

Chapter 2

The Two Daughters of Lot (Genesis 19:1-38)

*Your daughter is headstrong? Keep a sharp lookout
that she does not make you the laughing stock of your enemies,
the talk of the town, the object of common gossip,
and put you to public shame.*

Sirach 42:11

Introduction

The story of Lot and his two unmarried daughters is, chronologically, the first of four narratives about daughters and fathers to be analysed and discussed in this thesis. Compared with the stories of Jephthah's daughter and David's daughter Tamar, only recently has there been scholarly interest in Lot's daughters, while contributors to Bible commentaries continue to either ignore these two young women of Sodom or give them short shrift.¹

Nevertheless Lot's daughters are important, not only because of their status as legendary matriarchs of two powerful nations of the ANE, but because they are the first women in the Hebrew Bible to be presented as daughters, sisters and *b^etuloth*. Indeed, the older sister is the fourth woman and the first unnamed

¹ Popular publications about women of the Bible rarely mention Lot's daughters unless the authors claim to discuss each woman in the Bible (for example, Sue and Larry Richards' *Every Woman in the Bible* produces half a page on Lot's daughters). Richards and Richards, *Every Woman in the Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 58.

b^etulah in the Bible to be given a voice.² Lot's two daughters are the story's main protagonists in the last verses only (vss. 30-38), so my focus will be on the final section for the feminist task of retrieving material which has traditionally been regarded through androcentric eyes.

Narrative Analysis³

Narrative Context

The story of the destruction of Sodom and the rescue of Abraham's nephew Lot and his family in Genesis 19 is a minor, but apposite, section of the Abraham narrative cycle. Lot's story begins when he accompanies Abram, later Abraham, from Ur to Canaan (Gen. 11:31-12:9). Eventually the land cannot support the herds of both Lot and Abraham, so Lot chooses to live in Sodom (Gen. 13:8-13).⁴ Immediately preceding the story of Sodom is the visit to Abraham by YHWH and his messengers or angels (*mal'akiym* מלאכים)⁵ to announce that Sarah will give birth to Abraham's heir, and to reveal that Sodom and Gomorrah's sins are so heinous that the cities are to be destroyed (Gen. 18).⁶ Abraham pleads for Sodom and obtains the deity's undertaking to spare Sodom

² The first records of women's speech in the Bible are Eve (Gen. 3:13, 4:1, 25), and Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16:2, 5, 8, 13).

³ For a semi-literal translation of the pericope, see "Appendix 2," pp. 483-86.

⁴ See "Character Portrayal: Lot," p. 135, fn. 116.

⁵ In this analysis, I translate *mal'akiym* as "messengers" rather than "angels," as the word "messengers" clearly represents their role in Genesis 19. For the remainder of the chapter - apart from verse 15 - the narrator refers to the messengers as "the men"; however I will retain the word "messengers" to avoid confusion with the men of Sodom.

⁶ Sodom and Gomorrah are the cities of the broad valley, or plain, of the Ghor (*hakakar* הַכַּכַּר) (vs. 17c), purportedly located west of the Dead Sea and later known as the Jordan Valley.

if ten righteous people are found in the city (Gen. 18:23-33).⁷ After Sodom is destroyed and the beginning of Lot's dynasty with the births of Lot's sons/grandsons is announced, the narrative resumes its focus on Abraham and his less-than-admirable efforts to ensure his own safety as a resident alien in the Negeb (Gen. 20:1-18) before the birth of his heir, Isaac (Gen. 21: 1-7).

Story Outline

Act I Scene 1: The Messengers Arrive (Gen. 19:1-3a)

<u>Setting:</u>	Sodom – the gate, Lot's house	
<u>Time:</u>	Evening	
<u>Catalyst:</u>	Arrival of 2 messengers (angels)	(vs. 1a)
<u>Response:</u>	Lot offers hospitality	(vs. 1b)
<u>Complication:</u>	Messengers refuse	(vs. 2)
<u>Response:</u>	Lot urges strongly	(vs. 3a)
<u>Resolution:</u>	Messengers acquiesce	(vs. 3b)

Scene 2: The Men of Sodom Gather (Gen. 19:3b-11)

<u>Setting:</u>	Lot's house and Lot's "banquet"	(vs. 3c)
<u>Time:</u>	Later that evening	(vs. 3c)
<u>Catalyst:</u>	Sodomites demand to "know" the guests	(vss. 4-5)
<u>Response:</u>	Lot goes out, shuts the door	(vs. 6a)
<u>Attempted Resolution:</u>	Lot pleads with the men	(vss. 6b-8)
<u>Complication:</u>	Sodomites ignore pleas and abuse Lot	(vs. 9)
<u>Climax:</u>	Messengers rescue Lot, shut the door	(vs. 10)
<u>Resolution:</u>	Messengers dazzle the Sodomites	(vs. 11)

⁷ In the Hebrew Bible, "righteousness...is the fulfilment of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship be with men [sic] or with God." Elizabeth R. Achtemeier, "Righteousness in the OT," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:80.

Scene 3: Lot Warns his Sons-in-Law⁸ (Gen. 19:12-14)

<u>Setting:</u>	Lot's house; somewhere in the city	
<u>Time:</u>	Late that night	
<u>Catalyst:</u>	Messengers urge Lot to escape	(vss. 12-13)
<u>Climax:</u>	Lot urges his sons-in-law to get out	(vs. 14a)
<u>Complication:</u>	Sons-in-law think Lot is joking	(vs. 14b)

Scene 4: Lot's Family Leaves Sodom (Gen. 19:15-16)

<u>Setting:</u>	Lot's house; outside the city	
<u>Time:</u>	Dawn	
<u>Catalyst:</u>	Messengers again instruct Lot to flee	(vs. 15)
<u>Complication:</u>	Lot lingers	(vs. 16a)
<u>Climax:</u>	Messengers take Lot's family outside the city	(vs. 16b)
<u>Resolution:</u>	Lot and family stand outside the city	(vs. 16c)

Scene 5: Lot's Family Flees to Zoar (Gen. 19:17-23)

<u>Setting:</u>	Outside the city of Sodom; Zoar	
<u>Time:</u>	Dawn to sunrise	
<u>Catalyst:</u>	Messengers urge Lot to flee	(vs. 17)
<u>Response:</u>	Lot acknowledges their kindness	(vss. 18-19)
<u>Complication:</u>	Lot is fearful and asks to go to Zoar	(vs. 20)
<u>Climax:</u>	Messenger grants request	(vss. 21-22)
<u>Resolution:</u>	Lot arrives in Zoar at sunrise	(vs. 23)

⁸ In the Hebrew Bible, *chatan* (חתן) refers to the husband of a man's daughter, so several exegetes reason that Lot must have other married daughters who die in the holocaust because their husbands do not believe Lot's warning. Matthew B. Schwarz and Kalmon J. Kaplan, *The Fruit of Her Hands: A Psychology of Biblical Women* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 99. However, the narrator refers to Lot's older daughter as his "firstborn" (*b^ekiyrah* בכירה), so if there were four sisters, it is highly unlikely that younger sisters would be married before the firstborn (note Gen. 29:26). Consequently it can be assumed that Lot and his wife have only two daughters.

Scene 6: The Holocaust (Gen. 19:24-26)

<u>Setting:</u>	The broad valley of the Ghor	
<u>Time:</u>	After sunrise on that day	
<u>Catalyst:</u>	YHWH destroys Sodom & Gomorrah	(vss. 24-25)
<u>Response:</u>	Lot's wife looks back & becomes salt	(vs. 26)

Interlude (Gen. 19:27-29)

<u>Setting:</u>	An area east of Mamre, overlooking the plains	
<u>Time:</u>	Early morning	
<u>Event:</u>	Abraham goes out, looks, sees smoke	(vss. 27-28)
<u>Summary:</u>	God destroys cities, remembers Abraham	(vs. 29)

Act II Scene 1: Lot and Daughters: The First Act of Incest (Gen. 19:30-33)

<u>Setting:</u>	The route from Zoar to a cave in a mountain; the cave	
<u>Time:</u>	Some time after the destruction of Sodom	
<u>Catalyst:</u>	Lot and daughters travel to a mountain cave	(vs. 30)
<u>Response:</u>	Firstborn daughter formulates a plan	(vss. 31-32)
<u>Resolution:</u>	The plan is enacted by the firstborn daughter	(vs. 33)

Scene 2: The Second Act of Incest and Consequences (Gen. 19:34-36)

<u>Setting:</u>	The cave on a mountainside	
<u>Time:</u>	The next day and night	
<u>Catalyst:</u>	The firstborn instructs her younger sister	(vs. 34)
<u>Response:</u>	Lot's younger daughter complies	(vs. 35)
<u>Resolution:</u>	The daughters are pregnant by Lot	(vs. 36)

Coda: The Birth of Lot's Sons (Gen. 19:37-38)

<u>Setting:</u>	Unknown	
<u>Time:</u>	Nine months later	
<u>Action:</u>	The daughters give birth to sons	(vss. 37a, 38a)
<u>Conclusion:</u>	The sons are ancestors of Moab, Ammon	(vss. 37b, 38b)

Plot Analysis

Setting

Spatial Setting

The story begins with a peaceful evening scene in which two strangers enter the gate of Sodom where Lot is seated. Lot offers them accommodation for the night in his home which then becomes the setting for Scene Two and the first part of Scene Three. In contrast, and as an indication of the chaos in Sodom on that fateful night, Scenes Three to Five are set in four different locations: the unidentified place to which Lot goes to find his sons-in-law, Lot's house, outside of the city, and Zoar.

Act Two Scene One depicts Lot and his daughters leaving Zoar for the remote locality of a cave on a mountain where the daughters seduce their father. Sharon Pace Jeansonne notes significance in the choice of a cave setting, for “the term ‘cave’ (*mē‘ārāh*) is used throughout the Hebrew Bible to indicate a hiding place, place of refuge in time of trouble, or a burial place.”⁹ For Lot to flee to a mountain cave for refuge suggests that his family's situation is dire indeed.

The spatial setting of the Interlude is somewhere east of Mamre where Abraham sees the smoke from the destruction of the cities of the Ghor. The Interlude clearly divides the pericope into pre-holocaust and post-holocaust settings,

⁹ Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 1990), 40; Rashkow, *Taboo*, 107. A cave is a place of refuge for David (1 Sam. 24:3c) and Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:9), and the cave of Machpelah is a place of burial for Sarah (Gen. 23:19). See further discussion on caves in “Death and Life,” p. 112.

namely, Sodom in Act One, and a cave in Act Two; Zoar is a place of transition only. The Coda's setting where Lot's daughters give birth to sons is unknown.

