves moral reasoning and the courage to speak up. In this way, Abraham becomes a model for believers to actively participate in divine justice, especially in contexts of systemic oppression.

In today's "speaking out" culture, the church is called to emulate Abraham's prophetic boldness. Christians are not meant to remain passive observers but are invited into dialogue with God and society—advocating for justice and compassion in the political, environmental, and social spheres. Speaking up is not only a form of protest but an act of solidarity with the marginalized and a pursuit of a just and inclusive order.

Finally, the narrative affirms that God does not operate in isolation from humanity. Abraham's

conversation with God exemplifies a dynamic relationship where human voices matter. In contemporary society, this calls Christians to foster courageous dialogue, not only with God but also with those in positions of power, ensuring that justice and mercy become concrete realities for all.

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