

BIBLICAL THEODICY: THE DEFENSE
OF GOD'S JUSTICE
(Gen 18-19)

by

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Developing a successful theodicy requires one to consistently explain how suffering and evil can exist in a universe ruled by God who is sovereign, good, and just. The problem is that no one has been able to adequately accomplish this, though many noble attempts have been made. By examining one component of the theodicy issue, God's justice, within a key portion of Scripture (Gen 18-19), the reason why the dilemma is unresolvable is crystallized.

Divine retributive justice and divine discipline are two biblical explanations for suffering, among many. They form part of the larger thematic context for discussing divine justice as it is exhibited in the Lord's encounter with Abraham (Gen 18:16-33), the deliverance of righteous Lot (Gen 19), and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19).

The character of divine justice is more clearly exposed as Abraham and the Lord continue their dialogue which has justice as its primary focus. It is disclosed there that the preserving power of the righteous may be sufficient enough to divert the Lord's destruction of many wicked (Gen 18:26-32). In that the presence of ten righteous people could have accomplished this (v. 32), the Lord's justice is seen to be influenced by His desire to save.

The discriminating nature of the Lord's justice is illustrated by the deliverance of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked. Indeed, His justice is not arbitrary. Genesis 18-19 clearly falls within the framework of the orthodox doctrine of divine retributive justice.

Yet what is not revealed in this lesson on doing justice is also important. For a cloud of secrecy still obscures man's ability to see how God's other attributes function in relationship to His justice. The reader is left to wonder how the Lord's compassion (Gen 19:16) and His regard for Abraham (Gen 19:29) were each weighted so as to result in the divine decision to deliver Lot. It is conceivable that if the Lord had chosen not to deliver Lot, He would still have been considered just.

In conclusion, man's limited understanding of the divine nature and the functional relationship between God's attributes serves to explain his inability to completely solve the problem of theodicy. Man's ignorance of all the facts in any given situation, as demonstrated by Abraham, also compounds the dilemma. Yet the Old Testament does indicate that divine justice usually works according to the retributive scheme and is to a degree predictable. When man does encounter situations which defy explanation, he should continue to exercise faith in the God of the Bible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, and W. Gesenius, <u>The New Hebrew and English Lexicon</u>
<u>BSac</u>	<u>Bibliotheca Sacra</u>
<u>CBQ</u>	<u>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</u>
<u>EvQ</u>	<u>Evangelical Quarterly</u>
<u>ExpTim</u>	<u>Expository Times</u>
<u>FP</u>	<u>Faith and Philosophy</u>
GKC	Gesenius' <u>Hebrew Grammar</u> , ed. E. Kautzsch, tr. A. E. Cowley
<u>GTJ</u>	<u>Grace Theological Journal</u>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<u>IDBSup</u>	Supplementary volume to <u>IDB</u>
<u>IJPR</u>	<u>International Journal for Philosophy of Religion</u>
<u>Int</u>	<u>Interpretation</u>
<u>JBL</u>	<u>Journal of Biblical Literature</u>
<u>JJS</u>	<u>Journal of Jewish Studies</u>
<u>JSOT</u>	<u>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</u>
<u>JSS</u>	<u>Journal of Semitic Studies</u>
<u>JTS</u>	<u>Journal of Theological Studies</u>
KB	L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, <u>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros</u>
<u>KJV</u>	<u>King James Version</u>
LXX	<u>The Septuagint</u>

MT	Masoretic Text
<u>NASB</u>	<u>New American Standard Bible</u>
NICOT	New International Commentary on the OT
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OTL	The Old Testament Library
<u>RelS</u>	<u>Religious Studies</u>
<u>SJT</u>	<u>Scottish Journal of Theology</u>
<u>TDNT</u>	<u>Theological Dictionary of the NT</u>
<u>TJ</u>	<u>Trinity Journal</u>
TOTC	Tyndale OT Commentaries
<u>TWOT</u>	<u>Theological Wordbook of the OT</u>
<u>USQR</u>	<u>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</u>
<u>VT</u>	<u>Vetus Testamentum</u>
<u>WTJ</u>	<u>Westminster Theological Journal</u>
<u>ZAW</u>	<u>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</u>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The subject of theodicy has challenged the minds of philosophers, theologians, and humanity in general for ages. It was as much a concern for those of the polytheistic culture of Mesopotamia¹ as it was for Israel which espoused an ethical monotheism. Today those who have any belief in the existence of a just God/god, whether as a result of a Judeo-Christian heritage or not, continue to wrestle with the issues that are central to this topic.

The Defining of Theodicy

Actually the word "theodicy" is of a rather recent origin. Gottfried Leibnitz (1646-1716) is given credit for coining the term (from "θεός 'god' plus δίκη 'justice'"²). While definitions vary from writer to writer,³ theodicy is

¹See: W. G. Lambert, Babylonian Wisdom Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 21-91. Lambert analyzes and reproduces the text of "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer - Ludlul bēl nēmeqi" (pp. 21-62) and "The Babylonian 'Theodicy'" (pp. 63-91).

²IDBSup, s.v. "Theodicy," by J. L. Crenshaw, p. 895.

³"We may thus define theodicy loosely as the attempt to pronounce a verdict of 'Not Guilty' over God for whatever seems to destroy the order of society and the universe" (James L. Crenshaw, ed., Theodicy in the Old Testament, Issues in Religion and Theology, no. 4 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983], p. 1). Feinberg simply sees it as "a

basically the attempt to defend God's justice and omnipotence in the presence of this world's evil and suffering. Already it is apparent that this definition is based upon several presuppositions. It assumes that one believes in a God who is good, just, and omnipotent as well as in "the real occurrence of suffering."¹ Since this thesis is concerned with the biblical perspective on theodicy, the definition must necessarily reflect that interest.

Questions that are commonly discussed under this subject abound. Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper? Why does God demonstrate His compassion for the wicked (Jonah 4)? Abraham's question in Genesis 18:25 reveals the heart of the issue: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (author's trans.).

The Problem of Theodicy

The problem that faces one developing a theodicy has been exposed in the preceding section. It primarily involves harmonizing the belief in God's goodness, justice, and sovereign rule over history with the common tragedies of life. His sovereignty naturally includes His being both

term used to refer to attempts to justify the ways of God to man" (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, s.v. "Theodicy," by J. S. Feinberg, p. 1083).

¹The Encyclopedia of Religion, s.v. "Theodicy," by Ronald M. Green, 14:431. Mary Baker Eddy claims that "If sin, sickness, and death were understood as nothingness, they would disappear" (Mary Baker Eddy, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures [Boston: Trustees under the Will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1934], p. 480. Also cf. p. 153.

omnipotent and omniscient as well.¹ "When combined with some other implicit beliefs - for example, the belief that a good being would try to prevent suffering insofar as he is able - these various ideas seem contradictory."² So the task of a successful theodicy is to remain logically consistent³ in explaining how God can be good, sovereign, and just while suffering and evil are a present reality. In one sense "the problem turns on the attributes of God."⁴ For those who limit God's power⁵ or deny God's goodness,⁶ the problem does not exist. Likewise there is no dilemma for the one who refuses to accept the existence of suffering.⁷ Yet for those who believe all that the Scriptures reveal concerning God and who are honest with the

¹Green, "Theodicy," p. 431.

²Ibid.

³Feinberg, "Theodicy," p. 1083.

⁴Peter N. Gregory, "The Problem of Theodicy in the Awakening of Faith," RelS 22 (March 1986):69.

⁵Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Avon Books, 1981), p. 43. He notes, "God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can't bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims" (Ibid.). "But if we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible" (Ibid., p. 45).

⁶John W. Wenham, The Goodness of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), pp. 45-49.

⁷Eddy, Science and Health, p. 480. For two evaluations of Mary Baker Eddy's position, see: Reginald S. Luhman, "Belief in God and the Problem of Suffering," EvQ 57 (October 1985):331-32; and S. Paul Schilling, God and Human Anguish (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), pp. 73-75.

realities of life, the problem is not so easily brushed aside.

The Biblical Approach to Theodicy

Some authors¹ have approached this subject from a predominately philosophical and rationalistic perspective. While their works shed valuable light upon an immense subject and are not to be minimized, they neglect the indepth exegetical study of the Scriptures which is foundational to a biblical analysis. Since God is really at the center of anything that can be called a genuine theodicy, it is mandatory that He be allowed to speak first through His special revelation to man: the Bible. Until one has truly understood what He has had to say on the subject, there is no point in beating the air with speculative rationalism. Consequently, this thesis will primarily concentrate on the scriptural foundations, both exegetically and theologically.

The Purpose of the Thesis

Theodicy is essentially a defense of God's justice.² Men have in effect put God on trial when they have

¹Gottfried W. Leibniz, Theodicy, trans. E. M. Huggard and ed. and abridged Diogenes Allen (Ron Mills, Ontario: J. M. Dent and Sons [Canada] Limited, 1966); John Hick, Evil and the God of Love (London: The Fontana Library, 1968); S. Paul Schilling, God and Human Anguish (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977); Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil (New York: Harper and Row, 1974; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977); William Hasker, "Must God Do His Best?" IJPR 16 (1984):213-23; David McKenzie, "A Kantian Theodicy," FP 1 (April 1984):236-47.

²Hick, Evil and the God of Love, p. 6.

questioned His justice. Abraham's question (Gen 18:25) with regard to this aspect of God's character is not the only one on the pages of Scripture. Habakkuk asks, "Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallowed up those more righteous than they?" (Hab 1:13 b, c, NASB). Listen to Jeremiah! "Why has the way of the wicked prospered? [Why] are all those who deal in treachery at ease?" (Jer 12:1 b, NASB).¹ Clearly men have had a problem understanding what God's justice looks like.

Due to the broadness of the subject of theodicy and the limitations imposed upon this thesis, this study will be confined to dealing with one aspect of this complex issue: divine justice. More specifically, the purpose of this thesis will be to demonstrate that man's inability to adequately explain the functional relationship between God's justness and His other attributes is at the root of his inability to solve the problem of theodicy. It is impossible to produce a formula by which every instance of suffering can be reconciled with God's justice and omnipotence since it is beyond man's present capacity to know all the intricacies of His personality and government. Of course this does not exclude the fact that the OT does present divine justice as being to a significant degree both understandable and predictable.

¹The list may be multiplied. See: Job 8:3; 9:19-24; Ps 10:1; 13:1; Eccl 9:2; Ezek 18:25; Jonah 4; Mal 2:17.

The Procedure of the Thesis

Genesis 18-19 is a key portion of Scripture in any discussion on the topic of theodicy. This pericope raises many pertinent questions and sheds some valuable light upon the nature of divine justice. Since biblical theodicy is the thematic context of Genesis 18-19, chapter two will focus on two of the major answers that the Bible gives for the existence of suffering in God's universe: divine retribution and discipline. Furthermore, it will be shown how Genesis 18-19 fits within this larger context and contributes to it.

Chapter three develops the lesson on justice which Abraham was to learn from his encounter with "the Judge of all the earth" (Gen 18:25). The nature of divine justice, as exposed through a dialogue between Abraham and the Lord (Gen 18:22-33) as well as through the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), will be analyzed. Both what the Lord reveals and conceals with regard to His doing justice will highlight the limitations which hinder men in their attempt to thoroughly understand this aspect of God's character.

Based upon implications from the preceding chapters, two related topics will be considered in chapter four. First, there will be some attention given to the futility of trying to develop an equation by which God's actions can be explained in any given situation. This in turn will be related to the problem of theodicy. Second, the importance of the righteous interceding for others before the Lord will be examined. God is sovereign, but nevertheless, "The eyes

of the Lord are toward the righteous, . . . His ears are
[open] to their cry" (Ps 34:15, NASB).

CHAPTER II

BIBLICAL THEODICY: THE THEMATIC CONTEXT OF GENESIS 18-19

In its fullest dimensions, biblical theodicy forms the larger context of the many portions of Scripture which take issue with God's justice. One wishes that there were a single solution as to how man is to perceive the outworking of God's justice in the experiences of life. Yet there are voices heard from the pages of Scripture which are not all in unison. Abraham's voice (Gen 18:22-33) is one of these.