Temporal Setting

The narrator of Genesis 19 has planted the complete story in durative time except for the unknown period in which Lot and his daughters stay in Zoar and then escape to a mountain cave. The scenes which the narrator regards as the most significant are all time bound, and almost all of them have nocturnal settings, night being the time of danger.¹⁰

Social Setting

Like the flood narrative, Genesis 19 is a story of massive social disruption and one of the most dramatic of all biblical stories. The recounting of the destruction of Sodom and the Ghor Valley is set in the context of the 'Abraham Cycle' because the protagonists in the tale, Abraham's nephew and his family, are the sole survivors.

In Genesis 13:10-13 and 18:16-33, YHWH has already deemed the citizens of Sodom to be wicked enough to eradicate unless ten righteous people are found there. Consequently the audience anticipates a dramatic episode before the messengers even arrive at the gates of Sodom. It transpires that YHWH's

¹⁰ According to Weston Fields, for much of human history "night and violence, danger and darkness were inseparably joined." Weston W. Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah: History and Motif in Biblical Narrative*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 108. See a discussion about night in "Motifs: Safety and Danger," p. 110.

impression of an irredeemable community is confirmed by the vicious hostility of the townsmen towards Lot, a resident alien (*ger* גר)¹¹ and his guests. The only recourse from this situation is to escape, but for reasons unknown the setting of Zoar causes Lot to flee in fear once more.

Genesis 19 is the documentation of Lot's rapid social slide from city dweller to cave refugee where he is further humiliated by the actions of his own daughters (*banoth* בנות). Until the birth of his sons, Lot's loss of social status is complete: no community, no home, and after becoming intoxicated and committing two acts of incest, no dignity.

Events

In modern idiom, Genesis 19 is an exciting 'thriller' which recounts a divine act of retributive justice on a corrupt city while one man and his family are assisted to a last-minute escape. The reason the narrator gives for the incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah is YHWH's orientation towards justice which cannot do other than respond to a great outcry against, or of, those cities (*z'aqath sodom va'amorah ki y rabbah* זעקת סדם ועמרהכ ירבה) because of their very grave sin (Gen. 18:20; 19:13).¹²

¹¹ Although a *ger* is a "protected stranger" in a village, town or city, a *ger* is not a citizen and does not have the right to invite other strangers into the community. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary on Numbers*, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia Pa.: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 398; Bechtel, "Feminist Reading," 114.

¹² No explanation is provided about who is crying out or why. The construct usually means "of." If the meaning is "against" in Genesis 18:20, it is the only instance of this interpretation in the Hebrew Bible. *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette, In.: Associated Publishers and Authors Inc., 1907), 277. Nahum Sarna explains that "*za'aq* indicates the anguished cry of the oppressed, the agonized plea of the

The kernel event of the story is the escape of Lot, his wife and daughters from the conflagration of Sodom. The series of satellite events leading to this crucial moment are Lot's offer of hospitality as YHWH's messengers arrive at the city gate, Lot's meal (*mishtteh* מִשְׁתֶּה), the assembly of men at Lot's door followed by the messengers' intervention, the disbelief of the sons-in-law when warned of impending doom, Lot's own reluctance to leave and finally, the messengers' effective removal of Lot and his family from their home. The satellite events following the holocaust are Lot's flight to Zoar and his wife's death, Abraham's observation of the smoke from the Jordan Valley, Lot and his daughters' escape from Zoar to the mountains, and the *banoth* successfully implementing a plan to deceive their father in order to conceive children.

The lead up to the kernel event, the Lot family's escape from Sodom, is fraught with obstacles. Each of the five scenes features a catalyst and a response followed by a complication:¹³ as one difficulty resolves, another arises. Apart from the Sodomites' arrival in Scene Two, it is significant that the only catalysts for action in Act One are the messengers as they initiate the action four times in the first, third, fourth and fifth scenes. YHWH's single act against the cities of the plain is the catalyst in Scene Six.

victim for help in some great injustice." Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 145. Perhaps in Genesis 18:20 the victims are the powerless who subsist in the cities of the Ghor Valley; or perhaps the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are themselves 'characters' who are in agony because of their inhabitants' sins of inhospitality. See "Theme of Dangerous Hospitality," pp. 113-117.

¹³ See "Story Outline," pp. 93-94.

The three scenes following Sodom's destruction contain no complications. The Interlude in which Abraham observes the destruction of the Ghor Valley from a vantage point east of Hebron is a change of scene which "rounds off the story panoramically"¹⁴ while highlighting the magnitude of the event taking place far to the east.

What transpires in Zoar is unknown,¹⁵ but a fearful Lot initiates the action for only the second time and flees to the mountain with his daughters. There he again relapses into passivity as the older daughter takes control. Following a careful plan, she and her sister have sexual intercourse with their inebriated and 'unknowing' father and conceive children - thereby securing Lot's family line (*toledoth* תולדות).

Victor Hamilton's view regarding the Coda is that it is lifted from the context of the story of Lot and his family's escape from Sodom and transferred to a later period as an "historical, ethnological note."¹⁶ This hypothesis is reasonable given that one apparent purpose of the narrator is to explain the connection between Israel and the Moabites and Ammonites.¹⁷

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1967), 135.

¹⁵ Following the scorching of the whole valley (vs. 25) food would be scarce; Zoar may be another ghost town. It may also explain why the older daughter believes that "there is no man to come in to us" (vs. 31).

¹⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 54.

¹⁷ See "Narrator's Purpose," p. 150.

*Narrative Tension*¹⁸

The dramatic build-up towards the cataclysmic event of Genesis 19 begins with a debate of great import between Abraham and YHWH (Gen. 18:16-33). The outcome of one conversation determines the lives, or deaths, of many people. Will YHWH's messengers find ten righteous men to save Sodom and Gomorrah? If they do not, will YHWH carry out his threat to destroy the cities? Is this strange conversation Abraham's way of asking YHWH to save Lot and his family? With this startling discursive build-up the audience is sensitive to the looming drama of Genesis 19.

Scene One of the first act does not disappoint as a frisson of tension arises when Lot proffers the newcomers the bare minimum of hospitality: a place to wash and rest for one night. In keeping with the social code of the ANE, Lot's initial offer is refused.¹⁹ As expected, Lot asks again, and soon the guests are partaking of Lot's "banquet" of unleavened loaves (*matzoth* מצות).²⁰ Here the narrator may use *matzoth* to create a sense of foreboding: in the story of the first Passover (Exod. 12:8, 13:39), unleavened bread is a sign of a hurried meal as danger looms.²¹

¹⁸ Also contributing to the creation of narrative tension in Genesis 19 is the story's structure. See "Structure," pp. 104-107.

¹⁹ Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (1992), 5; Wight, *Manners*, 62. In the ANE, people were expected to initially refuse an invitation to a stranger's home, but to accept the second offer when urged.

²⁰ In practical terms, Lot's baking of unleavened bread seems sensible since it is already evening when the men arrive and Lot would not have anticipated entertaining guests.

²¹ Matthews, "Hospitality," 5.

As Lot's household prepares for sleep, the quiet evening scene is unexpectedly shattered as all the men of the city gather around the house. Here danger does indeed threaten: the citizens want to "know" (*yada* 'ידע) the strangers and command Lot to bring them out.²² As Lot goes out to the mob alone, closing the door behind him, audience apprehension mounts. The act of closing the door is significant because it implies that Lot, in exposing only himself to danger, may reject the mob's command to bring out the messengers.

In an impassioned speech, Lot tells the men to desist from "doing evil" (*hip'iyl* of *ra'a* 'רעע), offers to bring out his virgin daughters as substitute victims, and again entreats them to leave his guests alone. The effect on the townsmen is electric. They are derisory and enraged because Lot, a mere *ger*, dares to judge them.²³ The scene immediately explodes with action as the Sodomites move in on Lot. Just as the door is about to be broken down, "the men stretched out their hands and brought Lot to them" (vs. 10a). The audience does not hear which men have grasped Lot until the words "into the house" (vs. 10c) identify the messengers as those who have grasped Lot.²⁴ Now for the first time the messengers use supernatural power to strike the attackers with a dazzling light (*sanveriyim* סנוריים), and the true identity of the strangers can be guessed.

²² While *yada* ' usually translates as general knowledge in the Hebrew Bible, the context here implies that it means sexual knowledge. See "Knowledge and Ignorance," pp. 107-109.

²³ According to Pilch, an ANE community never accords equal rights to resident aliens, no matter how long they stay. "In effect, these people had no political rights", and "only very limited legal and social rights." John J. Pilch, "'Visiting Strangers' and 'Resident Aliens,'" in *Bible Today* 29 (November 1991): 359.

²⁴ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 59.

The narrator, however, does not allow Lot a moment of reprieve, for immediately the messengers tell Lot that YHWH has sent them to destroy the city. Lot is urged to escape with “all who are yours” (vs. 12). Tension again rises due to a series of delays: Lot goes out to warn his sons-in-law but the latter scornfully believe Lot’s warning to be a joke and he returns alone. For the remainder of the night anticipatory tension simmers as the messengers and Lot’s family wait in silence.

In the pre-dawn hour suddenly the messengers speak again, exhorting Lot to get out. Lot fails to respond and again tension rises.²⁵ The messengers lose patience and in high drama they hustle the family through the streets until they are outside the city’s walls. There with great urgency they tell Lot to flee for his life to the mountains without a backward glance. Once again a complication arises with Lot’s procrastination – this time with a rambling speech. Exasperatingly, the narrative seesaws between the messengers’ urgings and the delaying tactics of the man they are endeavouring to save. With remarkable grace one of the messengers grants Lot’s request to flee to Zoar, and repeats his exhortation to escape quickly. At last Lot goes.

This second build-up of tension is so patchy and jagged that when the anticipated holocaust finally pours forth, there is almost a sense of relief. Indeed,

²⁵ Gunkel notes the narrator’s use of Lot’s tardiness to increase narrative tension. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 209 [First published 1901].

the Interlude with Abraham's view of the smoke from afar may reflect the narrator's perception that a brief respite from the action is required.

Lot's second journey to seek refuge, this time because he fears living in Zoar, seems to be no more than a setback. After such a cataclysmic event, narrative tension is lost. With the family isolated and sheltering in a mountain cave there seems little reason to be shocked when the *banoth* deceive their father into committing incest.²⁶ When a family's world has been blown apart with the loss of a wife and mother and a whole community, a new beginning via acts of incest may even be a reasonable course to take.

Discourse Analysis

Narrative Patterns

Structure

In order to focus this analysis on the characters and the plot, I have structured Chapter 19 as a two-act narrative.²⁷ The six scenes of the first act in which Lot and his family dramatically escape the destruction of Sodom provide the essential elements of a lawsuit. An unspecified "outcry" (*z'aqah זעקת*) is the indictment (vs. 13), and on this basis a judgement of death is pronounced on Sodom and Gomorrah (vss. 24-29). "The structure is essentially theological and

²⁶ See discussion on incest in "Character Portrayal: Lot's Daughters," p. 145, fn. 153.

²⁷ I have used Paul Tonson's idea of two acts and an Interlude, but Tonson's structural details are different from mine. Tonson, "Mercy Without Covenant: A Literary Analysis of Genesis 19", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 95 (2001): 96-7.

conventional, reflective of the prophetic faith of Israel [and] closely parallels the lawsuit form ...at the beginning of the flood narrative.”²⁸

Act One contains two sets of concentric ring patterns, one placed inside the other. The outer ring, Pattern A (vss. 1-22) identifies the pivotal moment when the messengers rescue Lot from the Sodomite mob (vss. 10-11).

Pattern A: Genesis 19:1-22 (Act I Scenes 1-5)

- 1 The messengers come into Sodom and Lot urges them to come to his home. They demur, and Lot repeats his urging. The messengers comply (vss. 1-3)
 - 2 The Sodomites order Lot to send the messengers out to them (vss. 4-5)
 - 3 Lot reasons with the men, but they scoff (vss. 6 -9)
 - 4 The messengers save Lot from the mob and instruct him to prepare for Sodom’s destruction (vss. 10-11)
 - 3₁ Lot warns the sons-in-law, but they scoff (vss. 12-14)
 - 2₁ The messengers demand that Lot goes out of the city (vs. 15)
 - 1₁ The messengers go out of Sodom with Lot’s family and urge them to go to the mountains. Lot demurs, gains a concession, and the messenger repeats his exhortation. Lot complies (vss. 16-22)
- Climax: YHWH pours sulphur and fire onto the cities of the Ghor Valley, and Lot’s wife dies (vss. 24-26)

Pattern A reveals two climatic moments in Act One namely, the messengers’ rescue of Lot from the mob of angry townsmen, and the destruction of Sodom

²⁸ Walter Brueggemann sees this form of retributive justice as evidence of early simplistic moralism – a moralism which is questioned in Genesis 18:16-32. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1982), 166. For a discussion on YHWH’s lawsuit versus that of the Sodomites, see “Irony” pp. 124-26.

and Gomorrah as Lot flees to safety.²⁹ Embedded in Pattern A is a chiastic concentric ring, Pattern B (vss. 6-9), which focuses audience attention on the conversation between Lot and the men of Sodom.

In Pattern B, Lot's attempt to substitute his *banoth* for his guests as potential victims of abuse is underscored by the position of these words at the centre of the chiasm. The significance of this incident eventually emerges in the light of the daughters' pivotal role in Act Two.

Pattern B: Genesis 19:6-9 (Act I Scene 2)

- 1 Lot went out to them through the doorway and shut the door after him (vs. 6)
Then he said, "I beg you my brothers, do not do evil (vs. 7)
2 I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out
to you, and do to them what is good in your eyes" (vs. 8a)
2₁ But they said... "Now we will do more evil to you than with them"
1₁ And they pressed against the man, hard against Lot, and drew near to break
down the door. (vs. 9)

Following Act One the Interlude (vss.27-29), in which Abraham's observation of the event from a distant vantage point is recounted, presents like the closing scene of a narrative. It is, however, an intrusion which serves as a "hinge" linking the story of Lot's family in Sodom to the extensive Abraham Cycle of narratives.³⁰

²⁹ Bar-Efrat, "Observations," 166.

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 163; Tonson, "Mercy," 114.

The much shorter second act has two scenes and a coda which present a surprise conclusion to Lot's story. The scenes depict the daughters' activities in repetitious detail, thus ensuring that the second act is more than a mere postscript. In its depiction of the older daughter planning and implementing two sexual seductions of Lot, Act Two provides two clear examples of step-parallelism which ensure that this event is given some prominence.³¹

Step-Parallelism in Genesis 19: 30-38 (Act 2, Scenes 1-3)

- Preamble: Lot and his daughters flee to a cave in the mountains (vs. 30)
1. Firstborn daughter explains to her sister her plan to seduce Lot (vss. 31-32)
2. The firstborn daughter seduces Lot (vs. 33)
- 1₁ Firstborn daughter explains her plan for her sister to seduce Lot (vs. 34)
- 2₁ The second daughter seduces Lot (vs. 35)
- Result: Lot's daughters are pregnant to Lot (vs. 36)
- Coda: The births of Lot's sons/grandsons, Moab and Ben-Ammi (vss. 37-38)

Leitwort and Motif

The narrator employs a number of paired *Leitworten* and/or motifs in the dramatisation of the story of Lot and his daughters, namely, knowledge and ignorance, safety and danger, courage and fear, and death and life.

Knowledge and Ignorance

A significant *Leitwort* is the verb "to know" (*yada* 'יָדָע'). In Genesis 19, *yada* contrasts with the motif of ignorance or "not knowing." In Genesis 18:21, even YHWH appears to be unsure about what is going on in Sodom. As YHWH's

³¹ See "Retrieval," p. 176.

‘men on the ground’ in Genesis 19, only the messengers know the true situation in Sodom.

Yada ‘ is used by the Sodomites who seek to know the visitors (vs. 5c), and used negatively by Lot when he offers his *banoth* who have not known a man (*lo’ yad’u ’iysh* לֹא יָדְעוּ אִישׁ) (vs. 8a) to be “known” - or raped - in place of his guests. In Act Two, Lot has no knowledge (*lo’ yada’* לֹא יָדַע) about his sexual acts with his daughters (vss. 33c, 35c).³² Thus an *inclusio* is formed around the chronicle of Lot’s moral and social downfall.

Associated with the motif of knowledge are various references to eyes, sight, blindness and night.³³ When urging the townsmen to take his daughters, Lot gives the men permission to “do what is good (*tob טוב*) in your eyes” (vs. 8b).³⁴ As the mob turns on Lot, the messengers ensure that the Sodomites are kept in the dark about the impending catastrophe by blinding them with light (vs. 11b). They are in the dark, figuratively as well as literally. The subsequent scenes demonstrate that blind ignorance leads to danger and even death. The eyes of the sons-in-law (*chatanim* חַתָּנִים) see Lot’s words of warning as a joke (*pi’el* פִּעַל participle of *tsachqah* צַחֲקָה), while Lot knows that he is favoured in the eyes of the messengers and demands to go to Zoar. But just as the family reaches safety,

³² See “Irony,” p. 127.

³³ Bechtel, “Feminist Reading,” 125-26.

³⁴ The phrase, “in your eyes” means “in one’s estimation.” Bruce J. Malina, “Eyes-Heart,” in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, updated ed., ed. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2000), 71.

Lot's wife looks (*hip'iy* of *nabat* נבט) behind Lot towards Sodom, and in the act of seeing, she dies. Does she see in ignorance of the consequences: the narrator does not explain. Far away, Abraham faces the east and seeing the catastrophe, cannot know whether or not his nephew's family is safe.

The knowledge motif is continued in Act Two. On the mountain, the firstborn daughter apparently does not know that her father is not the only male survivor,³⁵ but she knows about “the way of all the earth” when it comes to sexual intercourse (vs. 32). Using the older daughter's knowledge, the sisters successfully activate a secret plan which ensures that procreation continues.³⁶ The plan ensures that the father “knows” his daughters; that is, he has sexual intercourse with them without knowing it cognitively.³⁷ Once more the connection between not-knowing and not-seeing is evident when Lot, apparently befuddled with wine, acts unknowingly in the darkness of night. Finally, the audience is not told if Lot knows that his grandsons are also his sons.

³⁵ It is possible the cave is so isolated and the destruction so widespread that the older daughter believes the world has been depopulated. Or she may simply believe that Lot has been totally alienated and is now so isolated that she knows he will not host male guests again.

³⁶ This contrasts with the scene in Act One, where the knowledgeable father understands what the crowd is demanding of his guests, but then tells them that his daughters “have not known a man” (vs. 8a).

³⁷ Melissa Jackson, “Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98 (2002): 31. *Yada'* is not used for the sexual act in Gen. 19: 32-35, but audiences familiar with the Hebrew Bible would have recognised that *yada'* is the term used for coitus elsewhere, including its use by Lot when offering his daughters to the Sodomites (vs. 8a). See “Irony,” p. 127, fn. 91.

Safety and Danger

In biblical stories danger is often associated with the world outside the home and community, while the inside world - usually the home, village or township of the story's protagonists - is associated with safety and protection.³⁸ For the most vulnerable members of a patriarchal household (*beyt 'ab*) going out of doors is dangerous indeed.³⁹

In the ANE, "night" is another word synonymous with danger for, during the hours of darkness, evil is said to lurk.⁴⁰ The narrator's choice of a night setting for most of Genesis 19 builds an atmosphere of foreboding and dread.

"Darkness'... [is] a symbol for evil, misfortune, folly, punishment, and the grave."⁴¹ The messengers, like all travellers, aim to enter the city before nightfall because it is too perilous to stay in the countryside at night. On this particular evening, however, the streets of Sodom become as dangerous for the visitors and their host as any traveller's path.

From the moment the Sodomites surround (*nip'al* נפעל of *sbb* סבב) Lot's house, the safety of Lot, his family and guests is under threat. When Lot's intervention with the Sodomites fails, Lot's guests inform him that a reversal of what is safe and unsafe is to occur "because we are destroying this place" (vs. 13a). Lot's

³⁸ Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 87.

³⁹ In almost all of the Hebrew biblical stories of *b^etuloth*, venturing out of the father's house is fraught with danger. Jacob's and Jephthah's daughters are the prime examples (Gen. 34:1, 2: Judg. 11:34-35). Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 98. See also the thesis' "Conclusion," p. 457.

⁴⁰ Wight, *Manners*, 63.

⁴¹ Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 108.

family is only safe outside Sodom's walls, but after negotiating to flee to Zoar it seems that small city is also unsafe. Ironically, while home and city burn, it is a remote mountainside - its rocky cliffs making vigilance easier and enemy accessibility more difficult - which provides refuge.⁴²

Courage and Fear

In Act One, Lot displays the emotions of both courage and fear. In the first scene it appears that Lot is already aware of Sodom's potential dangers for he bravely - and as a *ger* without authority to welcome strangers, perhaps foolishly⁴³ - insists that the messengers stay with him for the night (vs. 3a). A few hours later, Lot again shows foolhardy courage when he goes out (*yatsa* ' יצא) to face all the men of Sodom. His defence of his guests is bravely spoken, but surely it is fear of the mob's anger arising from his refusal to hand over the messengers which impels him to make a placatory offer for the townsmen to "know" his daughters instead.