The Major Biblical Answers to the Theodicy Problem

The Scriptures give several explanations for how God can be just while the righteous suffer and evil abounds. Two of these which are going to be discussed more fully below are found in divine retribution and discipline (an "educative"¹ theodicy).

Another solution which needs to be mentioned is eschatological in nature. For Israel it means looking beyond their present darkness to the dawn of a future messianic age when all injustices will be resolved.² After

¹Green, "Theodicy," p. 433. While some writers refer to different solutions to the problem of theodicy, others commonly speak of various theodicies.

²IDBSup, s.v. "Theodicy," by J. L. Crenshaw, p. 896.

Israel has endured a brief period of extreme suffering, the new age will burst forth in splendor as the Lord turns "their mourning into joy" (Jer 31:13, NASB; cf. Isa 24-27; Ezek 33-48; Zech 12-14).

A fourth response concerns one vicariously suffering for the benefit of others.¹ While the ultimate example of this is found in the account of God's suffering Servant (Isa 53:4-12; "But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" [v. 6, NASB]), other men also illustrate this truth. Joseph was sold into slavery (Gen 37:28) and imprisoned (Gen 39:20) so as to preserve the lives of his family (Gen 45:5,7,20).²

The Traditional View of Divine Retributive Justice

The concept of divine³ retribution permeates the pages of Scripture. It starts with the account of Adam and Eve disobeying God (Gen 3). This sin brought punishment to

¹Ibid; Green, "Theodicy," p. 435; J. Barton Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 442-43.

²Payne, Theology of the Older Testament, p. 442.

³It needs to be noted that retribution also played a significant role in the sphere of civil law. Biblical 'lex talionis' (as found in Exod 21:23-25; Lev 24:17-20; Deut 19:21 - "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" [NASB]), while fundamentally related to divine retribution, is another whole subject in itself. For a thorough discussion, see: David Daube, Studies in Biblical Law (N.p.: Cambridge University Press, 1947; reprint, New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1969). Cf. IDBSup, s.v. "Retribution," by W. S. Towner, p. 742; W. Lillie, "Towards a Biblical Doctrine of Punishment," SJT 21 (December 1968):449-61; Gordon J. Wenham, The Book of Leviticus, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 312-13.

the serpent (vv. 14-15), the woman (v. 16) and the man (vv. 17-19). The wickedness of man in Noah's day brought God's decision - "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land" (Gen 6:7). Clearly sin brings suffering and ultimately physical death for most in this life (Gen 2:17). Yet this concept takes on dimensions which are far more complex than this.

The parameters of the doctrine

The basic definition

As prominent as the doctrine of retribution is, "the term 'retribution' is a non-biblical word."¹ It does not occur in the KJV. The basic view of retributive justice presented in the Bible is that "a fit and measured response of good or evil is distributed among human beings in accordance with what their own actions deserve -- good for good and evil for evil."² Special attention needs to be given to the reciprocal or return-in-kind element inherent in the term. For, as Towner notes, it is this characteristic which differentiates "retribution from mere 'punishment' in English usage."³

¹W. Sibley Towner, "Retributional Theology in the Apocalyptic Setting," USQR 26 (Spring 1971):203. Cf. IDB Sup, s.v. "Retribution," by W. S. Towner, p. 742.

²Stephen A. James, "Divine Justice and the Retributive Duty of Civil Government," TJ 6 (Autumn 1985):199.

³Towner, "Retributional Theology," p. 203. Also observe how he distinguishes "retribution" from other terms such as "vengeance" and "consequence" (p. 203).

The distinction between ages

When considering this doctrine it is important to further qualify the subject by giving attention to the time element. When is this retribution to take place? Is it during this age or in one to come?

The earthly/temporal era. James labels those punishments which are confined to this realm (earth) as "partial, or limited, retribution."¹ It is retribution within past and present history. Despite the emphasis that is today placed upon future retribution, especially in the area of eschatology, it is necessary to remember that divine retribution in the OT was primarily limited to the temporal realm.² References to rewards and punishments were essentially restricted to life in this world with no mention of a future state.³ Thus people were not as motivated in their actions by the prospect of rewards in heaven as the first-century Christians were. This is especially true in those portions of Scripture where the Mosaic law is in the foreground.⁴

Two of the key Mosaic portions of Scripture evidencing this understanding are Leviticus 26 and

¹James, "Divine Justice," p. 201.

²Edward Beecher, History of Opinions on the Scriptural Doctrine of Retribution (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), pp. 3-4.

³Ibid., p. 4. Cf. Gustav F. Oehler, Theology of the Old Testament, trans. George E. Day (N.p.: T. & T. Clark, 1873; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), p. 195.

⁴Beecher, Doctrine of Retribution, pp. 4-5.

Deuteronomy 28. Against the backdrop of God's covenant with Israel, blessings¹ are promised if the obligations of the covenant are fulfilled. Curses are pronounced upon those who break the covenant.

In Leviticus 26:3-13 the results of performing God's statutes and commandments (v. 3) would be abundant harvests (vv. 4-5), peace and victory over one's enemies (vv. 6-8) and God's own personal presence (vv. 11-12). The curses pronounced upon Israel for their disobedience are more extensive than the blessings. Verses 14-39 concern the penalties which would bring poor health (v. 16), defeat before one's enemies (v. 17), unproductive land and trees (vv. 19-20) and ultimately exile (vv. 33-34, 38-39).

The lists of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28 are more extensive than those of Leviticus 26, particularly with regard to the curses (vv. 15-68). Disobedience to God's statutes and commandments would cause sickness (vv. 21-22), defeat before their enemies (v. 25), others to eat their crops (v. 33), exile (vv. 36-37, 63-65), cannibalism (vv. 53-57) and all manner of plagues and diseases (vv. 59-61).

Yes, divine retribution was perceived as occurring in the temporal realm in these two books and many others

¹The blessings and curses which are found in Lev 26 and Deut 28 have a basic similarity with elements in other Ancient Near Eastern treaties. For further discussion on these similarities and differences, see: Wenham, Leviticus, pp. 29-30; Peter C. Craigie, The Book of Deuteronomy, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 339-40; K. A. Kitchen, Ancient Orient and Old Testament (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), pp. 90-102.

recording the history of Israel. One is all too familiar with the expression, "Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord," in the book of Judges (2:11) with the following account of how God delivered Israel "into the hands of their enemies" (2:14).¹ This was merely the fulfilling of the curses of the covenant. In fact the final exile of the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 17) and the southern kingdom of Judah (2 Chr 36:15-21; Jer 25:1-11; Ezek 4-5) were the results of divine retribution for the breaking of God's covenant (Lev 26:33-34, 38-39; Deut 28:36-37, 63-65). Indeed Israel was basically motivated by rewards and punishments which were to be realized during their earthly sojourn.

The heavenly/eternal era. Yet it is also necessary to keep this viewpoint in balance with the fact that the OT does occasionally refer to a future life where divine retribution will be experienced.² This is evident in Daniel 12:1-3, 13 (cf. Isa 26:19³ and 66:24). Retribution in that

¹Cf. Judg 3:7-8, 12-14; 4:1-2; 6:1-6; 10:6-9; 13:1.

²Beecher, Doctrine of Retribution, p. 9. He notes that "there was in fact a course of feeling and thought on the subject of a future life, during all these ages, which had finally culminated in well-defined opinions as to retributions in a future life before Christ came." Actually belief in retributive justice in a future life did not evolve over the course of time but was disclosed by God in the progress of revelation. It was not the result of religious "development" (Ibid., p. 10) but of divine revelation in OT times.

³"As such, it, along with 25:8, represents the highest conception of resurrection in the OT" (John N. Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986], p. 485). Cf. Oehler, Theology of the Old Testament, pp. 514-15.

future age is eternal in character and may appropriately be called "absolute, or exact, retribution."¹ All accounts will finally be settled. It is then that "many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but others to disgrace (and) everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2, NASB).

The NT is much more thorough in the knowledge that it provides on this future aspect of divine retribution.² While it would be profitable to pursue this topic into the NT, the venture would be beyond the goals of this chapter.

The matter of immediacy

Another facet of the doctrine of divine retribution concerns how soon God acts after an event worthy of His retribution has occurred. Immediate retribution is a pervasive characteristic of the books of Chronicles. The Chronicler perceived history as operating according to this principle. For in these books it is amply demonstrated "that reward and punishment are not deferred, but rather follow immediately on the heels of the precipitating events" (emphasis added).³ One is easily reminded of the account of King Uzziah who because of pride attempted to usurp the

¹James, "Divine Justice," p. 201.

²For a good overview of divine retribution from the perspective of the NT, see: The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v. "Retribution," by Archibald M'Caig, 4:2570-72.

³Raymond B. Dillard, "Reward and Punishment in Chronicles: The Theology of Immediate Retribution," WTJ 46 (Spring 1984):165.

divinely appointed duties of the priests within the temple (2 Chr 26:16-23).¹ He straightway broke out with leprosy and hurried out of the temple "because the Lord had smitten him" (v. 20, NASB). Another example is that of Uzza who attempted to steady the ark with his hand but was quickly struck down by the Lord (1 Chr 13:10 cf. 15:13-15).

Still it is important to realize that the Chronicler does not push the immediacy of retribution to the extreme of making it a hard and fast rule.² King Asa failed by relying upon Ben-hadad instead of God, but God sent Hanani the seer to rebuke him (2 Chr 16:1-10). Time was given to King Asa to repent though the text seems to indicate that he did not (vv. 12-13).

Other examples from the OT could be multiplied for both immediate and deferred retribution. Determining how much time is required to declare a judgment deferred instead of immediate is rather subjective, but there is a line of demarcation.

The relationship between cause and effect

Underlying the concept of retribution is the presupposition that the reward or punishment should be "in some way proportionate"³ to the precipitating act. Such is the case in civil law with regard to 'lex talionis'. Is

¹Ibid., p. 168.

²Ibid., p. 170.

³Lillie, "Biblical Doctrine of Punishment," p. 450.

this true in the realm of divine retribution? Basically the question touches the central problem of theodicy.

Boogaart, using the story of Abimelech in Judges 9, seeks to demonstrate the following:

The meaning of retribution is not exhausted by pointing to a general correspondence between act and consequence in an appropriate text, i.e. by pointing to the fact that good was requited with good, or evil with evil. At root, retribution entails more than this, and often a closer look at texts where this concept plays a role reveals not merely a general correspondence of act and consequence but an exact one (emphasis added).¹

This is an interesting principle but one that may be difficult to apply with the confidence that Boogaart suggests. The only example Boogaart gives his readers is the story in Judges 9, and upon closer examination, one is hard pressed to find the exactness in the correspondence between the act and its consequence which Boogaart sees. He notes the correspondence between Abimelech's killing his seventy brothers upon one stone (v. 5) and the death of Abimelech being primarily caused by a blow to the head by a millstone (v. 53).² In response he says, "His retribution has been exact indeed."³ Yet more is required to demonstrate exact retribution than two stones, especially when one considers that in the end all the people of the

¹T. A. Boogaart, "Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem," JSOT 32 (1985):48. He also helpfully charts the exact retribution that is supposedly evidenced in the story of Abimelech and the men of Shechem (Ibid., pp. 52-53).

²Ibid., p. 51.

³Ibid.

city of Shechem were killed (vv. 42-45) plus "about a thousand men and women" (v. 49, NASB) in the tower of Shechem. Were the deaths of thousands (?) in Shechem an exact retribution for their part in Abimelech's execution of his seventy brothers? While Boogaart's arguments are a little fuller than what has been intimated above, they are nevertheless overly simplistic. He has hardly presented enough evidences to support his thesis with regard to the frequency of the instances of exact retribution. While some may find it especially hard to understand God's justice when the righteous suffer, it is no less difficult when His justice intercepts the wicked. Would man really know exact retribution if he saw it?

At the root of man's dilemma is his lack of data on any given situation that presents itself. God knows all the external facts of every event plus all the inner motives of men's hearts (1 Chr 28:9). Thus when man attempts to evaluate a situation from his limited perspective, his judgment differs from God's. Unfortunately man in his ignorance becomes perplexed over God's evaluation. Clearly the problem is not with God's justice but man's ignorance of all the details which went into God's accurate assessment. Jesus' exhortation is appropriate: "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24, NASB). Still man has an obligation to judge righteously in spite of his handicap. More will be said along these lines when God's disclosure of His justice to Abraham is examined (Gen 18-19).

The subject of agency

In analyzing this doctrine of divine retribution it is necessary to more pointedly identify the agent of the retributive action. Is God directly bringing about the reward¹ or punishment, or is He indirectly working through someone else? In the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord directly brought the brimstone and fire (Gen 19:24). Elijah was in the forefront when he gave the order to have the prophets of Baal slain at the brook Kishon (1 Kgs 18:40). He was the "primary agent"² through whom God indirectly worked.

James' main emphasis in his article is that God indirectly uses men and women today as His agents to administer divine retribution through the medium of civil government.³ This is supported by Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14.

The denials of the doctrine

As well grounded as this doctrine appears to be from Genesis to Revelation, there is one person in particular who has attempted to show that no such doctrine exists in the OT. His name is Klaus Koch. In his article entitled "Is

¹Dillard laments the fact that punishment most often comes to mind when retribution is discussed and that God's desire to reward those who please Him is left in the background (Dillard, "Reward and Punishment in Chronicles," p. 165, n. 2.). Cf. 2 Chr 15:7 ("But you, be strong and do not lose courage, for there is reward for your work" [NASB]).

²James, "Divine Justice," p. 201.

³Ibid., p. 202.

There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?",¹ he reviews scriptures which have commonly been considered to have taught a doctrine of divine retribution (Prov 25-29, Hos, Pss). His basic thesis is that actions, in and of themselves, naturally produce certain consequences. God is not judicially handing out rewards and punishments, but He is involved "by facilitating the completion of something which previous human action has already set in motion."² Koch's oft repeated phrase regarding actions with "built-in consequences" (cf. pp. 62, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 72, 73, etc.) finds application in some texts such as Psalm 7:14-16:

Behold, he travails with wickedness,
And he conceives mischief, and brings forth
falsehood.
He has dug a pit and hollowed it out,
And has fallen into the hole which he made.
His mischief will return upon his own head,
And his violence will descend upon his own
pate (NASB).

While Psalm 7:14-16, Proverbs 11:3-6; 26:27 and other passages may truthfully be interpreted in this manner, Koch has failed to make a distinction between them and those texts which emphasize the intensity of God's own personal involvement.³ Koch neglects to deal with all the passages which portray God as crashing into history to inflict punishment. Fire and brimstone falling from heaven upon two

¹Klaus Koch, "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" trans. Thomas H. Trapp, in Theodicy in the Old Testament, ed. James L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 57-87.

²Ibid., p. 61.

³John G. Gammie, "The Theology of Retribution in the Book of Deuteronomy," CBQ 32 (January 1970):5.

cities (Gen 19:24) can hardly be perceived as an expected built-in consequence of these cities' wickedness. God is certainly more judicially active and involved here than a "'midwife who assists at a birth.'"¹ The immediacy of Uzza's death before the Lord after he touched the ark (1 Chr 13:10) was more than an example "of the inevitable, universal, and automatic working-out into tragic consequences of evil 'destiny-making deeds.'"²

To say the least, Koch's views have little impact upon the stability of the doctrine of retribution in the OT. Positively, though, Koch has presented some valuable insights into the relation between actions and consequences and has helped others to more clearly define divine retribution.³ M'Caig aptly demonstrates how that which is the "natural consequence of sin" and that which is the "positive infliction of Divine wrath" fit together in the discussion of future retribution.⁴ Both aspects have their place. It is not an either/or situation.

¹Koch, "Retribution in the Old Testament?" p. 61.

²Towner, "Retributional Theology," p. 204, n. 2.

³For works which interact with Koch's article, see: Gammie, "The Theology of Retribution," pp. 1-5; John Barton, "Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament," JTS 30 (April 1979):10-12; Patrick D. Miller, Jr., Sin and Judgment in the Prophets, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series, ed. James L. Crenshaw (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 5-6, 121-39.

⁴M'Caig, "Retribution," pp. 2570-71.

The Principle of Divine Discipline

Another explanation for how a good and just God can allow suffering is one which complements¹ the doctrine of retribution. While it still presupposes sin as at the root of man's problem, this explanation emphasizes the purposefulness of the suffering beyond that of mere punishment (retribution). Thus it is called the "educational or disciplinary" view.² In essence this view regards suffering as God's means of disciplining His children for their own improvement and well-being. The text which is most often used to support this understanding is Proverbs 3:11-12: "My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father, the son in whom he delights" (NASB). A more thorough examination of this subject is required.

A lexical study of key words

An analysis of לָּטַח and its derivative, מִלִּטָּה

Unlike the doctrine of retribution which is best studied according to larger conceptional units, the subject of divine discipline revolves around a few specific terms. The verb לָּטַח and the noun derived from it, מִלִּטָּה, bear most of the weight in supporting the OT teaching on this topic.

¹Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), p. 123; H. Wheeler Robinson, Suffering: Human and Divine (London: Student Christian Press, 1940), p. 56.

²Kaiser, Personal Suffering, p. 123.

The verb **נָסַר** (discipline, chasten, teach, admonish¹) and its derivative **מִנְסָר** (a noun translated "discipline [of the moral nature], chastening, correction"² as well as "education, instruction, . . . warning, reminder"³) are used approximately ninety times in the OT. Out of the twelve books that these words appear in (Lev [3x]; Deut [6x]; 1 Kgs [4x]; 2 Chr [2x]; Job [7x]; Pss [10x]; Prov [35x]; Isa [4x]; Jer [15x]; Ezek [2x]; Hos [4x]; Zeph [2x]), **מִנְסָר** alone appears thirty times in Proverbs.

If one were to examine all of the uses of **נָסַר** and **מִנְסָר**,⁴ he would find that the "basic meaning . . . is the learning or teaching of a lesson."⁵ In what ways were the lessons administered? Some lessons were given through suffering (cf. Jer 2:30; 30:14). Jeremiah 5:3 reveals that God brought suffering upon the people as a means of discipline with the intended purpose that they repent. Yet "they refused to take correction (**מִנְסָר**)" (NASB).

¹BDB, pp. 415-16; and William L. Holladay, A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 137.

²BDB, p. 416.

³Holladay, Lexicon, p. 186.

⁴This has already been done. See: J. A. Sanders, "Suffering as Divine Discipline in the Old Testament and Post-Biblical Judaism," Colgate Rochester Divinity School Bulletin 28 (November 1955):1-135.

⁵Sanders, "Suffering as Divine Discipline," p. 41. Cf. TWOT, s.v. " **נָסַר**, **נִסְרָה**, **מִנְסָר**," by Paul R. Gilchrist, 1:386-87. "From the usage and parallels in the OT, one must conclude that yāsar and mūsār denote correction which results in education" (Ibid., p. 386).

Consequently God's chastening may be of no benefit if it is rejected (cf. Jer 2:30; 7:28).¹

Other lessons were to be learned through spoken communication (cf. Isa 8:11; 28:26 [both refer to verbal instruction]). Here in Deuteronomy 4:36 the absence of suffering in the discipline is plain: "Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you [לְיִסְרֶךָ]; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire" (NASB). Discipline may be administered verbally without pain.

A third way, which is rarer than the first two, concerns the possibility of learning by observing other people or God's handiwork² (cf. Jer 2:30; Isa 53:5; Deut 11:2-3; Prov 24:32). מִיָּסָר may be understood in the sense of a warning or reminder³ in Ezekiel 5:15 for other nations which shall see the judgments of God inflicted upon Jerusalem. Suffering is still an element in this case.

To bring perspective to this analysis it is important to remember that the number of occurrences when suffering was used by God and man for instruction are only slightly larger than the total number of times when suffering was not present (practically equal). Thus יָסַר and מִיָּסָר demonstrate that suffering is only a factor in

¹For an expanded treatment of this thought, see: Mark E. Willey, "The Biblical Concept of Paideia" (M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1981), pp. 12-13.

²Sanders, "Suffering as Divine Discipline," p. 41.

³Holladay, Lexicon, p. 186.

about fifty percent of the cases when these two words are used. Furthermore one must consider that not all the uses of these words refer to divine discipline. According to Sanders' definition, "It is only when the punishment is interpreted as an opportunity to repent, and is seen as evidence of God's goodness and love that it is called divine discipline."¹ So the number of applications of לָצַח and מִקָּטָר in the area of divine discipline are further reduced to about one-third of their total occurrences.

An analysis of לָצַח and its derivative, מִלְכַּחַח

While לָצַח (a verb not attested in the Qal) and the noun form מִלְכַּחַח have a contribution to make to the doctrine of divine discipline, it is not as extensive as the previous two words. The basic judicial² aspect of the words is evident when their lexical meanings are noted (לָצַח - "Hiph. decide, adjudge, prove;"³). With regard to the distribution of these words throughout the OT,⁴ the majority of the occurrences are found in Proverbs as was the case with מִקָּטָר.

Out of the eighteen times that these words appear in the prophets, Jeremiah 2:19 is the only example where a true

¹Sanders, "Suffering as Divine Discipline," p. 117.

²TWOT, s.v. "לָצַח, מִלְכַּחַח, מִלְכַּחַח," by Paul R. Gilchrist, 1:376-77.

³BDB, p. 406.

⁴Gen (6x); Lev (1x); 2 Sam (1x); 2 Kgs (1x); Job (18x); Pss (11x); Prov (26x); Isa (7x); Jer (1x); Ezek (3x); Hos (2x); Amos (1x); Mic (2x); Hab (2x).

parallel exists with יָסַר:¹ "Your own wickedness will correct you [תִּקְרַחְךָ], and your apostasies will reprove you [תִּכְחֹלְךָ]" (NASB). Still other instances of instructive discipline exist where יָסַר parallels יָסַר (2 Sam 7:14; Job 5:17; 13:10; 22:4; 33:19; Ps 6:2 [MT]; Prov 1:23, 25, 30; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; and others). When generally comparing יָסַר and יָסַר it is important to keep in mind that there is still a basic difference between them even when their meanings overlap. For "whereas yāsar has the notion of paternal chastisement (as evidenced by the LXX's translating paideuō), yākah denotes education and discipline as a result of God's judicial actions."²

A summation

The verbs יָסַר and יָסַר with their derivatives play a leading role in the delineation of the doctrine of divine discipline. Yet this doctrine is also evident even in places where these words are not used (cf. Amos 4:6-11). The educational element that has been exposed in the preceding lexical studies "presupposes the capacity of the recipient to learn, to repent, to reform."³ God is pictured as the loving parent who disciplines his own children that they may grow and mature (Prov 3:11-12). Thus discipline, which may include suffering, is interpreted as an indication

¹Sanders, "Suffering as Divine Discipline," p. 19.

²TWOT, s.v. " יָסַר, יָסַרְךָ, יָסַרְתָּ," by Paul R. Gilchrist, 1:377.

³IDBSup, s.v. "Discipline, Divine," by J. M. Ward, p. 234.

of God's favor. In keeping with man's free will, it is his choice to either accept God's discipline by responding to it positively or reject it in rebelliousness (Jer 2:30; 7:28; 32:33).

The book of Job brings into close proximity the doctrines of divine retribution and discipline. While it appears that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar primarily clung to the commonly accepted view of immediate retribution, there still is an indication that they were aware of divine discipline as a cause of suffering. Eliphaz, who said, "Remember now, who [ever] perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed?" (Job 4:7, NASB), also exclaimed, "Behold, how happy is the man whom God reproves [יֹדְכֶנָּה], so do not despise the discipline [וּמִיָּסָר] of the Almighty" (Job 5:17, NASB). Elihu is most often credited¹ with putting the greatest emphasis upon God's discipline as a reason for suffering (Job 33:16 [וּבְמִסְרָם], 19 [וְהִיבִיחַ]; 36:10 [לְמִיָּסָר]).

The Place of Genesis 18-19 within This Context

God's justice is at the heart of theodicy. Whether one is attempting to understand the outworking of God's ways in the history of a nation, a city or an individual, the matter of God's justness ultimately poses a problem in his thinking.

¹Cf. Kaiser, Personal Suffering, p. 123; Robinson, Suffering: Human and Divine, pp. 56-57; and Payne, Theology of the Older Testament, p. 439.