After the grim experience at his door, Lot bravely goes out again,⁴⁴ this time to warn his sons-in-law of the impending catastrophe. But they think he is joking and with this set-back, Lot's spirit seems to fail. He does nothing about saving his family until compelled to do so by the messengers. Even then he fears escaping to the mountain, and when he eventually does travel there, it is because

⁴² Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 93-94, 102.

⁴³ Matthews, "Hospitality," 4.

⁴⁴ *Yatsa* ' , which occurs six times in the pericope, is closely associated with the motifs of courage and fear in the face of danger.

he fears to live in Zoar. Thus during the course of events of Genesis 19, Lot's courage is replaced by fear.

Death and Life

In the story of the destruction of Sodom, the motif of death is closely linked to human evil. From Genesis 18:32, the audience is aware of YHWH's intention to crush Sodom if the messengers discover that there are fewer than the ten righteous men necessary for the city's survival. The dearth of righteous men is revealed when the narrator states that those planning to "do evil" at Lot's door are "all the people to the last man" (vs. 4b). Of all the men in the Ghor Valley only Lot lives because "YHWH's compassion was with him" (vs. 16c) and because "God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out" (vs. 29b). Of all the women and children in the valley only Lot's wife and daughters are saved, but as Lot's wife looks back to her burning home, death's arm reaches for her also. The cave (vs. 31), is a motif associated with Sheol and death.⁴⁵ In the cave episode, the *Leitwort* "to lie" (*shakab* שָׁכַב) occurs no less than seven times in the space of four verses. In this context *shakab* means sexual intercourse, but *shakab* also means to lie with one's ancestors in the grave (e.g. 1 Kgs. 1:21, Ezek. 32:21). "Certainly, associations of eroticism and destruction/death have a long literary tradition."⁴⁶ The repeated reference to sexual activity in a recess of a mountain cave is thus another reminder of death's immanence.

⁴⁵ See "Spatial Setting," p. 96.

⁴⁶ Rashkow, *Taboo*, 33.

To counter the constant reminders of death in Genesis 19, three forms (*qal*, *pi'el* and *hip'iyl*) of the *Leitwort* “preserve life” (*chayah* חַיָּה) appear in the dialogue, with *chayah* mentioned twice by Lot in Act One and twice in Act Two by his firstborn daughter. Both protagonists are equally determined to live, but while Lot speaks for himself alone, his daughter enacts plans to “preserve life through our father’s seed” (vss. 32, 34). Thus into the midst of death comes new life, for in the wake of one of the most destructive events recorded in the Hebrew Bible, the birth of Lot’s sons is a powerful symbol of hope: a divine blessing.⁴⁷

The Theme of Dangerous Hospitality

The rule of hospitality is fundamental to all ANE legal codes and is the “noblest of virtues;”⁴⁸ it is clear that the narrator of Genesis 19 regards hospitality as a cardinal virtue. As Fields’ research indicates, the social obligation of hospitality in the ANE is paramount in an age when public accommodation is almost non-existent and where the countryside is open to the depredation of wild animals and equally wild men.⁴⁹ Bechtel explains that “in a group oriented society... outsiders are generally considered threatening,”⁵⁰ so the most expedient way to manage and nullify the danger a travelling stranger may pose is through the practice of hospitality. Julian Pitt-Rivers concludes that “the law of hospitality is

⁴⁷ In patriarchal cultures, sons are regarded as the greatest blessing, for almost invariably a father’s greatest desire is to see the continuation of his lineage through male offspring (Gen. 15:1-6). de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 41.

⁴⁸ Hermann Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, trans. Michael D. Rutter (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1987), 95 [first published 1917].

⁴⁹ Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 54, 55.

⁵⁰ Bechtel, “Feminist Reading,” 113.

founded upon ambivalence. It imposes order through an appeal to the sacred, makes the unknown knowable, and replaces conflict by reciprocal honour.”⁵¹

The theme of dangerous hospitality in Genesis 19 begins in the previous chapter where Abraham is presented as the consummate host to three men, one of whom is YHWH (Gen.18:1-8). After the meal Abraham intercedes with YHWH on behalf of Sodom, while two of the guests - revealed to the audience as *mal’akiym* in Genesis 19:1 - travel to Sodom where they are shown hospitality by Abraham’s nephew Lot.

In Genesis 19 the central story - the salvation of Lot and his family - is developed within the *inclusio* formed by the chapter’s penultimate opening and closing scenes in which food and/or wine is proffered. The scene opens with Lot sitting in the city gate, a position which usually means that such a person has the right to greet and scrutinise strangers. Lot rises from his seat in order to offer the two men hospitality for the night: a protocol which ensures that a stranger is protected from the dangers of the night.⁵²

Lot commences his duties as host by providing his guests with a feast (*mishtteh מִשְׁתֶּה*) (vs. 3b). Something is wrong, however, in the brief description of this

⁵¹ Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or The Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 107; Matthews, “Hospitality,” 4; Bruce J. Malina, “Hospitality,” in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, updated ed., ed. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers Ltd., 2000), 115.

⁵² See “Safety and Danger,” pp. 110-11.

meagre “feast” in comparison with Abraham’s elaborate preparations (Gen. 18:6-8).⁵³ Soon afterwards it is evident that things are indeed amiss for ominously, all the men of Sodom have gathered at Lot’s door demanding that he bring the messengers outside “so we may know them” (vs. 5b).

In Act One, a key *Leitwort* is “threshold,” that is, the doorway to Lot’s house, the symbol of hospitality. When the door is closed it establishes that the hospitality offered in Lot’s house is ‘inside’ and therefore secure, in contrast to the dangerous streets of Sodom on the ‘outside.’ As a host responsible for the protection of his guests, Lot goes outside, shuts the door behind him,⁵⁴ and attempts to deflect the Sodomites, his “brothers,”⁵⁵ from their evil intent by offering his *banoth* as substitute victims.⁵⁶ Why did Lot not offer himself instead of his daughters? The answer is that it would serve no purpose. If Lot is raped and dishonoured it would be inevitable that his whole family would also be violated. However, in believing that he can redirect the Sodomites’ objective Lot has misread them; suddenly he is in great danger. The narrative implies that Lot’s failure is due to the very thing of which the men of Sodom accuse him,

⁵³ There is a hint of satire here, as the description of Lot’s food preparation cannot but be compared unfavourably with the lavish preparations made by Abraham for the same guests earlier in the day (Gen. 18:6-8). Contra Rashkow, who describes Lot’s meal as a “lavish drinking feast.” Rashkow, *Taboo*, 104, 168 fn. 8.

⁵⁴ Rashkow is puzzled by Lot’s decision to shut the door behind him in order to negotiate in secret instead of eliciting help from his guests. Rashkow, *Taboo*, 104. I question the notion of secrecy, for surely those inside the house hear the words of Lot’s address to what would be a huge crowd. There is also no evidence at this stage that Lot is aware of his guests’ supernatural powers which might assist him.

⁵⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, the word “brother” (*’ach* אָח) may also be a technical term for people who are connected to each other by covenant. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 8. Lot is claiming a relationship with the men of Sodom which they refuse to acknowledge.

⁵⁶ In ancient Israel, it is taken for granted that a father has absolute rights over the lives of his family members. Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 173.

that is, of being a *ger*. It seems that a person born elsewhere cannot be accepted as a citizen, and only citizens have the right to call each other “brother” and host visitors to their city.⁵⁷ When this *ger* has the audacity to criticise them, the citizens are outraged.

The Sodomites’ hostility is manifestly hypocritical, for their xenophobia means that they - who should have provided for the strangers - have failed to uphold the ANE code of hospitality and have brought shame onto their city.⁵⁸ Although not stated overtly by the narrator, the implication is that the primary reason for YHWH’s decision to eradicate Sodom is its citizens’ inhospitality.⁵⁹

As the crowd’s intensity grows, the shut door becomes the focus of their efforts. With repetition of each of the words “door” (*deleth* דלת) and “threshold” (*pethach* פתח) (vss. 9-11), the contrast between Lot’s hospitality inside Lot’s house and the Sodomites’ inhospitality outside the door is emphasised.

⁵⁷ In tribal societies - in the ANE as well as today - identity is marked by place of birth. Matthews, “Hospitality,” 4.

⁵⁸ Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 73; Victor H. Matthews, “Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 98.

⁵⁹ In Genesis 18:20, the sin of Sodom is not named, and in the past commentators assumed that the destruction of Sodom is YHWH’s punishment for sexual sin. However, the theme of inhospitality in Genesis 19 points to the sin of rape as being just one manifestation of the Sodomites’ apparently-entrenched violation of the fundamental code of hospitality. Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 39-41. Nissinen concurs with this assessment of Sodom’s primary sin. Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 1998), 47-49.

Associated with the threshold of Lot's house - the site where the first dramatic climax of Act One takes place - is the motif of 'liminality'.⁶⁰ It is the threshold which symbolises Lot's marginal status in Sodom, yet Lot appears unable to recognise the extremely precarious state of his position in the city. He acts assertively at various threshold sites: at the city gate, at the door of his house, presumably at the door of the place where he finds his sons-in-law, and at the place from where he flees the city (vss. 16d-20).

As Bechtel observes, "Entrances are marginal and dangerous because through them the group can be violated and its existence threatened."⁶¹ After welcoming two strangers whom the citizens of Sodom then want to violate, and after almost being lynched by the same mob, Lot's self-confidence in liminal places is now seen to be foolish and dangerous, for in the Sodomites' eyes he remains an alien who has no rights. As the mob threatens his life, the messengers pull Lot back through the doorway and shut the door against his attackers. The lockout symbolises YHWH's judgement on Sodom for the crime of inhospitality; it is now a city where the doorway to YHWH's mercy has been closed.

From the moment Lot is rescued, host and guest roles are reversed.⁶² In the face of Sodom's inhospitality the *mal'akiym* now assume the host's responsibility for

⁶⁰ Victor W. Turner describes liminal *personae* as "threshold people" who are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 95-97.

⁶¹ Bechtel, "Feminist Reading," 114.

⁶² In normal circumstances this role reversal would insult the host. Malina, "Hospitality," 116.

safety as they assess the family's situation and instruct Lot to warn his *chatanim*.⁶³ Despite Lot's reluctance to leave, by daybreak the messengers have led the family out of the city. The statement, "YHWH's compassion (*chumlah חמלה*) was with him" (vs. 16), reminds the audience that the messengers' actions are those of YHWH, the consummate host. Lot, accepting his guest status, acknowledges the host's generosity and kindness (*chesed חסד*) (vs. 19).⁶⁴

At the beginning of Act Two, Lot and his daughters climb a mountain to find shelter (vs. 30). There on a rocky mountainside, a cave-dwelling symbolises how much Lot has lost in personal, social and economic terms. Now on the margin of their world, Lot and his *banoth* are still liminal,⁶⁵ and still in danger. Without community, Lot is fearful and unable to remedy the situation.

So a strange reversal takes place. The firstborn daughter sees what her father cannot: a way out. She subverts her father's leadership role by making plans for the household's future.⁶⁶ As if to emphasise Lot's degraded state, the older daughter's stated opinion is that he will never again host male guests. Her solution is to formulate a radical plan in which she takes responsibility for the family by arranging Lot's intoxication and appropriating his position as head of

⁶³ Could the sons-in-law have been part of the crowd which the narrator says includes every man in the city (vs. 4d)? If they were in the crowd and witnessed the blinding flash one would think that, rather than dismissing Lot's speech as a joke, they might be more receptive.

⁶⁴ Lot addresses his rescuers in the singular (*adonay אדני*), despite opening his speech with "My lords" Perhaps his use of the singular is in recognition that it is YHWH who has saved him.

⁶⁵ See also "Retrieval," p. 173.

⁶⁶ Jackson, "Lot's Daughters," 33. See "Retrieval," pp. 174-75.

the household.⁶⁷ The supplanted host loses his ability to “know” (*lo’ yada’* לֹדַע) his own actions (vss. 33c, 35c).

The connection between the opening scenes in Act One and the closing scenes in Act Two is demonstrated by the repetition of verbs of movement. The words “go” or “come” (*bo’* בּוֹא), “arise” (*qum* קוּם) and “lie down” (*shakab* שָׁכַב) occur in both acts,⁶⁸ but in entirely contrasting situations. On the first occasion, the host graciously invites the strangers into his home, aiming to please; on the second occasion, the *banoth* seduce the purported host in his cave-home, aiming to deceive. Act Two’s scenes of a repeated deception are shades of the perverted hospitality of Sodom.

Thus the theme of dangerous hospitality connects the two acts; in Act One it leads to destruction and death, but in Act Two it leads to a resurrection of hope in the birth of Lot’s sons.

Ambiguity

An important and persistent narrative tool employed by the author of Genesis 19 is that of ambiguity. Indeed, every character in the story is enigmatic in some way. In the opening scene Lot is depicted as a community leader greeting

⁶⁷ It might be assumed that Lot’s earlier fear of evil pursuing him to the mountain remains (see vs. 19b). Without conventional protection, Lot probably does not need too much persuasion to drink alcohol to excess. The narrator is not interested in indicating how the family accessed wine for Lot.

⁶⁸ The three verbs appear in verses 1, 3-6, 12, 14-15, 23, 30-35.

strangers to the city, but within a few hours the citizens of Sodom dismiss Lot as an outsider who has assumed too much. The audience is left to wonder how Lot gained his position at the gate. Did he appoint himself to the role because no one else was willing to be hospitable? Lot's righteousness, as repeatedly affirmed by the writer of 2 Peter 2:7-8, is another contentious issue. In comparison with the Sodomites Lot has a number of positive qualities, but when he is judged by the messengers' standards of compassion, justice and wisdom, Lot misses the mark.⁶⁹

Throughout the narrative many of Lot's decisions and actions are ambiguous. The narrator gives no reason for Lot's statement to the Sodomites that his *banoth* are virgins. Contextually it can only be construed as encouragement to the men of Sodom to assault his daughters. Nor is there an explanation for Lot's readiness to hand two *b^etuloth* over to the mob when apparently they are already betrothed to men of Sodom.⁷⁰ After failing to persuade his daughters' fiancés to flee, Lot then inexplicably delays his departure. The narrator gives no reason for the delay, so the audience can only speculate about his motives. Is Lot too attached to the city, or is he more fearful about attempting to escape? Perhaps he hopes that the messengers will change their plans if he delays them.

⁶⁹ More than a few commentators seek to modify Lot's culpability regarding his offer. See "Suspicion," pp. 161-63. For Achtemeier's definition of "righteousness," see p. 93.

⁷⁰ In the Mesopotamian law codes, "betrothal was as sacrosanct as a consummated marriage." Sarna, *Genesis*, 136; Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 38. At marriage, a woman's husband can demand proof of her virginity (Deut. 22:13-21). "Her prenuptial virginity is valued as highly as her life." Annemarie Ohler, *The Bible Looks at Fathers*, trans. Omar Kaste, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 119.

Uncertainty surrounding Lot's vacillation contributes to growing tension in the night scene and adds to the messengers' mystique. When they do leave, could the death of Lot's wife have been averted with a word from him about the danger of looking back at Sodom?⁷¹ In Act Two Lot's behaviour is particularly equivocal. Perhaps he is easily duped because he is alcohol dependent and has lost his moral compass. He appears to be powerless and without sexual control, yet he fathers two sons. In the end it is difficult to determine whether or not Lot is a victim, a perpetrator, or both.

In Act One, notably in verse 9, the evil intent of the Sodomites to harm Lot is unmistakable, yet in verse 5b, what they mean by the word *yada'* is less clear. While *yada'* may mean an intellectual understanding of something, it is also a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁷² Perhaps Lot has good reason to see rape as the Sodomites' purpose, and therefore offers his daughters as substitute victims. Given the reaction of the townsmen to Lot's suggestion it is apparent that he partially misunderstands their intent. By sexually violating the messengers the men of Sodom may be intent on humiliating Lot's guests because they have been pre-judged as hostile aliens. Or the aim of the townsmen may be to dishonour the *mal'akiym* for accepting the hospitality of a *ger*, thereby also

⁷¹ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 39. The text does not make clear that Lot's wife knows of the danger; it only records that the messenger, using the masculine singular, tells Lot not to look back.

⁷² William L. Holladay, ed., 12th corrected impression, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, Neth. and Grand Rapids, Mi.: E. J. Brill and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 129.

punishing Lot who has overstepped his rights as a resident alien.⁷³ The narrator leaves these uncertainties unresolved.⁷⁴

The place of Lot's sons-in-law⁷⁵ is also difficult to comprehend as there is so little information about them. Because the virginal daughters remain in the *beyt 'ab* under their father's 'protection,' they are more likely to be betrothed rather than married. Whether married or betrothed, however, the *chatanim* should be consulted about what happens to their fiancées, so Lot's offer of the latter to the townsmen to molest is surely a violation of the rights of the sons-in-law.⁷⁶

Further ambiguity surrounds the messengers and YHWH. In the introduction and in verse 15 the messengers are referred to as *mal'akiym*; thereafter the narrator calls them "the men" and Lot addresses them twice as 'adonay (אדני). Nor is it possible to distinguish between the two messengers regarding the matter of just who "strikes the match" to destroy the Ghor Valley. Unanswered questions include: is YHWH acting through the messengers or are the

⁷³ See "The Men of Sodom," p. 140.

⁷⁴ Confusion about Sodom's sin is reflected in different traditions. For example, the Jesus tradition names inhospitality as the sin of Sodom (Matt. 10:12-15), and in Ezekiel YHWH states that Sodom displayed "pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me" (Ezek. 16:49, 50a). Neither of these traditions about Sodom specifically mentions sexual sins, although "abominable things" may allude to them.

⁷⁵ See discussion about the *chatanim* in "Story Outline," p. 94, fn. 8.

⁷⁶ According to Léonie Archer, when a daughter is betrothed, "her father was obliged to share his authority with her husband [to be]...*Ned* 10:1." Léonie J. Archer, *Her Price is Beyond Rubies: the Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 49; Toensing, "Women of Sodom," 73; Carolyn Pressler, "Sexual Violence and Deuteronomic Law," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus and Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 103.

messengers and YHWH one and the same?⁷⁷ Why are the Sodomites not given an opportunity to repent of their evil treatment of strangers? How just is YHWH's decision to turn to ash the whole of the Ghor Valley, the countryside as well as all of its inhabitants: animals, children, men and women?

Uncertainties continue in Act Two. Somehow Lot, apparently an old man (vs. 31b), is able to impregnate his daughters while so inebriated that he is unaware of what he is doing. The behaviour of Lot's daughters is also difficult to understand. Either they are scheming tempters who shame their father by deception, or they are saviours of Lot's *toledoth*, or they can be viewed as both. Their children, Moab and Ben-ammi, also hold an ambiguous position in Israelite consciousness, for not only are Lot's sons the grand-nephews of Abraham and therefore relatives of Israel, but they are also the patriarchs of nations who become Israel's enemies.⁷⁸

The story of Sodom and Lot's family is a story of liminality. Sodom itself is on the edge of Israel's consciousness, for the only connection it has with the people of Israel is Lot. Yet Israel's God is so interested in Sodom that he eliminates - almost arbitrarily it seems - every living thing in the Ghor Valley.

⁷⁷ The idea of divine incarnation has always been a mystery and a topic of controversy.

⁷⁸ Michael Maher, *Genesis* (Wilmington, De.: Michael Glazier, 1982), 121; Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257; Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996), 90.

Paradoxically, the central character of Act One whose life is saved is a *ger*, an uncertain figure who hovers in liminal places: doorways, gateways and finally in a doorless cave.⁷⁹ In Act Two Lot's older daughter, a *b^etulah*, negotiates the dangerously liminal stage of transition between childhood and womanhood by making plans which are at once offensive and admirable. Whatever the cost, she is a survivor.

Irony and Contrast

The tale of Lot's family and the fate of Sodom hold many instances of irony because "in a story of subversion and inversion - the weak besting the powerful - irony is inherent."⁸⁰ In the lead-up to the events of Genesis 19, YHWH sets the parameters for a lawsuit against the Sodomites (Gen. 18:16-33). The messengers arrive in the city as YHWH's prosecutors, looking for evidence of Sodom's acts of injustice which led to the appeal (*z'aqah זעקה*) to YHWH the judge (Gen. 18:20a). In a darkly ironic scene, however, the Sodomites form an assembly outside of Lot's door to demand their own version of 'justice' against YHWH's legal team of investigators and prosecutors.⁸¹ Strangely the crowd does not storm the house for apparently "they respect the sanctity of the home even though they do not respect the sanctity of the visitors."⁸²

⁷⁹ There is no setting for the announcements of the babies' births in the Coda: by that time Lot surely would have found a home other than a cave.

⁸⁰ Jackson, "Lot's Daughters," 38.

⁸¹ See "Structure," p. 105, fn. 28.

⁸² Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 100.