The most comprehensive manner of viewing God's justice has been described in the doctrine of divine retribution. This is the general consensus of the OT. Related to this doctrine and complementing it is the principle of divine discipline. Though these two explanations which presuppose man's sinfulness do not answer all the questions which have arisen regarding God's justice and human suffering, they do form the broader context of which Genesis 18-19 is an integral part.

Genesis 18-19 has a significant contribution to make in furthering the understanding of God's justice. For in these chapters the reader is confronted with an historical account of "how God's righteousness works in life."¹ God, who is concerned that His servant Abraham do "righteousness and justice" (18:19), demonstrates His own justice in the administering of retribution upon two wicked cities (19:24). Abraham, who appears to believe that God's retributive justice would be violated if the wicked and righteous were treated alike (18:25), enters into a question-and-answer session with the Lord. Like many who are interested in the subject of theodicy today, Abraham too wanted to know-"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (18:25).

¹Allen P. Ross, Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 348.

CHAPTER III

ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION FOR THE RIGHTEOUS IN SODOM: A LESSON IN DIVINE JUSTICE (GEN 18:16-33)

The following discussion is based upon the presupposition that Genesis 18:16-33 is narrative literature¹ which is rooted in historical fact. It is not regarded as just "a theological inquiry disguised as a dialogue."²

The Immediate Context

Historically speaking, Genesis 18-19 falls into the beginning of the period of the patriarchs. These patriarchs were sojourners who wandered over the countryside looking for grazing land and water for their herds. During Abraham's day Canaan was "a largely agrarian, decentralized land in which political power, where it existed, was never great and resided in the hands of local 'kings' whose

¹For a discussion of the genre, see: Leland Ryken, The Literature of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), pp. 45-78. Ryken more specifically classified this as "heroic narrative" (Ibid., p. 46). Unfortunately, some lower this narrative to the level of a folk-tale wherein the "primary purpose . . . is . . . to tell a story about a hero, who was so great that he could get what he wanted from God himself" (Irving F. Wood, "Folk-tales in Old Testament Narrative," JBL 28 [1909]:39).

²Claus Westermann, Genesis, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 137.

domains were geographically limited city-states."¹ This fits well with the details of Abraham's life in Genesis 12-25:11 and accounts for the limited restrictions upon his movement.²

It was when Abraham was about ninety-nine years old (Gen 18:10; 21:5), perhaps around 2068 B.C.³, that he was visited by three men (Gen 18:2). In the true fashion of oriental hospitality, he respectfully addressed one of his visitors as "My Lord" (אֲדֹנָי) and requested that he allow him to be their host (vv. 3-5).⁴ Abraham proceeded to make preparations to have their feet washed and a meal served (vv. 6-8). Sometime during the following course of events Abraham recognized that one of these three, who appeared to be men, was actually the Lord. While it is not clear when this occurred, certainly the "visitor's ability to discern Sarah's inner laughter when he could not even see her proved conclusively that he was the Lord Himself (vv. 12, 13)."⁵ Having foretold Sarah's birth of a son and heard her laugh

¹Leon J. Wood, A Survey of Israel's History, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 35. Cf. John Bright, A History of Israel, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 80-83.

²Wood, Survey of Israel's History, p. 35.

³Ibid., p. 34; Cf. John J. Davis, Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), pp. 158-59.

⁴For arguments which demonstrate that this verse is not sufficient enough evidence to claim that Abraham knew one was a theophany, see: Davis, Paradise to Prison, p. 197; and H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1942), 1:536.

⁵Davis, Paradise to Prison, p. 198.

of unbelief (vv. 10-14), the men (אֲנָשִׁים) rose up in anticipation of the next phase of their journey (v. 16). Though Abraham had gained some insight into God's power ("Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" [v. 14, NASB]), now he was to learn something about God's justice (vv. 16-33).

Following Abraham's session with the Lord (Gen 18:16-33), the story is resumed in Genesis 19 with the arrival of the two angels at Sodom (v. 1). The angels' confrontation with the depraved inhabitants of Sodom (vv. 4-11) leads to the announcement of God's impending judgment (vv. 12-13). The Judge will do justice. Yet in the midst of judgment there is deliverance for the righteous (2 Pet 2:7). Lot and his family were spared even though the angels finally had to lead (drag?) them out of Sodom by the hand (v. 16). Immediately upon Lot's and his families' arrival at Zoar, brimstone and fire consumed Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 23-25). Abraham was remembered by God at this time which resulted in Lot's deliverance (v. 29). "Lot, consequently, was not delivered for his own sake but for Abraham's."¹

The closing verses of the chapter (vv. 30-38) visualize all too clearly that though a family may be quickly taken out of Sodom, Sodom may not be so speedily removed from the family. Lot and his daughters were not much of a credit to their God. Did they get better than they deserved? Judgment did overtake Lot's wife (v. 26).

¹Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:573. Cf. Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 354.

The Predominant Theme

In approaching this pericope, it is important to answer the question, "What is the predominant theme?" Surprisingly, several answers have been put forth. By far the most popular one attributes to these verses an example of intercessory prayer. Heart stirring articles have been written which seek to encourage the saints to plead for others before God as Abraham did.¹ Westermann objects to this though on the grounds that intercession has a unique character all of its own, and what appears in Genesis 18:23-32 is certainly not prayer.² While he makes a valid point in questioning this dialogue as prayer, he does not adequately demonstrate that this is not true intercession. Strictly speaking, this pericope is not a prayer.³ It resembles more of a classroom question-and-answer session. Yet to deny that intercession is taking place is to go too far. Nevertheless, is intercession the major emphasis of this portion of Scripture? That is doubtful.

¹Cf. L. Paul Moore, Jr., "Prayer in the Pentateuch," BSac 98 (July-September 1941):329-34; Reginald E. O. White, They Teach Us to Pray (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1957), pp. 13-23; Robert S. Candlish, Book of Genesis (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1868), pp. 304-12; F. B. Meyer, Abraham: or, The Obedience of Faith (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), pp. 126-29; and James M. Boice, Genesis: An Expositional Commentary, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 2:161-62.

²Claus Westermann, Genesis 12-36: A Commentary, trans. John J. Scullion S. J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 291. Cf. Westermann, Genesis, p. 139.

³Cf. 1 Sam 7:18-29; 1 Kgs 8:22-53; 2 Chr 20:5-13; and Jonah 2:1-9.

Some men have found other themes present. For Stigers the central thread which ties Genesis 18 and 19 together is "the treatment of strangers by Abraham and by the Sodomites."¹ Speiser, on the other hand, notes that "the theme is the relation between the individual and society."² He sees Abraham as an individual who, having found favor before God, attempts to acquire the privilege of having his voice heard with regard to the fate of Sodom.³ While these suggestions have some merit, they hardly rise to the level of being major themes.

A much more viable option and perhaps the best one is to regard justice as the predominant theme.⁴ The Lord was concerned that Abraham teach his descendants His ways "by doing righteousness and justice" (18:19, NASB). The Lord intended to personally survey the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah (18:20-21) so that Abraham would know that His judgment, based upon all the facts, would be just. Abraham's dialogue with the Lord in verses 23-32 revolves around his concern that justice be done by "the Judge of all the earth" (18:25). In Abraham's mind the equal treatment of the righteous and the wicked would be an injustice (18:23, 25). Furthermore, the occurrences of the words מִצְדִּיק

¹Harold G. Stigers, A Commentary on Genesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 168.

²E. A. Speiser, Genesis, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1964), p. 135.

³Ibid.

⁴Cf. Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 347; and Westermann, Genesis, p. 137.

(righteousness - v. 19), מִשְׁפָּט (justice - vv. 19, 25), צַדִּיק (righteous - vv. 23, 24 [2x], 25 [2x], 26, 28) and שֹׁפֵט (judge - v. 25) help demonstrate this emphasis.

The execution of God's just judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah culminates this theme (Gen 19). Here the terminology is of a different sort: "destroy" (vv. 13 [2x]; 14), "punishment" (v. 15), "disaster" (v. 19) and the like (NASB).

The Critical Examination

The Lord's Decision to Disclose His Intentions: A Soliloquy (18:17-19)

The topic of the conversation changes in verse 17 from that of the preceding verses wherein Isaac's birth was announced (vv. 9-15). The men's rising up and looking down towards Sodom¹ (v. 16) communicated to Abraham their new intentions. As a good host Abraham accompanied them for a ways² (v. 16).

Verses 17-19 have commonly been considered a soliloquy³ with מִן (v. 17) being taken by some to include

¹It should be noted that the LXX adds καὶ Γομόρρας after Σοδόμων.

²For the traditional view of how far Abraham went, see: S. R. Driver, The Book of Genesis, Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen and Co., 1904), p. 195.

³Cf. Ross, Creation and Blessing, pp. 349-50; Westermann, Genesis, p. 138; and Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:544.

"to himself."¹ This is suggested by BDB² for Genesis 20:11 and 26:9 but not for Genesis 18:17. Nevertheless, the possibility does exist for וַיַּחְשַׁב יְהוָה to be understood in this way (i.e. "And the Lord thought" [v. 17]). Whether the Lord's thoughts were audible or not is hard to discern. Leupold³ believes that they were while Westermann⁴ suggests that they were not.

Motivated by Abraham's destiny

The decision the Lord intends to make is expressed as a question (vv. 17-18). Part of the Lord's reason for not concealing His intentions from Abraham is found in his destiny: "since Abraham will surely [וְיָבֹרֵךְ - an infinitive absolute] become a great and mighty nation, and all the peoples of the earth will be blessed in him?" (v. 18). The Lord has great regard for Abraham in light of the special position that he will hold in history. Yet to claim that the Lord was obligated to inform Abraham of any nation that would be removed from the opportunity to share in his blessing,⁵ is to go beyond the scope of the text.

¹Driver, Book of Genesis, p. 195; and John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, ICC. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), p. 304.

²BDB, p. 56.

³Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:544.

⁴Westermann, Genesis 12-36, pp. 288-89.

⁵While Ross takes this viewpoint (Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 350), Stigers responds to a similar advocate of this persuasion as follows: "Here the supposition is that Sodom and Gomorrah cannot be destroyed because all peoples have a right in the promise to Abraham. This is false; only

Motivated by Abraham's role as an instructor

Yet a deeper and more important reason¹ for God's disclosure is brought to light in verse 19. For the Lord had "known him" (יָדָעְתִּי) ² for the specific purpose³ (לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר - "to the end that"⁴ or "in order that" [NASB]) of his commanding his descendants "to keep the way [דֶּרֶךְ] ⁵ of the Lord"⁶ (NASB). The results of not keeping God's ways becomes all too evident in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. If Abraham's descendants are not to experience a similar fate, it is imperative that they live in light of what the patriarch has commanded them (cf. Deut 6). Abraham's sphere of influence during his own lifetime would have even touched the lives of Jacob and Esau for fifteen years (cf. Gen 21:5; 25:7, 26).

the elect have such right. The hard of heart have rejected all hope!" (Stigers, Genesis, p. 170, n. 74).

¹Cf. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:545.

²The meanings suggested here range from the idea of "chosen" (NASB; and Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 288) to that of the emphasis being placed upon the intimacy of the relationship (Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:545; Skinner, Commentary on Genesis, p. 304; and Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 350).

³Ronald J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax: An Outline, 2nd ed. (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 61-62.

⁴BDB, p. 775.

⁵Note the frequency of the occurrences of דֶּרֶךְ in the context of the law of the Lord (Ps 119).

⁶Leupold's remark is also pertinent: "The expression 'way of Yahweh' (derekh yahweh) requires 'Yahweh' to be construed as a subjective genitive: 'the way which Yahweh desires'" (Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:546).

An instructor of righteousness (מִדְּרָשׁ)

What is involved in keeping God's ways is further explained in the following phrase: "by doing righteousness" (מִדְּרָשׁ הַיָּדֵי [an infinitive construct of דָּרַשׁ¹]). The feminine noun מִדְּרָשׁ occurs 156 times² with only 9 instances in the Pentateuch. The majority of the occurrences are found in the Prophets (77 times). The masculine form of the noun דְּרָשׁ appears 117 times with 11 of them found in the Pentateuch. In contrast to מִדְּרָשׁ, the majority of the occurrences of דְּרָשׁ are evidenced in wisdom literature.