Contrary to the hospitality code of the ANE, those who should have offered hospitality do not, and paradoxically the *ger*, who as a non-citizen has no right to welcome strangers to the city, does offer it.⁸³ Lot's effort to protect his guests leads to the Sodomites - in their impromptu law court - denouncing him for playing the judge. Lot, who apparently believes that he has been integrated into their community (Gen. 13:12, 14:12), whose daughters are betrothed to local men and whose uncle once rescued many Sodomites from slavery (Gen. 14:13-16), ironically is now accused of being an judgmental alien whom the Sodomites are determined to subject to their own rough justice. In other words, Lot's speech leads to his rejection as a foreigner by the "brothers" among whom he has chosen to live.⁸⁴

The intention of all the men of Sodom to impose their perverted form of justice on the guests by sexually violating them means that Lot, a *ger* without legal and social rights,⁸⁵ appears to be alone in his condemnation of the behaviour of Sodom's citizens as evil. However, this assumption immediately demands revision because, in reverse irony, Lot's attempt to resolve the situation by offering his *banoth* to protect his guests is, in the view of many including my own, equally horrendous. There is a gaping moral discrepancy between Lot's respect for his male guests and his proposal to the Sodomites to rape his daughters instead. The horrible irony is that although Lot is the primary

⁸³ Matthews, "Hospitality," 4. Lot is an alien because his birthplace is in Mesopotamia.

⁸⁴ Matthews, "Hospitality," 4.

⁸⁵ In discussing Judges 11 and Jephthah's situation as an outcast, Richard DeMaris and Carolyn Leeb write, "the widow, orphan, and sojourner [*ger*] ...have no legal representation in Israel." DeMaris and Leeb, "Judges-(Dis)Honor," 186.

guardian of two vulnerable young women, there is no indication that he experiences any angst about his choice. Suddenly Lot's own life is in danger, for the door which he closed behind him a few minutes earlier in order to shield the messengers is now the door through which the messengers rescue and shield their hapless host.⁸⁶

The next morning Abraham is on the hills of Mamre watching the rising plume "like the smoke of the furnace" in the east (vs. 28). Although Lot is saved for Abraham's sake, paradoxically the latter is unaware of the success of his intercession and therefore would assume that Lot is dead since too few righteous citizens were found in Sodom.⁸⁷ Yet this nephew of Abraham is alive and able to sire Moab and Ben-Ammi whose descendants later refuse hospitality to and humiliate their kin,⁸⁸ the children of Abraham, the man whose righteousness made the existence of Moab and Ammon possible.⁸⁹

Irony also threads through the events of Act Two. On the morning of the cataclysm Lot flees to Zoar because he fears going to the mountain; later he fears Zoar so much he escapes to what is probably the same mountain. Thus the last home for the hospitable host, who chose to live in the city of Sodom in

⁸⁶ Lasine, "Guest and Host," 54, fn.14.

⁸⁷ Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1990a), 81.

⁸⁸ See Deuteronomy 23:3, 4 and 2 Samuel 10:1-5.

⁸⁹ The story of Israel is inextricably linked with Israelite legends about the origins of Canaan, Moab and Ammon. At the end of the flood narrative (Gen.6-9), which has a number of parallels with the story of Sodom, Noah is sexually shamed by Ham who later becomes the father of the Canaanites. Lot is sexually shamed by his daughters, who become the mothers of Moab and Ammon. In time, all three nations become enemies of Israel.

preference to his uncle's rural and nomadic existence, now ekes out his life in an isolated mountain cave.

Act Two is also enlivened by satirical word plays. For example, the phrase “and she (the daughter) went in” (*bo' bo'at*) is placed in conjunction with the phrase “he did not know” (*lo' yada' la' yadec*) which describes Lot's senseless state on successive nights (vss. 33, 35). Yet the Hebrew Bible also uses the phrases *bo' al* (*bo'at al*)⁹⁰ or *yada'* to indicate the male sexual act.⁹¹ So in two instances of role reversal, Lot's daughters take on the male role of going into the cave to initiate sexual intercourse.⁹² Paradoxically, the aim is for Lot to “go into” and “know” his daughters while unknowingly - in his inebriated state - enacting his own horrifying proposal to the Sodomites (vs. 8).⁹³

There is more evidence of Act Two's satirical tone when the once-authoritative father becomes the intoxicated and unaware participant in a sexual ménage planned by these once-compliant daughters.⁹⁴ Indeed, by distancing Lot from the responsibility of committing incest in a culture where family honour is

⁹⁰ *bo' al* (*bo'at al*) or, more commonly *bo' al* (*bo'at al*), can mean sexual intercourse. Wenham notes that the construction *bo' al* in verse 31 is identical with the construction used for Levirate obligations in Deuteronomy 25:5. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Tx.: Word Books, 1994), 40.

⁹¹ There are many instances of the use of *yada'* to denote sexual intercourse in Genesis alone, for example: 4:1, 17, 25; 16:2, 4; 29:21, 23; 38:2, 8, 26. *Yada'* also means knowledge in a broader sense and implies consciousness, which, according to the narrator, Lot has lost in these two instances (vss. 33c, 35c).

⁹² Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form Hermeneutics* (Leiden, Neth./New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 98.

⁹³ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 171.

⁹⁴ As in the story of Noah (Gen. 9:20-25), Lot is saved only to drunkenly engage in two incestuous acts.

paramount, Lot's daughters expose him to further derision and shame.

Regarding Act Two, Laurence A. Turner sees as ironic the blurring of the distinction between who is "righteous" and who is "evil" because "those who were saved...have sunk to the level of those who were exterminated."⁹⁵

Each of the above instances of irony provides evidence of contrasts between people and between places. In Act One, the abusive demands of the Sodomites contrast with the messengers' care for Lot and his family, and the Sodomites' blind grappling for Lot's door is set against the messengers' power not only to strike them with blindness, but also to destroy the Ghor Valley and its cities.

Furthermore, Lot's growing indecisiveness is starkly different from the assertive statements and actions of the messengers and later from his daughters' reversed-role assertiveness. The dramatic contrast between the settings of Acts One and Two is also startling, for the holocaust transforms Lot's family from comfortable city-dwellers surrounded by crowds and noise to bereaved and isolated refugees in the silence of the wilderness.⁹⁶

The story begins in a city with Lot taking a leading role and ends in a cave with his *b^ekiyrah* (בכירה) taking that leading role. As her plans come to fruition, Lot is conspicuously absent from the text. Yet when the *b^etuloth* name their sons, their choices are, ironically, Moab – "from the father" - and Ben-ammi - "my

⁹⁵ Laurence A. Turner, "Lot as Jekyll and Hyde: A Reading of Genesis 18-19," in *The Bible in Three Dimensions* ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter, JSOT Supplement Series 87 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990b), 96. I believe there are grounds to refute Turner's assessment - see "Retrieval," pp. 172-74.

⁹⁶ Smith, "Challenged," 127-28.

own kinsman's son."⁹⁷ "Even in his absence...Lot's legacy continues in his offspring."⁹⁸

Character Analysis⁹⁹

The complete range of Berlin's categories of full-fledged characters, type characters and agents applies to those around whom the story revolves. The men of Sodom, Abraham and Lot's younger daughter are agents of the story, while the messengers and Lot's wife are types. The characters of YHWH and Lot's firstborn daughter are difficult to categorise;¹⁰⁰ only Lot can be classified as a fully-fledged or round character.

Character Portrayal

Lot

In a complex portrayal of Lot the narrator offers limited approval and covert criticism of his protagonist. As the central figure in the story, Lot acts in every scene except the Interlude and the Coda. Unlike the earlier stories in which he has a role secondary to that of his Uncle Abraham, Lot is portrayed as a well-intentioned man determined to assert his authority and initiate action. He fails,

⁹⁷ Robert Alter's translation. Alter, *Genesis*, 90. See "Character Portrayal: Lot's Daughters," p. 147, and "Retrieval," p. 177.

⁹⁸ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 41.

⁹⁹ Since the activities of the characters have already been discussed in various contexts above, these portraits are sketches only, and are (mostly) presented in order of appearance.

¹⁰⁰ See "Character Portrayal: YHWH and Abraham," p. 137-38, and "Character Portrayal: Lot's Daughters," p. 143, fn. 152.

however, to complete what he sets out to do and eventually is reduced to a pathetic state of fear and passivity.¹⁰¹

Initially Lot's hospitality is exemplary, although a seed of doubt is planted in the audience's collective mind when Lot's *mishtteh* (מִשְׁתֶּה) - restricted to a description of his preparation of unleavened bread - is meagre in comparison with Abraham's feast.¹⁰²

While Lot's decision to face the aggressive crowd outside his door is surely a foolhardy impulse, nevertheless his bravery and deep sense of duty towards his guests are evident. Lot then adopts a moral stance by begging his Sodomite brothers not to do evil by sexually humiliating the visitors (vss. 7b, 9b).¹⁰³ Even Lot's initial attempt to placate with the word "brothers" fails, for the Sodomites' response quickly discounts any idea of brotherhood with Lot.¹⁰⁴

Next, in his determination to fulfil his obligations of hospitality towards his guests, Lot makes a disastrous attempt to transact a deal using his daughters as bargaining chips.¹⁰⁵ From this moment, it is apparent that here is a father who has chosen to abandon the sacred responsibility of protecting his daughters in

¹⁰¹ Turner, "Lot as Jekyll," 97.

¹⁰² Gunkel, determined to paint a positive portrait of Lot, thinks the report of Lot's *mishtteh* is brief "in order not to weary the reader after 18:1-8 [with its description of Abraham's meal]." Gunkel seems to be clutching at straws with this explanation. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 207.

¹⁰³ Lasine notes the similarity between this and an incident in Exodus 2:14 where a Hebrew wrongdoer asks the same question of a young Moses when the latter attempts to intervene in a conflict. Lasine, "Guest and Host," 52, n. 6. Both Lot and Moses struggle in their attempts to straddle two cultures.

¹⁰⁴ See "The Theme of Dangerous Hospitality," p. 116, fn. 57.

¹⁰⁵ See "Ambiguity," pp. 120.

favour of the sacred code of hospitality. That is, in order to safeguard two male strangers, Lot is willing to throw his *banoth* to men so wicked that YHWH has already decided that they should be annihilated.

When the messengers announce Sodom's imminent doom, Lot - despite having recently offered their fiancées to the mob - is able to respond appropriately by warning his sons-in-law. His commands to the *chatanim* to "Get up, get out" (imperatives of *qum* *קום* and *yatsa* 'יצא') (vs.14), convey more urgency than the initial directives of the messengers, but Lot fails to explain to the *chatanim* why YHWH is destroying the city. The audience is left to ponder the reason for this omission. Has Lot panicked, is he ambivalent about these two escaping with him, or is he himself reluctant to leave home? Perhaps he himself does not believe the messengers' threat, so his warning to the *chatanim* lacks conviction.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps Lot experiences all of these thoughts and emotions, but perhaps he also resents the host-guest role reversal which has taken place. After all, for guests to usurp the role of their patron is to insult him.¹⁰⁷ Lot does thank the *mal'akiym* for their kindness, but his prevarication about leaving implies that he resents having to obey their orders. Lot may also have other character flaws which are exposed by the angels' intercession. "He is undecided, flustered,

¹⁰⁶ After failing to convince the *chatanim*, Lot's lack of conviction is evident in his own ambivalent responses to the messengers' warnings.

¹⁰⁷ See "Theme of Dangerous Hospitality," p. 116, fn. 62.

ineffectual. . . . He hesitates to turn his back on his possessions, and has to be led to safety by the hand, like a child.”¹⁰⁸

Without consulting the messengers or praying to YHWH for help, Lot’s carefully expressed final speech (vss. 18-20) reveals a character trait which could be viewed either as manipulative or as evidence of his inability to trust YHWH’s messengers. Lot wants the messengers to allow him to go to Zoar instead of the mountain. Alter surmises that Lot, used to city life, is afraid to live in the wilderness.¹⁰⁹ This proposal makes sense, but his obsequious acknowledgement of the messengers’ *chesed* also implies that Lot is a man who likes to use words to pressure others. His pleas to go to Zoar¹¹⁰ suggest self-centredness: he pleads only for himself and his own life (*vutchiy nephshiy* נפשי וְחַיִּי) (vs. 20g; also vs. 19e-h).¹¹¹ Lot’s insistence that the messengers must acquiesce to his wish to go to Zoar so that “I myself shall live” (vs. 20g) is granted beyond his imagining, but at a cost to himself, his wife and his daughters.

¹⁰⁸ E. A. Speiser, “Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes,” in *The Anchor Bible*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 143. Speiser assumes that Lot does not want to abandon his possessions, but the narrator does not indicate that this is one of Lot’s problems.

¹⁰⁹ Alter, *Genesis*, 87.

¹¹⁰ Gunkel suggests that the repetition that Zoar is “small” emphasises the pathetic pleading of an old man who cannot face a mountain climb. Gunkel, “Genesis,” 210.

¹¹¹ This trait is evident years earlier when Abraham offers his nephew first choice of an area in which to settle. Lot does not discuss or negotiate the agreement with Abraham; he simply chooses and goes (Gen. 13:8-12). However, it could be argued that in a group-oriented society, Lot’s use of the singular automatically includes the rest of his family. Bechtel, “Feminist Reading.” 110.

Lot's wife dies as the family flees to Zoar. What does this mean for her husband? In an instant he has lost everything except his two daughters and his own life. The text is silent about Lot's reaction to these losses, but Act Two provides two clues to his state of mind. The first is that he flees to the mountain because he fears to live in Zoar when previously he was more fearful of the mountain. The second clue is that Lot's daughters recognise in him a weakness for wine - perhaps he uses alcohol to allay his grief - so they use it to their advantage.

The massive reversal of fortune suffered by Lot seems to have broken his spirit, for in Act Two he is reduced to the status of a type or flat character. Here in the cave the formerly talkative but now silent Lot isolates his daughters. He makes no effort to contact Abraham, offers no prayer to YHWH for help, and his firstborn daughter describes him as old. Lot, who during that fateful night endeavours - with mixed success - to use his skills of persuasion with the messengers, the townsmen and his sons-in-law, is now himself persuaded, twice with success, to become intoxicated. "The focus of this episode is on Lot, and not because he does anything but because he does so little. Virtually the last things attributed to him are being afraid and being old. The drink and sex are passive, and he is heard from no more."¹¹² The narrator is no longer interested in Lot, but in Lot's descendants.

¹¹² Brodie, *Genesis*, 257. In reality, it is highly unlikely that a man would be able to successfully perform sexually if he is both elderly (vs. 31) and so drunk that he is unconscious of his actions (vss. 33, 35).

Questions remain, however. Is Lot a righteous man? Is he saved merely because YHWH pities (*chumlah* חמלה) him, or because Abraham cares enough to negotiate with YHWH over Sodom's fate (Gen.18:16-32)? Lot is never described as righteous, so I consider the rescue of Lot to be more about YHWH's loyalty to Abraham than it is about Lot's virtue.¹¹³

As the story closes a paradoxical picture of Lot has emerged. It mirrors the confusion surrounding Lot and his aspirations and failures in Act One, and it underscores Lot's unconscious and morally ambiguous achievement, namely the genesis of two nations in Act Two.¹¹⁴ Hamilton's summary is apt: "Lot escaped the destruction of Sodom through no effort of his own and subsequently became the father of the Moabites and Ammonites through no effort of his own."¹¹⁵

The narrator, it appears, has created Lot as a character to provide a foil for Abraham. While Abraham obeys YHWH's commands without question (e.g. Gen. 12: 4, 17: 23) and yet has the courage to challenge the deity's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:22-32), Lot makes poor decisions, has to be coerced into responding to the advice of YHWH's messengers, and "when he

¹¹³ For further discussion about Lot's righteousness, see "Suspicion Applied to Lot's Righteousness," p. 163-64.

¹¹⁴ George W. Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 147.

¹¹⁵ Hamilton, *Book of Genesis*, 54.

does take the initiative, he invariably makes the wrong choice.”¹¹⁶ While Abraham trusts his God, Lot has little faith and is governed by fear.

So what kind of a man is Lot? The narrator gives no explanation for Lot’s abusive offer of his daughters to the mob, no account for Lot’s dangerous delaying tactics and his fear of the mountain, and no reason for his belief that Zoar is unsafe. Lot, if not an anti-hero, is a “sub-hero” supplanted by the supplementary characters, namely, the messengers and Lot’s daughters.

Messengers, YHWH and Abraham

The second most prominent characters of Act One are YHWH’s mysterious *mal’akiym*. Despite their pivotal role in the tale, the messengers remain type characters because they act as one and cannot be distinguished from one another throughout the story.¹¹⁷ Nor do they reveal any emotion. The ‘distancing’ effect is more pronounced when the audience hears only one messenger respond to Lot’s plea to go to Zoar.¹¹⁸ Yet the messengers, unlike most type characters, have the power to profoundly alter the lives of every other character in the story.

¹¹⁶ Turner, “Lot as Jekyll,” 97. Genesis portrays Lot as consistently making poor choices. At the division of land in Genesis 13:11, Lot chooses the Jordan Valley, from where he is later captured as a prisoner of war and rescued by Abraham (Gen. 14:27). In Genesis 19, Lot needs rescuing more than once: both at the door and later when he delays his departure from the city. And his choice of Zoar is also an apparent mistake.

¹¹⁷ Berlin, *Poetics*, 23.

¹¹⁸ Three visitors meet Abraham at Mamre, two visit Sodom, but only one directs Lot towards Zoar. Until the refugee family is outside of Sodom, without exception the voice and action of both messengers are recorded in the plural (vs. 2-4, 10-13, 15-17).

As strangers and visitors to Sodom, the messengers give the expected initial refusal of Lot's invitation to stay at his house.¹¹⁹ When they do accept Lot as their host, their crucial role in the narrative becomes clear: as Lot loses any influence he might once have held, the *mal'akiym* reveal their power.¹²⁰ Until they take command of the fracas at Lot's door and dazzle the Sodomites, only the audience knows their identity (Gen. 18:16-33). When Lot and the townsmen experience the strangers' supernatural powers, there is no indication that they are recognised as divine representatives.¹²¹ Immediately afterwards the *mal'akim* take command by announcing judgement on Sodom and organising the rescue of Lot and his extended family. Significantly, the messengers do not warn the Sodomites of their fate.¹²²

As the messengers again inform Lot of the urgency of their mission, the latter repeatedly procrastinates. Eventually the messengers simply seize (*hip'iyl* of *chzq* חִזְקוּ) Lot and his family by the hands, and take them outside the city. They seem to know the time set for the destruction of the area,¹²³ so with apparent exasperation, one of the *mal'akiym* commands Lot, "Quickly! Escape (*pi'el*

¹¹⁹ See "Narrative Tension," p. 101, fn. 19.

¹²⁰ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 38.

¹²¹ Curiously, Toensing assumes the Sodomites know that Lot's guests are God's agents. She therefore concludes that the townsmen's desire to humiliate the guests is to show their gods' superiority. Toensing, "Women of Sodom," 70. Bechtel, on the other hand, cannot find textual evidence that the messengers are divine or spiritual beings at all. Bechtel, "Feminist Reading," 112-13. Contra Bechtel, I consider that the messengers' power to dazzle the townsmen (vs. 11) and their announcement that they are about to destroy the city (vs. 13a) indicate that at least the narrator views them as divine beings. When the Sodomites were blinded they may or may not have attributed it to Lot's guests.

¹²² Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 149. In contrast, centuries later the people of Nineveh are warned of their imminent destruction by Jonah and have the opportunity to repent (Jon. 3:4).

¹²³ The reason for haste is not given, but the tension created is a superbly dramatic device.

imperative of *mhr* מְהֵרָה; *nip'al* imperative of *mlt* מְלִט) there, because I am not able to do a thing until you arrive there” (vs. 22).

Curiously, the narrator of Genesis 18:16-88 and 19:1-29 now seems to merge the identities of YHWH and the *mal'akiym*.¹²⁴ For example, the Interlude contradicts the messengers' assertion - in verse 13a - that they will destroy Sodom, as the narrator states four times - in verses 24, 25 and 29 - that YHWH, not the messengers, destroys the cities. The narrator probably considers the work of the *mal'akiym* and the work of YHWH to be one and the same.

This view of God and the messengers is foreshadowed in Genesis 18:16-21 when YHWH plans to visit Sodom to find out if the people are as guilty as the outcry implies (Gen. 18:21).¹²⁵ It is remarkable that in this story cycle, YHWH is portrayed as a deity who is not all-knowing. Like the messengers who have the power to blind the townsmen but do not know how many relatives Lot has, YHWH has the power to destroy a vast area of Canaan yet does not know how many righteous people there are in Sodom.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972), 217. Westermann surmises that the Israelite narrator cannot contemplate the idea of the holy deity coming into contact with the depraved Sodomites; hence the role of the messengers. When Lot is outside the city, however, the figure directing Lot is YHWH himself.

¹²⁵ See also “Events,” p. 98, fn. 12. The concept of an all-knowing deity may be a later development, or the portrayal of a deity who is unsure about what is happening in Sodom could be an authorial narrative technique. The narrator may want to emphasise the seriousness with which Sodom's evil is regarded, especially since YHWH comes in person to initiate an investigation (Gen. 18:17-33). The direct discourse between Abraham and YHWH as they bargain over the Sodomites' fate presents a dramatic scene which not only highlights the narrator's interest in social justice, but also draws the audience's interest in a way that an all-knowing deity's terse verdict could not.