With regard to the meaning of מִדְּרָשׁ and דְּרָשׁ, older scholars believed that they were basically synonymous.³ On the other hand, a more modern writer challenges this

¹Thomas O. Lambdin, Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 129.

²Gen [3x]; Deut [6x]; Isa [36x]; Jer [8x]; Ezek [20x]; Hos [1x]; Joel [1x]; Amos [3x]; Mic [2x]; Zech [1x]; Mal [2x]; Job [4x]; Pss [33x]; Prov [18x]; Judg [2x]; 1 Sam [2x]; 2 Sam [4x]; 1 Kgs [3x]; 1 Chr [1x]; 2 Chr [2x]; Neh [1x]; and Dan [3x].

³Cf. Norman H. Snaith, The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament (London: The Epworth Press, 1944), p. 72; G. Quell and G. Schrenk, Bible Key Words: Righteousness, Manuals From Kittel. trans. and ed. J. R. Coates (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1951), p. 3, n. 2; A. B. Davidson, The Theology of the Old Testament, The International Theological Library, ed. S. D. F. Salmond (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), p. 269; and John A. Bollier, "The Righteousness of God: A Word Study," Int 8 (October 1954):404. For the etymology of the root דָּרַשׁ, see: David Hill, Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 82-83. There he remarks: "The most we can say is that they suggest that the fundamental idea of דָּרַשׁ available to us is that of conformity to a norm which requires to be defined in each particular case" (Ibid., p. 83).

consensus. He¹ notes one of the uses of מִשְׁכָּל in Leviticus 19:36: "just weights" (lit. just stones [אֲבָנֵי - מִשְׁכָּל]). In this case, as in others where weights are used (Deut 25:15 and Ezek 45:10), the emphasis is upon "what is right, just, normal."² Correct or accurate weights are what is important; that which is right for its intended use.³ McGrath continues as follows:

It may be noted that this application of מִשְׁכָּל in the construct is not limited to weights - thus at Deuteronomy 33.19; Psalm 4.6 [MT] and 51.21 [MT], we encounter references to the 'sacrifices of righteousness'. Again, it is probable that this means nothing more than the 'correct' sacrifice - i.e. that which is appropriate under the circumstance.⁴

The point of all this is that מִשְׁכָּל is not used to qualify weights and measurements like מִשְׁכָּל is and may indicate a fundamental difference between the two words. So to claim⁵ that there is no difference between them is not true. The standard lexicons⁶ have not failed to reflect this difference in their definitions.

In looking at the uses of מִשְׁכָּל only in the Pentateuch, one finds that righteousness is that which is

¹A. E. McGrath, "Justice and Justification: Semantic and Juristic Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of Justification," SJT 35 (1982):408.

²BDB, p. 841. Cf. KB, p. 794.

³McGrath, "Justice and Justification," p. 408.

⁴Ibid.

⁵For two writers who do not see any differences between these words, see: Snaith, Distinctive Ideas, p. 72; and Bollier, "The Righteousness of God," p. 404.

⁶Cf. BDB, pp. 841-42; and KB, pp. 794-95.

forensically¹ attributed to one who believes in the Lord (Gen 15:6). Faith is what God expects of man and when it is witnessed by God, He will declare that person righteous. According to Deuteronomy 6:25, observing "all [לְכָל] this commandment before the Lord" would be regarded as righteousness. Obedience to what God requires of man as stated in His commandments is described as נִצְחָה . In the context of giving a loan and receiving a pledge for it (i.e. a cloak [Deut 24:13]), righteousness (נִצְחָה) is depicted as returning the cloak to the debtor at night so that he would have something to sleep in (cf. Ezek 18:5-9).

Already in these few verses it is apparent that righteousness is experienced in the relations between men and between God and men.² It concerns conduct as well as attitudes. One does righteousness³ if he personally responds to God by faith and in obedience to what He demands of him; both in his relationship with God and his neighbor.

¹Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:477.

²This aspect of relationship is brought out in Lofthouse's article. He notes "that righteousness, in the Old Testament, . . . has to do with the personal relations of men to one another in a community; it means standing right with others, being in the right with them. When it is referred to the sphere of religion . . . it must be understood in the light of the covenant in which God has chosen that He and His people should stand with one another" (W. F. Lofthouse, "The Righteousness of God," ExpTim 50 [October 1938 - September 1939]:441). Cf. Davidson, Theology of the Old Testament, p. 273.

³For a discussion which demonstrates that righteousness does not mean sinlessness, see: Davidson, Theology of the Old Testament, pp. 274-77.

The covenant formed the sphere in which these relationships were worked out for the nation of Israel.

While this may be an oversimplification of a complex subject, it does help to explain part of what it means "to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness [מִצְדִּיק]" (v. 19, NASB; emphasis added). Putting it even more succinctly, righteousness for man may be defined as "measuring up to the demands of God."¹ Abraham was to bear the responsibility of instructing his progeny to respond to God's demands with faith and obedience. That is doing righteousness (מִצְדִּיק).²

An instructor of justice (מִצְדִּיק)

Yet doing righteousness was not all of what was necessary to keep the Lord's way. Justice (מִצְדִּיק) was also required. Whereas here (v. 19) the Lord is focusing on the exercise of justice (מִצְדִּיק) by Abraham's descendants, in verse 25 Abraham's primary concern is with the Lord's justice (מִצְדִּיק). This connection calls attention to the central issue in the pericope under discussion (Gen 18:16-33).

That justice is an important subject in Scripture is indicated by the numerous times that the word מִצְדִּיק is used (ca. 420). It is used 84 times in the Pentateuch with only

¹Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1:478. In effect, God's will or nature becomes the standard (cf. Payne, Theology of the Older Testament, pp. 156-57; and Snaith, Distinctive Ideas, pp. 60-61).

²For a detailed examination of the development of this word in the OT, see: Payne, Theology of the Older Testament, pp. 155-61.

3 occurrences in Genesis (18:19, 25; 40:13). The masculine noun מִשְׁפָּט is a derivative of the verb שָׁפַט ("judge, govern"¹) and may mean "Justice, ordinance, custom [or] manner."²

When examining the usages of this word, one is greatly helped by Culver who has found that there are "at least thirteen related, but distinct, aspects of the central idea"³ represented in the OT. They are categorized as follows:

1. The act of deciding a case of litigation brought before a civil magistrate.
2. The place of deciding a case of litigation.
3. The process of litigation is called mishpāt.
4. A case of litigation (i.e. a specific cause brought to the magistrate).
5. A sentence or decision issuing from a magistrate's court.
6. The time of judgment.
7. Sovereignty, the legal foundation of government in the sense of ultimate authority or right.
8. The attribute of justice in all correct personal civil administration is emphasized.
9. mishpāt also designates an ordinance of law - often used co-ordinately with hōq "ordinance" (Ex 15:25) and tôrâ "law" (Isa 42:4).

¹BDB, p. 1047.

²TWOT, s.v. " שָׁפַט, שֹׁפֵט, מִשְׁפָּט, שֹׁפֵט," by Robert D. Culver, 2:948.

³Ibid. Cf. Osborne Booth, "The Semantic Development of the term שָׁפַט in the Old Testament," JBL 61 (March-December 1942):105-10.

10. A plan (Ex 26:30) or 11. custom (II Kgs 17:33) or even 12. a fitting measure taken (I Kgs 5:8) seem to come under the scope of this word, though they are extended meanings, hardly standard.
13. One's right under law, human or divine, is denominated mishpāt (Deut 18:3; Jer 32:7).¹

The use of מִשְׁפָּט in Genesis 18:19 is like that in Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice [מִשְׁפָּט נִיחַי], to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (NASB; emphasis added). As justice is an attribute of God ("i.e. rightness rooted in God's character"²), so should it be an attribute of man. God requires it of him as these verses indicate. Ultimately, as with הַשְׁפָּט, שֶׁמֶשֶׁפָּט "is of God, being His declared will."³ Man learns to do justice by observing what God has declared to be justice. "Justice is what God wills because such is His Nature."⁴ For the Hebrew, justice was defined by God's law.

Yet before Abraham was qualified to "command his children and his household after him" (v. 19, NASB) concerning justice, he would need a little further training from "the Judge of all the earth" (v. 25). If God's justice, as defined by His Being, was to be implanted in Abraham's character, God would find it necessary to use the most suitable method for the task. Indeed, the importance

¹Ibid., pp. 948-49.

²Ibid., p. 949.

³Snaith, Distinctive Ideas, p. 76.

⁴Ibid., p. 77.

of this divine tutoring, along with Abraham's assimilation of the lesson material, is disclosed by the Lord's own words: "in order that [וְיָבִיחַ] the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (v. 19, NASB).

The Occasion for the Lord's Display of Judgment (18:20-21)

The wickedness of the cities of Sodom (cf. Gen. 13:13; Isa 3:9; Lam 4:6) and Gomorrah (Jude 7) would provide the opportunity for the Lord to demonstrate divine justice. While He did not directly tell Abraham what He intended to do to these cities, Abraham no doubt sensed what was coming when the Lord exclaimed, "The outcry [תַּעֲרָא] of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed [כִּי־גָדוֹל]¹ great, and their sin is indeed exceedingly grave" (v. 20; cf. v. 23).²

The word for "outcry" (v. 20, the construct form of תַּעֲרָאִי) is a different Hebrew word than those which are translated "outcry" in Genesis 18:21 (תַּעֲרָאֵי) and 19:13 (תַּעֲרָאֵי). Some scholars³ regard תַּעֲרָאֵי to be an earlier form of תַּעֲרָאִי and consider their meanings parallel. How תַּעֲרָאִי is used in the context of verse 20 is not so easily settled. Kautzsch takes it as an "objective genitive, . . . Gn 18²⁰ מִדְּבַר תַּעֲרָאִי the cry concerning Sodom."⁴ Whose cry is this?

¹BDB suggests that the כִּי be translated as "because" (BDB, p. 473), and the KJV translates it accordingly. Another lexicon opts for the meaning, "yes, indeed" (Holladay, Lexicon, p. 155).

²Boice, Genesis, 2:160.

³See: BDB, p. 858; and TWOT, s.v. " תַּעֲרָאִי , תַּעֲרָאֵי ," by Leon J. Wood, 1:248.

⁴GKC, p. 416, h.

Perhaps it is "the cry of sins for vengeance or punishment."¹ Supportive of this view is Genesis 4:10. There it was Abel's blood crying (צֶעֶקֶיִם , masculine plural participle from צָעַץ) to God from the ground.² Maybe it is the cry of the oppressed³ (Ps 34:16 [MT]). This view, though, is not as frequently expressed.

The opening words of verse 21 ("I will go down now and see" [NASB]) remind one of similar words in Genesis 11:5 ("And the Lord came down to see" [NASB]). Certainly, the Lord already knew the state of affairs in Sodom and Gomorrah. He merely wanted Abraham to know that He was cognizant of all the facts and His judgment would be accurate. Indeed, these words also signify God's decision "to step in as judge."⁴

The Inquiry into the Lord's Justice (18:22-33)

In coming to verses 22-33, it is commonly held that this is an account of Abraham's intercession for Sodom. Accordingly, Abraham is portrayed here as standing in the gap between the Lord, with His impending judgment, and the citizens of Sodom. The uniqueness of this type of

¹John P. Lange, "Genesis," trans. Philip Schaff, in vol. 1 of Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, ed. Philip Schaff, 25 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 435. See Derek Kidner, Genesis, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 133.

²Lange, "Genesis," p. 435.

³Boice, Genesis, 2:160; and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), p. 11.

⁴Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 290.

intercession with the use of a question/answer format is evident when one considers other biblical examples.¹

Nevertheless, when one moves in for a closer inspection of the details, he is not so quick to accept this view. Yes, for some,² Abraham was essentially interceding for the entire city of Sodom which would include the righteous and the wicked. Yet when one considers the key verses in this pericope (vv. 23-25), which determine the direction of the following dialogue,³ it is apparent that Abraham's primary concern is for the righteous. Abraham indubitably thought that it would be a gross injustice for the righteous to be treated the same as the wicked (vv. 23, 25). So though Abraham questions the Lord with regard to how many righteous people it would take to have Sodom spared (vv. 24, 26-32), the basic interest of Abraham is for the deliverance of the righteous even at the price of preserving the wicked majority. This reasoning is further supported by the premise that justice is the theme here as discussed above.

That this is the central issue is likewise sustained by Genesis 19:29. There the reader is told that it was for

¹Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 351.

²See: Kidner, Genesis, p. 133; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, trans. James Martin, Commentary on the Old Testament (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 230-31; Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 351; Meyer, Abraham, p. 124; Candlish, Genesis, p. 304; Speiser, Genesis, p. 135; Boice, Genesis, 2:160; and Stigers, Genesis, p. 171.

³Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 291.

Abraham's sake that Lot was delivered from the destruction which fell upon the cities. Abraham's intercession before the Lord was for the sake of the righteous (Gen 18:23, 25), and his request was granted when the righteous were exempted from the catastrophic judgment which overtook the wicked (Gen 19:15-22, 29). Clearly, in this case, "the Judge of all the earth" (Gen 18:25) chose not to treat the righteous and the wicked alike. Though Abraham did intercede for the city of Sodom, it was for the sake of the righteous and not the wicked.¹ Abraham's intercession, while including Sodom, was firstly for the deliverance of the righteous from that same fate which faced the city. Granted, this emphasis differs from that of many scholars, but it is truer to the text.

The stage for the dialogue is set in verse 22. After the men ("angels" [19:1]) departed for Sodom, Abraham was to be found "still standing before the Lord."²

¹"There is not a sentence that so much as hints that Abraham was imploring God's mercy to avert a disaster from the people" (Ibid., pp. 292-93).

²0. Eissfeldt, who prepared the critical apparatus for Genesis in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, indicates that the original reading was וַיִּהְיֶה . . . אַבְרָהָם (i.e. "And the Lord was still standing before Abraham" [v. 22]) (K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, editio funditus renovata [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983], p. 25). The present reading in the MT is supposed to be the results of a scribal correction (Ibid.), but this is questionable. The LXX reads: "and Abraam was still standing before the Lord" (v. 22), as similarly do the Peshitta and Latin Vulgate.

The problem of wholesale judgment introduced

The core of the issue at hand for Abraham is expressed by his words as recorded in verses 23-25. There he lays down his arguments before the Lord. Manifesting a holy boldness rooted in faith, Abraham "drew near" (from שָׁגַח¹) to the Lord. His first question was, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

(עַם-רָשָׁע וְצַדִּיק יִסָּפֶה יָחַד; v. 23). Abraham was repulsed by the thought that the Lord would indiscriminately² "sweep away" (from סָפָה; used also in 18:24; 19:15, 17) both the righteous and the wicked together. The Lord's "right to destroy"³ was not the problem. The dilemma for Abraham was what would have been the unfairness of God's destruction if it fell upon the righteous, too. Abraham, presumably operating upon the commonly accepted view of divine retributive justice, could not comprehend evil being inflicted upon the good.

The identity of the צַדִּיק

Those who exhibit צַדִּיקָה (cf. above) in their conduct and character may be described by the adjective צַדִּיק

¹For the use of this word in the "context of litigation," see: Zeev W. Falk, "Hebrew Legal Terms," JSS 5 (October 1960):353.

²Skinner, Commentary on Genesis, p. 305. Cf. BDB, p. 705.

³See: Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 351; and Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 291.

("just, righteous"¹).² "But there are passages in which *ṣaddîq*, used of Israel or of the individual Israelite, refers to status rather than to ethical condition (see, for example, Ps 32.11 in the light of vv. 1, 2 and 5; Isa 60.21)"³ (emphasis added).

The relation between the ethical and juridical use of צַדִּיק is commented upon by Davidson. Though he claims the "primary use"⁴ of the word is juridical, he notes that "the ethical notion begins to prevail over the juridical."⁵ Quell and Schrenk bring the juristic aspect to the forefront with its courtroom scenario. "The 'righteous' (*ṣaddiq*) is the man whom God's verdict has justified (*hiṣḏiq*), and the 'wicked' (*rasha'*) is the man whom God has condemned; the background being the picture of a judicial process (*ribh*)."⁶

As with other צַדִּיק-words, the content of צַדִּיק is dependent upon the context in which it is used. At times the character of the righteous is identified when he is contrasted with the wicked (cf. Pss 1; 37). Usually the

¹BDB, p. 843.

²C. E. B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:94.

³Ibid.

⁴Davidson, Theology of the Old Testament, p. 268.

⁵Ibid., p. 269.

⁶Quell and Schrenk, Bible Key Words: Righteousness, p. 7. Cf. Koehler who claims that "justness in the Old Testament is not a juristic concept but one having reference to relationships" (Ludwig Koehler, Old Testament Theology, trans. A. S. Todd [London: Lutterworth Press, 1957], p. 35). Balance needs to be maintained.

context of this word involves the covenant relationship with its inherent demands. "Accordingly, those who are joined to the Lord by faith [cf. Gen 15:6] and follow his standards in obedience are called 'the righteous'."¹

In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah only Lot and his immediate family qualified as צדיק. Three times in 2 Peter 2:7-8 Lot is described as δίκαιος ("upright, just, righteous, like צדיק = conforming to the laws of God and man, and living in accordance w. them."²). The latitude within the boundaries of this term is all too woefully pictured by the lives of Lot and his family who made Sodom their home. Clearly, they stretched the meaning of the word to its limits.

The identity of the רשע

The opposite of צדיק is the adjective רשע ("wicked, criminal"³). As the righteous are more clearly identified when contrasted with the wicked, so the opposite is also true. The רשע are characterized in Proverbs 10 as being violent (vv. 6, 11), worthy of punishment (v. 16),

¹Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 351. See: Hill, Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings, p. 94. "On many occasions, however, the 'righteous' are those who, in humility and faithfulness, trust in Yahweh, despite persecution and oppression; those who seek to live uprightly and without pride of heart, depending on Yahweh for protection and vindication" (Ibid.).

²William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 4th rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 194. The LXX uses δίκαιος in Genesis 18:23 and throughout the chapter.

³BDB, p. 957.

having a heart worth little (v. 20), experiencing his fears (v. 24), having a short life (v. 27), and speaking perverted words (v. 32). Indeed the "commonest word for sinner is . . . רָשָׁע."¹

The wicked, unlike the righteous who respond to God in faith and by obedience to the demands of the covenant, are frequently regarded in the Psalms as "destined for judgment because they stand outside the covenant and its stipulations."² Psalm 50:16 reads, "But to the wicked

[וְלִרְשָׁעִים] God says, 'What right have you to tell of My statutes, and to take My covenant [בְּרִיתִי] in your mouth?' " Then in two subsequent verses of this psalm (vv. 18-19), it is explained how the wicked have violated three commandments of the Decalogue,³ among others.

Of course, the majority in Sodom and Gomorrah had "no part with the covenant and . . . no interest in obeying the Lord"⁴ which in turn disqualified them from being worthy of the appellation, "righteous." If one should question whether the difference in relationship between other nations and God, in contrast to Israel and God, should somehow exempt them from the same righteous demands placed upon Israel, Kaiser's words may prove helpful:

¹Koehler, Old Testament Theology, p. 171.

²Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 351.

³C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Psalms, trans. James Martin, Commentary on the Old Testament (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. 130.

⁴Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 351.

Old Testament ethics are universal, embracing the same standard of righteousness for all the nations of the earth as it does for Israel. Never did the biblical writers conceive of justice, righteousness, or the good as the special corner of the truth reserved for Israel alone; on the contrary, for Abraham the question was "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25).¹

While Abraham introduces his concern here with the possibility that the Lord's judgment might be of the wholesale variety (v. 23), it is not until verse 25 that he resumes this argument. Consequently, more that needs to be said on this matter will be reserved for that time when verse 25 is examined.

The preserving power of the righteous

Abraham's line of reasoning takes a new turn in verse 24 as he persists² in his intercession for the righteous. He questions God concerning His willingness to "spare [from שָׁמַר - 'forgive'³] the place for the sake of the fifty righteous ones [מֵאָדָם] who are in its midst" (v. 24). Proceeding from his own standard of justice, Abraham looks at the situation (i.e. the "effect of the guilty on

¹Kaiser, Old Testament Ethics, p. 11. Kaiser has an excellent section, though brief, on the universality of OT ethics (Ibid., pp. 11-13).

²Ackroyd notes "the motif of insistent demand upon God" (Peter R. Ackroyd, "Hosea and Jacob," VT 13 (July 1963):251, n. 1). With regard to Gen 18:22-23, Amos 6:1-6, Jer 20:7-18 and Ezek 4:14, he says that "all reveal such insistence: they all show, . . . both as we have it in Genesis and as we have it in Hosea [12:4], that such an insistence is proper and theologically sound, for in fact it is to be regarded as a way of demonstrating the willingness of God to act" (Ibid.).

³Holladay, Lexicon, p. 247.

the innocent"¹) and then reverses its components by considering the influence of the righteous upon the wicked.² For Abraham "there is more injustice in the death of a few innocent people than in the sparing of a guilty multitude; his question, however, is 'To what limits is the application of this principle subject?'"³ Is God so willing to save that He would spare the wicked majority in Sodom from destruction for the sake of fifty righteous?⁴ Indeed, God is desirous of saving⁵ the wicked as is indicated in Ezekiel 33:11: "'As I live!' declares the Lord God, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways!'" (NASB). How much more is He concerned about the righteous?

That Abraham does not know all the facts of the situation at Sodom (cf. v. 22) is evident from his starting at fifty righteous. Like many people he probably thought better of others than was actually the case. Then again,

¹Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham and the Righteous of Sodom," JJS 33 (Spring-Autumn 1982):122-23.

²Ibid.

³James L. Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel," ZAW 82 (1970):385. Cf. Skinner, Commentary on Genesis, p. 305.

⁴Ibid.

⁵"The question of the eternal salvation of the soul is not in view here" (Charles L. Feinberg, The Prophecy of Ezekiel [Chicago: Moody Press, 1969], p. 190).

Abraham might have expected that Lot's presence would have influenced this many Sodomites.¹

The Lord answers Abraham's question (v. 24) in verse 26 in the affirmative - "then I will spare [אֶתְכֶם] the whole place for their sake." The righteous are so significant that the Lord would have spared (forgiven) those who were described as "wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord" (Gen 13:13, NASB), whose outcry was great and whose sin was "exceedingly grave" (18:20). Yet in what way would the Lord spare or forgive (אֶתְכֶם) them? Certainly, it must have meant "nothing more than to annul the decision to destroy."² There is no reason to suspect that the righteous had any "atoning function"³ with regard to the wicked in the sense that the Lord's Servant did in Isaiah 53.

Abraham proceeds, with an attitude of humility ("I am dust⁴ and ashes" [v. 27]), to reduce the number of righteous from fifty (v. 28) to ten (v. 32). His persistence in this matter reveals the driving force within him which will not quit until the question has been

¹Davis, Paradise to Prison, p. 199.

²Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 292.

³Ibid.

⁴For a good study on the use of the word "dust" in the OT, see: Walter Brueggemann, "From Dust to Kingship," ZAW 84 (1972):1-18. In connection with this verse (v. 27), he writes: "The man still exists, he can still address the deity, but now he speaks no longer in mood of pride and demand, now only one of hopeful entreaty which moves in the direction of faith" (Ibid., p. 16).

answered: "Is this 'decision to destroy . . . a just decision'¹?" Having received the Lord's assurance that Sodom would be spared if only ten righteous were found, the conversation ended (v. 33). Incredible as it might seem, the Lord would have withheld the brimstone and fire (Gen 19:24) on a wicked multitude for the sake of just ten righteous people.

Why the number ten? The answers are purely speculative. Perhaps Abraham assumed that there might have been ten righteous in Lot's family.² Maybe ten represented "the limit of human charity"³ or the "smallest group"⁴ (i.e. in contrast to individuals). Whatever the reason, ten would have deferred the destruction.

The contribution of Jeremiah 5:1

To arrive at a proper understanding of this verse, it is important that the context be established. The accomplishment of this will be expedited by the use of Thompson's outline:

II. THE DIVINE JUDGMENT ON JUDAH AND JERUSALEM (2:1-25:38)

A. ISRAEL'S GUILT AND PUNISHMENT (2:1-6:30)

1. Israel Indicted for Her Sins (2:1-37)

.

¹Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 292.

²Stigers, Genesis, p. 173.

³Skinner, Commentary on Genesis, p. 306.

⁴Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 292.

2. A Plea for Israel's Repentance (3:1-4:4)

.

3. The Coming Judgment (4:5-6:30)

- (i) The Alarm-Invasion is Threatened (4:5-10)
- (ii) The Scorching Hot Wind of Judgment (4:11-18)
- (iii) Jeremiah's Anguished Cry (4:19-22)
- (iv) A Vision and an Oracle about the Coming Destruction (4:23-28)
- (v) The Death Agony of Zion (4:29-31)
- (vi) The Unpardonable Sin and Moral Depravity of Jerusalem (5:1-9)
- (vii) False Security in the Face of a Terrible Foe (5:10-19)
- (viii) Yahweh Warns a Foolish, Rebellious, Complacent People (5:20-31)¹

In the context of divine judgment being pronounced upon Jerusalem, the Lord commands that a search be made for "a man [אִישׁ] " (Jer 5:1). This man must be "one who does justice [עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט] , who seeks truth [מְבַקֵּשׁ אֱמֻנָה] " (5:1, NASB). If (אִישׁ) such a man is found, the Lord says, "then I will pardon her [אֶפְסֶה לָּהּ] " (5:1, NASB).

The similarities between this context and that of Genesis 18-19 are evident. Here in Jeremiah 5:1 a man who met the demands of God's "holy Word, His Law and His Gospel"² (i.e. doing justice) and sought "faithfulness"³ (אֱמֻנָה⁴) would clearly be considered righteous (cf. Hab

¹J. A. Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 125.

²Theo. Laetsch, Bible Commentary: Jeremiah (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), p. 72.

³BDB, p. 53.

⁴For a critical examination of this word in Habakkuk 2:4 where it is usually translated "faith," see: George J. Zemek, Jr., "Interpretive Challenges Relating to Habakkuk 2:4b," GTJ 1 (Spring 1980):43-69.

2:4). For one such righteous man the Lord would have spared Jerusalem from destruction. This is revealing in light of the fact that Jerusalem was more corrupt than Sodom (cf. Ezek 16:44-52). Whereas ten righteous people were needed to spare Sodom, Jerusalem was certainly offered "easier terms"¹ by the Lord than they were.

Yet both situations are examples of God's justice. Is it fair to say that the Lord's justice leans toward benevolence?² In the end destruction did overtake both cities. The Lord's grace and mercy were exhibited showing His longing to save; but in each case, the people were beyond the point of being able to avail themselves of God's longsuffering anymore. Indeed, God's justice, in the final analysis, could not be called into question because the wicked were punished and the righteous were delivered when they were present. These are clear illustrations of divine retributive justice with an emphasis upon God's benevolence even towards the wicked. The only cry of injustice possible would be that from the hardhearted who may accuse God of being too compassionate.³

¹Thompson, Jeremiah, p. 236. Cf. Blenkinsopp, "Abraham and the Righteous of Sodom," p. 129.

²Snaith, Distinctive Ideas, pp. 71, 77.

³Jonah's anger over God's deliverance of Nineveh does just that (Jonah 3:10-4:2). The truth that the Lord is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (4:2) became a contributing factor in Jonah's displeasure when Nineveh repented and was consequently spared (3:10). For a stimulating article on this subject, see: Terence E. Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," ZAW 90 (1978):227-37. Cf. Coats' brief article where he deals with

The contribution of Ezekiel 14:12-23

In Babylonia Ezekiel served as a prophet "among the exiles" (Ezek 1:1, NASB). He spoke for God "both to his immediate company and also to the Judaeans who remained in the land of Palestine."¹

The pericope under consideration occurs in the first of the two main divisions of the book. To better ascertain the context of chapter 14, Harrison's outline of the first major division will be utilized:

- I. The Approaching Destruction and Dissolution of the Nation, ch. 1-24
 - A. Introduction and call, 1:1-3:3
 - B. Instructions to Ezekiel, 3:4-21
 - C. Prophecies and visions of judgment, 3:22-7:27
 - D. Visions relating to abominations in Judah and the destruction of the state, 8:1-11:25
 - E. Oracles predicting the captivity of Jerusalem, 12:1-19:14
 - F. Final warnings prior to the fall of the city, 20:1-24:27²

Chapter 14 commences with Israel's elders, idolaters at heart, receiving a message of judgment from God through Ezekiel (vv. 1-5). The Lord further exhorts them to repent (v. 6) lest they and anyone else in Israel be cut off from among His people (v. 8). This includes the false prophets (vv. 9-10) through whom they got their desired messages.

God's justice in regard to His allowing David's second son through Bathsheba to live (George W. Coats, "II Samuel 12:1-7a," Int 40 [April 1986]:170-75).

¹R. K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 836.

²Ibid., p. 822.

For those who suspected that God would not be as severe in His judgment as Ezekiel was prophesying because of the presence of a righteous remnant, the contents of verses 12-23 would serve to undermine their false sense of security. Once after each of the four judgments (famine [v. 13], wild beasts [v. 15], a sword [v. 17] and a plague [v. 19]), which are listed in the realm of possibility, one reads words similar to those found in verse 14. There it is written that "'even [though] these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job were in its midst, by their [own] righteousness they could [only] deliver themselves,' declares the Lord God" (cf. vv. 16, 18, 20). These other three verses (vv. 16, 18, 20) add the thought that the three righteous men ("super-saints"¹) could not have even saved their own children.

What was described by the Lord as potentially happening in verses 12-20, is now applied to Jerusalem as a prophecy in verses 21-23. A remnant from Jerusalem would survive, but they would be wicked² in character (vv. 22-23). They would go into exile to show those who were already there from earlier deportations the greatness of their sin.

This would be proof positive that the judgment of God was called for. They would see that God's judgments were neither excessive nor arbitrary. They would be comforted (mentioned twice) in the sense of acquiescing in the rightness of the judgment of God. No matter how much Ezekiel loved his countrymen, no matter how much he was pained at their judgment, yet he had to acknowledge that the

¹John B. Taylor, Ezekiel, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1969), p. 128.

²Ibid., p. 130; and Feinberg, Prophecy of Ezekiel, p. 82.

dealings of God with His people were in justice (emphasis added).¹

So the question that needs to be asked is, "How is it that ten righteous people would have spared Sodom (Gen 18:22-32), and one righteous person would have brought God's pardon of Jerusalem (Jer 5:1), but now even the presence of three righteous men of the caliber of Noah, Daniel, and Job could not deliver Jerusalem (Ezek 14:12-23)?" Perhaps the answer is found in the extreme level of wickedness to which they had sunk.² While the righteousness of Noah, Daniel, and Job would deliver themselves, it would have no influence with God concerning His decision to destroy the others. Apparently, there comes a time when even the preserving power of the righteous is of no avail.³ God's justice demands that nothing interfere with the releasing of His impending punishment upon the exceedingly wicked.

The concluding observations

In each of the three cases (Gen 18:22-32; Jer 5:1; Ezek 14:12-23), the normal scheme of divine retributive justice is depicted. The wicked were ultimately punished, and the righteous, when they existed, were delivered. The Lord's justice was vindicated in each episode.

The presence of a sufficient number of righteous people would have spared the cities in which they dwelt in

¹Feinberg, Prophecy of Ezekiel, p. 82.

²Ibid., p. 81.

³Cf. Jeremiah 7:16 and 15:1-4 where intercession before the Lord for the ungodly is of no use.

two of the three situations cited (Gen 18:22-32; Jer 5:1). In the third instance (Ezek 14:12-23), if a righteous remnant had existed, they could have only delivered themselves. It may be concluded that the preserving power of the righteous is related to the degree of wickedness which characterizes the society in which they live. Indeed, other factors are surely involved and preclude the ability to make any hard and fast principle. Yet, generally speaking, the texts examined above would indicate that the righteous do affect God's decision to destroy as long as the society of which they are a part has not filled "the measure of iniquity"¹ (cf. Gen 15:16).

One significant difference between these pericopes is found in the matter of how the righteous person's influence fits into the argument of the author. As previously discussed with regard to Gen 18:22-32, Abraham's argument centers upon the injustice of the righteous being destroyed with the wicked. For him the preserving influence of the righteous upon the wicked of Sodom would result in the righteous delivering themselves if for their sake the Lord halted the destruction of the city. Contrarily, in Jeremiah 5:1 and Ezekiel 14:12-23 the emphasis is upon the preserving power of the righteous for the sake of the wicked, Jerusalem, and not themselves.

¹Keil and Delitzsch, Pentateuch, p. 230.

The problem of wholesale judgment continued

Abraham resumes his plea that a distinction be made between the righteous and the wicked (v. 25). His reluctance to believe that the Lord could destroy them both in the same stroke is expressed by his words: "Far be it from you [$\text{לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ$ ¹ - used twice in v. 25] to do the like of² this manner [or 'such a thing as this'³]." The word "this" (זֶה) refers to the Lord's killing עַם-רְשָׁע . That phrase (עַם-רְשָׁע), which was used previously in verse 23, is now further explained by the clause $\text{וְהָיָה כַּצַּדִּיק כְּרָשָׁע}$ ("lit. that the like of the righteous be the like of the wicked, i.e. that the righteous be as the wicked"⁴). The repetition of the כִּי (i.e. $\text{כַּצַּדִּיק כְּרָשָׁע}$) denotes "the completeness of the correspondency between two objects."⁵ To have the same judgment fall upon the righteous and the wicked would be equivalent to regarding them as similar in character. Knowing God as well as he does, Abraham once again retorts, "Far be it from you" (v. 25). As "the friend of God" (Jas 2:23, NASB), Abraham "rejects the possibility that God could"⁶ judge in this manner.

¹The LXX uses Μηδουῶς ("By no means") here (v. 25).

²BDB, p. 454.

³Williams, Hebrew Syntax, pp. 46-7. The preposition כִּי on וְהָיָה is used in the comparative sense (Ibid.).

⁴BDB, p. 454.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Westermann, Genesis 12-36, p. 291.

Unfortunately, Job did not have this same confidence in God's justice. Defending his own innocence (Job 9:21), Job concludes "It is [all] one [אֶחָד הֵיאָה]; therefore I say, 'He destroys the guiltless [צַדִּיק] and the wicked [רָשָׁע]' (Job 9:22, NASB). The phrase אֶחָד הֵיאָה "expresses the idea of indiscriminating equality of treatment."¹ Job, who allows his experience to mold his theology, claims that God is arbitrary in how He administers justice.² He treats the innocent and wicked alike. This contradicts Bildad's argument that the upright are rewarded and the godless suffer loss (Job 8).

Though Abraham is relatively sure that the Lord would not judge indiscriminately, he still finds himself pressed to ask the question: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice [הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַשְׁפִּיט מִשְׁפָּט]?"³ (v. 25). In that שֹׁפֵט and מִשְׁפָּט are both derived from שָׁפַט,⁴ Driver remarks that the "Heb. is more pointed and forcible

¹Edouard Dhorme, A Commentary on the Book of Job, trans. Harold Knight (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1967), p. 139.

²Norman C. Habel, The Book of Job, OTL (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), p. 194.

³The LXX has ὁ κρίνων πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν, οὐ ποιήσεις κρίσιν (i.e. "You who judges the whole earth, shall you not do right?"). The sense of the verse is a little different in the Targum of Onkelos: דִּיין כָּל אָרֶעָ בְּרָם יַעֲבִיד דִּינָא. Etheridge translates it: "Can the Judge of all the earth but do justice?" (J. W. Etheridge, The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee [New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1968], p. 70).

⁴C. S. Rodd, "Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Just? (Gen 18²⁵)," ExpTim 83 (February 1972):137.

than the English: 'shall not the judge of all the earth do judgment?' - do what the title which He bears implies."¹

The nature of divine justice (מִשְׁפָּט)

While man's obligation to do justice was briefly discussed above (v. 19), attention must now be given to what it means for God to "do justice" (לַעֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט). For here in verse 25, Abraham expects the Supreme Judge (cf. Judg 11:27; Pss 50:6; 75:7; 94:2) to dispense justice in conformity with His position and character.

It is discriminating. In considering the verb מִשְׁפָּט, a necessary task since it affects the meaning of its derivatives, one discovers that there is a lack of unity among scholars with regard to the basic meaning of the word. Concepts which lie behind מִשְׁפָּט include those of ruling (cf. 1 Sam 8:5, 20), judging (i.e. in the sense of deciding cases [cf. Deut 1:16]), and custom (cf. Josh 6:15: "and marched around the city in the same manner [מִשְׁפָּטָם] seven times" [NASB, emphasis added]). While some² have found custom to be the primary idea, others³ have decided that ruling is fundamental. Morris favors "discrimination."⁴ Though the issue can not be settled here, one needs to keep each of

¹Driver, Book of Genesis, p. 197.

²See: Snaith, Distinctive Ideas, p. 76; and Booth, "Semantic Development of מִשְׁפָּט," p. 108. They espouse this view.

³Leon Morris, The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 9.

⁴Ibid., pp. 14-17.

these concepts in mind when determining the usage of the word within a particular context.

When examining the use of *מִשְׁפָּט* in Genesis 18:25, the idea of discrimination clearly comes to the forefront since indiscriminate judgment of both the righteous and the wicked is Abraham's immediate concern. Perhaps Abraham was familiar with the Lord's display of justice in Noah's day when "righteous" (*צַדִּיק* [Gen 6:9; 7:1]) Noah and his family were delivered from destruction. Abraham expected at least this measure of justice from the Judge whose throne rests upon a foundation of righteousness (*צִדְקָה*) and justice (*מִשְׁפָּט*) (Pss 89:15 [MT]; 97:2).

As Job's remark, "He destroys the guiltless and the wicked" (Job 9:22, NASB), is reflected upon once again, it is important that the end of the story be remembered. For there it is written, "the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he prayed for his friends, and the Lord increased all that Job had twofold" (42:10, cf. vv. 11-17). The Lord certainly distinguished between the righteous and the wicked in this case as well, even if the "gifts at the end are gestures of grace, not rewards for virtue."¹

It means deliverance for the righteous. The Lord also separated righteous Lot (2 Pet 2:7-8) and his family from the wicked before destruction came (Gen 19:16). While this pictures the discriminating character of God's justice,

¹Francis I. Andersen, *Job*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 294. Cf. Habel, Book of Job, pp. 584-85.

it likewise draws attention to the truth that God's justice means deliverance for the righteous.

This connection between justice and deliverance is particularly apparent in the case of the needy. Deuteronomy 10:18 says that the Lord "executes justice [מִשְׁפָּט וְחַסֵּד] for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing" (NASB). For the weak, helpless, and oppressed, "judgment means help and deliverance"¹ (cf. Ps 76:10 [MT] where justice = salvation).

It means punishment for the wicked. When one moves into the narrative of Genesis 19, the vital question, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (18:25), should not be forgotten. There it is told how the wicked (רָשָׁעִים) experienced the מִשְׁפָּט of God (cf. Deut 32:41). Justice meant disaster for them in the form of "brimstone and fire" (v. 24, NASB). The reason that Sodom and Gomorrah were not exempt from God's justice is found in the words, "Judge of all the earth" (18:25, emphasis added). This demonstrates the relationship between God's justice and all nations.

It is influenced by other divine attributes. In the context of judgment, which results in deliverance for Lot, the reference to the Lord's "mercy" or "compassion" (חַסְדֵּי יְהוָה ² [Gen 19:16]) being upon him raises an important issue. What

¹TDNT, s.v. " κρίνω: B. The OT Term מִשְׁפָּט ," by Volkmar Herntrich, 3:930.

²While a standard lexicon lists this word as a feminine noun (BDB, p. 328), Gesenius considers it to be an infinitive form of חָסַד (GKC, p. 123, d). See: TWOT, s.v. "חָסַד, חַסְדֵּי, חֶסֶד," by Leonard J. Coppes, 1:296.

relationship does God's justice have with His other attributes? Morris' insight into this matter is valuable:

But, though God's judgment will be just, and give the wicked no cause for complaint, we should not think of it as a blind weighing of merits and demerits in a balance. Mishpat may take its origin from a legal matrix, but it makes its home with qualities like lovingkindness, faithfulness, righteousness, mercy (or mercies), truth and glory (see Ps. xxxvi, 5f., lxxxix. 14; Ezk. xxxix. 21; Ho. ii. 19, etc.). It is repeatedly linked with qualities like these. It is a blend of reliability and clemency, of law and love. It is a love of men and a love of right. Not the one and not the other, but both.¹

The relation between the Lord's sovereignty and His mercy is described in Exodus 33:19 where He says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious [from רַחֵם], and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion [from חַנּוּן²]" (NASB). Ultimately the Lord is free, within the boundaries of His own nature, to choose who will benefit from His compassion.³ Was Lot's righteousness a factor in the Lord's demonstration of compassion (cf. Ps 34:20 [MT])?

In the final analysis, only when one understands how God's attributes function in relation to each other will he be able to know the intricacies of divine רַחֲמֵי. Yet there is an impenetrable barrier which prevents man from peering into this aspect of God's character. While God's justice is

¹Morris, Biblical Doctrine of Judgment, pp. 21-22.

²The emphasis is upon "God's unconditional choice" (TWOT, s.v. "חַנּוּן," by Leonard J. Coppes, 2:842).

³The compassion that the Lord demonstrated toward Nineveh (Jonah 4:11) is best seen as a consequence of their repentance (Jonah 3:10), though it is only part of the reason for God's sparing them (Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," pp. 231-32).

reflected in that standard which He expects man to follow, divine justice operates at an infinitely higher level (Isa 55:8-9).

The natural inclination to question divine justice

That there is a natural tendency in Scripture to question God's justice, is undisputable.¹ Abraham's questions (Gen 18:23-32) typically reveal the perplexity which men face in the catastrophes of life. In the situation that confronted Abraham, the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham was ignorant of many of the variables which went into the Lord's just decision. At the outset of his inquiries, Abraham did not know how many righteous were in Sodom, what number would have saved the whole city, or whether the Lord's judgment would be arbitrary, though he did not believe that it would be. Abraham was at a disadvantage because of his limited perspective.

Lack of understanding often leads to questions being asked. The fact that Abraham's conversation with the Lord ended peacefully (v. 33) may be an indication that there is nothing wrong with questioning God as long as it is done in humility and with reverence (v. 27). Indeed, is it possible that "God was drawing him on,"² leading Abraham to ask these questions which would facilitate the learning process? After all, the Lord did expect Abraham to "command his

¹Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God," pp. 380-95.

²Meyer, Abraham, p. 129.

children . . . to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (v. 19, NASB). When men are confronted with events in life which raise questions in their minds concerning God's justice, they need to heed Abraham's example of how to approach God for answers. It may be that the Lord wants them to know more about His justice, too.

CHAPTER IV

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The Elusive Formula: The Problem of Theodicy

While the OT generally views God's justice as functioning in a retributive manner, there are exceptions. The righteous are not always delivered (cf. Heb 11:35-38). When Zechariah was moved by the Spirit of God to rebuke the people during Joash's reign, "they conspired against him and at the command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the Lord" (2 Chr 24:21, NASB). Job, "righteous man par excellence,"¹ suffered because of his righteousness (Job 1:8).

Part of the reason that man cannot understand these exceptions to the general rule is perhaps found in his inability to determine how God's attributes function with one another. How does His love work in conjunction with His wrath? Does this affect God's timing? If the wicked prosper here, it is reasonable to expect that they will receive their due punishment in the next world (Matt 13:36-43). Yet why is retribution (punishment) immediate in some cases and deferred in others?

¹Habel, Book of Job, p. 90.

The inadequacy of man's attempts to give definitive answers to these questions should discourage him from searching for "a formula whereby it can be determined just how God will act in specific instances."¹ It is just not possible to plot God's every move. Finite man, while aided by God's Word, is incapable of comprehending the infinite God. To seek a formula to explain how God's justice works in any given situation, is presumptuousness.

Yet in many ways the attempts to solve the problem of theodicy take this same route. They try to logically uncover how God's attributes are all interrelated. Indeed, the problem of theodicy "turns on the attributes of God . . . If God had no attributes, there would be no problem."² Men may strive to find that formula which will explain the justness of God's actions, but it will always elude them. Granted, the Scriptures say much about the Lord's justice and other character traits. Still there is a line which man cannot cross. Once that line has been reached, one must be content to live with his incomplete knowledge and exercise faith in "the Judge of all the earth" (Gen 18:25, cf. Prov 3:5). It is expected that "the righteous will live by his faith" (Hab 2:4, NASB). For the "secret things belong to the Lord our God" (Deut 29:29, NASB) and cannot be found out.

¹Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," p. 232.

²Gregory, "Problem of Theodicy," p. 69.

The Value of Intercession for Others

Though God's sovereign will influences His decision to either save or destroy, it must not be forgotten that Abraham's intercession for the righteous did have results. "Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered [זָכַר] ¹ Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived" (Gen 19:29, NASB). Perhaps one of the lessons which God intended for Abraham to acquire was "that He responded to intercession of others."² Moses later would also intercede for the children of Israel: "So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people" (Exod 32:14, NASB; cf. 1 Sam 7:8-9; 12:23). This important spiritual truth should not be minimized.

¹See: Ross, Creation and Blessing, pp. 196-97, 362-63. "The verb zākar, 'remember,' is important in terms of God's covenantal faithfulness" (Ibid., p. 362).

²Davis, Paradise to Prison, p. 200. Note the other reasons he gives for why God informed Abraham about His intentions for Sodom and Gomorrah (Ibid., pp. 199-200).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

One who attempts to formulate a successful theodicy must be able to bring God's goodness, justness, and sovereignty into harmony with the existence of suffering and evil. This is a complex problem which revolves around God's attributes.¹

The Bible is far from silent on this subject. It offers several solutions, but ones which are incomplete at best even when considered together.² The most common one is explained through divine retributive justice. A second answer, divine discipline, complements it. The suffering which results from retributive justice is a measured punishment that corresponds to the nature of the sin. Divine discipline, which may or may not include suffering, emphasizes an educational element that is of a beneficial character. These two views, together with others, form the context for considering divine justice as it is revealed through a unique conversation (Gen 18) and a display of divine retribution (Gen 19).

¹Gregory, "Problem of Theodicy," p. 69.

²Robinson, Suffering, p. 68.

Abraham, whose calling and destiny require him to be well informed in how to do justice (Gen 18:18-19), learns much as he humbly and reverently (v. 27) questions the Lord's intentions concerning Sodom (vv. 23-32). As he progresses in his intercession for the righteous, Abraham discovers that if a sufficient number exists (10, v. 32), they may divert the Lord's destruction of the wicked society in which they live. From other sources (Jer 5:1; and Ezek 14:12-23), it was concluded that the preserving power of the righteous was limited by the pervasiveness of the evil. There does come a time when the extreme wickedness of a people may exempt them from any benefit derived from the presence of the godly. Yet from these examples which reflect God's propensity to save, one may suggest that His justice is greatly affected by His mercy and grace.

That divine justice is discriminating, making a distinction between the righteous and the wicked, is clearly expressed in these chapters (Gen 18-19). It is manifested in deliverance for the righteous and destruction for the wicked. Plainly, Genesis 18-19 fits the common view of retributive justice.

The limitedness of man's ability to thoroughly dissect God's justice is also exposed in this portion of scripture. A question still remains concerning how the Lord's compassion (Gen 19:16) and Abraham's intercession for the righteous (cf. Gen 19:29) influenced His just decision to deliver Lot. This in turn points to the mystery of how God's attributes work together. It is here that man

experiences his greatest frustration. For divine retributive justice, divine discipline, and all the other biblical solutions which help explain why the righteous suffer, when examined together, still leave gaps in man's understanding. Indeed, the problem of theodicy is rooted in mankind's ill-fated attempt to explain the reasoning of the infinite God of heaven and earth. No single formula will ever be found that will resolve all the difficulties.

In view of all these insurmountable obstacles, man must finally confess that his knowledge and understanding are inferior to God's (Job 42:3). He is left with one option: trust the Lord (Prov 3:5).

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