¹²⁶ Turner, “Lot as Jekyll,” 92.

As the sun rises after that eventful night, Lot and his daughters are saved from Sodom's incineration, and YHWH and/or the messengers triumph as righteous avengers of those who cry out against evil and injustice. If the narrator has purposely presented the messengers and YHWH as a three-in-one person, then the character of the messengers as revealed in Genesis 19, displaying the virtues of intelligence, patience, decisiveness, determination, flexibility and graciousness – at least towards Lot and his family - might be viewed as vigorous exemplars of the character of YHWH.

In Genesis 18:16-33 Abraham is a fully-fledged character. He reveals that he has an interest in the salvation of Sodom - having already rescued Lot and its other inhabitants in the past - ¹²⁷ and that may be the reason he repeatedly challenges YHWH's determination to destroy the Ghor Valley. Of course YHWH, the powerful agent behind the messengers' reconnoitre and rescue mission, knows Abraham's greatest concern is for Lot. Yet when Sodom fails to produce the required number of righteous people, YHWH does not spare the city for the sake of Lot. ¹²⁸ Nevertheless YHWH does have pity (*chumlah*) for Lot (vs.16c), ¹²⁹ and through his *mal'akiym*, even spares the "little city" of Zoar for Lot's sake.

At the story's dramatic climax YHWH, "operating from above," shows his hand to spectacularly initiate the destruction of the cities of the Ghor Valley by

¹²⁷ In Genesis 14:11-16, Abram and his allies stage a dramatic rescue of Lot and other Sodomites who had been taken captive after the battle of the Valley of Siddim.

¹²⁸ Turner, "Lot as Jekyll," 100-101.

¹²⁹ See reference to *chumlah* in "Suspicion Applied to Lot's Righteousness," p. 164.

raining down brimstone and fire.¹³⁰ On display is YHWH's mighty power which far outstrips the fireworks of the messengers.

Now Abraham re-enters the narrative, this time as a two-dimensional character or agent. His appearance is important, for despite YHWH's pity for Lot, ultimately Lot's family survives for Abraham's sake. Looking east to see the smoke rising from the Ghor Valley Abraham joins the audience as an observer, but unlike the audience he is given no information about Lot's fate.¹³¹

The Men of Sodom

Like the messengers the townsmen of Sodom are a group character, but unlike the messengers they act only as agents of the plot. The Sodomites appear once in Act One as the hostile crowd whose behaviour is the catalyst for the messengers' decision to destroy the city. The narrator repeatedly states that it is the total male population of Sodom which assembles at Lot's house.¹³² Don Benjamin makes a valid point when he claims that this is a legal assembly comprised of all the elders and warriors in the city who "unanimously agree that the strangers are enemies of Sodom."¹³³

¹³⁰ Tonson, "Mercy," 100.

¹³¹ See "Irony" p. 126.

¹³² While this gathering is logistically fantastic, it is important for the narrator to establish that there are no righteous men in the city (note Gen. 18:32) in order to justify the annihilation of Sodom.

¹³³ Don C. Benjamin, *The Old Testament Story: An Introduction with CD-ROM* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 60.

Initially the townsmen, angry because Lot has exceeded his rights as a *ger* by hosting strangers, order Lot to bring out his guests “so we may know them” (vs. 5c). Here the context supports the interpretation of *yada* ‘as sexual intercourse, or more accurately, rape.’¹³⁴ Their violent reaction to Lot’s speech suggests that not only are they ruthlessly inhospitable towards travelling strangers, but that they resent Lot for addressing them as brothers and infuriated that he, a *ger*, has the temerity to judge their intentions as evil. From the Sodomites’ point of view the messengers are dangerous intruders who should be treated as women, that is by “knowing” them sexually, in order to humiliate them.¹³⁵ “Gang rape of a man has always been an extreme means to disgrace one’s enemies.”¹³⁶ This accords with Athalya Brenner’s assertion that in Genesis 19 “the chief issue...is not [homo] sexuality but their wish to establish control on other males, to the extent that they disregard social values like hospitality.”¹³⁷ When the Sodomites’ malevolence is directed towards YHWH’s own representatives the consequences are grave indeed.

¹³⁴ Contra Morschauser who interprets the Sodomites’ demand “to know” the guests as the intention of the former to interrogate rather than sexually abuse the latter. Scott Morschauser, “‘Hospitality,’ Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19:1-9,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27:4 (2003): 472-73. See discussion in “Suspicion Applied to Lot’s Righteousness,” p. 162-63..

¹³⁵ While traditionally scholars held the view that the Sodomites are punished for their homosexual proclivities, exegetes now consider the Sodomites’ primary sin to be gross violation of the sacred code of hospitality. For example, Matthews, “Hospitality,” 3-11; Bechtel, “Feminist Reading,” 117, 18. See “Theme of Dangerous Hospitality,” p. 116. Nissinen agrees, adding that the Sodomites’ demand is evidence of their “excessive arrogance, xenophobia, and contempt of hospitality.” Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 48.

¹³⁶ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 48. The research of Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin indicates that in ancient Israel the act of sexual intercourse was considered to be more political than personal. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 176. Another form of public shaming is recorded in 2 Samuel 10:4, when the king of Ammon humiliates David’s emissaries by cutting their garments at the hip to expose their genitals.

¹³⁷ Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and ‘Sexuality’ in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden, Neth./New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 139, 141-42.

Following Lot's criticism of them the Sodomites turn on him, proposing to "do more evil" to Lot than they intended for the guests (vs. 9). Their movement - crushing Lot in their attempt to break down the door - and their persistent groping for the door despite being dazzled by the light, demonstrates that their determination to attack Lot and his guests is as strong as ever. By detailing the townsmen's persistent malevolence the narrator is underscoring the depravity of the entire male population. There are indeed fewer than ten righteous men in the city: destruction is imminent.

Lot's Sons-in-Law and Lot's Wife

Lot's *chatanim* and his wife have brief, but not insignificant roles as agents in Genesis 19. Notably, Lot's daughters' betrothal to men of Sodom is a sign that Lot, as a resident alien, has been accorded a measure of acceptance in the city.¹³⁸ However the Sodomites are not ready to trust Lot, especially after he, erroneously in their eyes, hosts strangers in their city. At Lot's door the Sodomites "to the last man" (vs. 4d) - including, presumably, Lot's *chatanim* - hear Lot offering his betrothed *banoth* as victim substitutes for the visitors whose honour he must protect. The narrative gives no indication, however, of the effect of Lot's speech on his sons-in-law.

¹³⁸ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 63.

Soon afterwards Lot visits his *chatanim* to warn them about the city's imminent demise but they regard his advice as laughable.¹³⁹ Like their fellow citizens, they refuse to listen to Lot. Alter describes the reaction of the *chatanim* as "the false perception of mocking laughter by those about to be destroyed."¹⁴⁰ Their response is predictable for a number of possible reasons: Lot may be their future father-in-law, but he remains a *ger* whose attempt to barter their fiancées in exchange for his guests has dishonoured the *chatanim*; the other townsmen have ridiculed this *ger* who dared to judge them;¹⁴¹ and/or Lot is simply unconvincing about the threat because he himself is unconvinced.¹⁴² That the *chatanim* think he is joking indicates that they also have little respect or regard for Lot and his family. Unfortunately for them, by disregarding this unique opportunity to escape with Lot they unwittingly choose to die.

Following the scene where Lot fails to win over his sons-in-law, his family is helped out of the city and the audience hears for the first time that Lot has a wife (vss. 15-16). Her role as an agent is peripheral, and she is never depicted as interacting with any other person, let alone her two endangered daughters. Her first and only initiative is to look back to Sodom. In the ensuing catastrophe, the immolation of Lot's wife is the narrative's only reported death.

¹³⁹ Their interpretation of Lot's words as a joke or "laughable" (*pi'el* participle of *tschq* צחק) is the same verb used when Sarah laughs at YHWH's news that she will bear a son (Gen.18:12).

¹⁴⁰ Alter, *Genesis*, 87

¹⁴¹ Turner, "Lot as Jekyll," 95. It is noteworthy that the dazzling of the Sodomites at Lot's door apparently does not influence the response of the *chatanim*.

¹⁴² See also "Character Portrayal: Lot," p. 131.

For Lot's wife, seeing means death. Fields speculates that she is prompted to turn because of her emotional attachment to her home.¹⁴³ Had she heard the messenger's warning, or had she chosen to ignore it?¹⁴⁴ Whatever the answer, her demise is another loss for the now destitute family.¹⁴⁵ Nameless and voiceless, the wife of Lot is nevertheless memorialised by a starkly simple landmark: a pillar of salt.¹⁴⁶

Lot's Daughters

The two daughters of Lot are the only other women in the story. In Act One they appear merely as objects of the words and actions of others. What the daughters hear, see and experience through one night and early morning, however, is horrific in the extreme. The terror begins when the Sodomites gather threateningly outside their home. Yet when Lot steps out to speak to the men, the *b^etuloth* hear their father invite the mob to take his daughters, who “have not known a man” (*lo' yad'u 'iysh* לֹא יָדְעוּ אִישׁ), and “do to them whatever is good in your [the townsmen's] eyes” (vs. 8a-e).¹⁴⁷ Whatever Lot may do or say after this abusive proposal, essentially the latter now know that their father does not respect or care about them in any way - physically, socially or emotionally.

¹⁴³ Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 95.

¹⁴⁴ Regarding the uncertainty about whether or not Lot's wife knew of the messengers' warning, see “Ambiguity,” p. 120, fn. 71, and “Character Portrayal: Lot,” p. 133.

¹⁴⁵ Perhaps the mother's death is a narrator's contrivance: is she sacrificed so that the daughters can come to the fore? Proposed by Professor Norman C. Habel in conversation on 23rd June, 2009.

¹⁴⁶ See “Suspicion,” p. 155-57.

¹⁴⁷ The narrator does not state that the girls hear Lot's words, but it would be difficult for them *not* to hear their father addressing the large crowd, for a few verses later the messengers mention that the *b^enoth* Lot “are found here,” that is, in Lot's house (*nip'al* participle of *matsa'* מָצָא, vs. 15b). Genesis 18:10c depicts another inside/outside scene where Sarah, positioned at the tent entrance, overhears the conversation between Abraham and his guests.

Immediately after Lot's speech the girls hear the Sodomites attempt to attack their father, they see the flash of blinding light, and they witness Lot's rescue. The *b^etuloth* then endure a night of tension before being seized by the messengers to rush through Sodom's streets and out through the gate, leaving their fiancés behind.¹⁴⁸ The girls and their parents reach the relative safety of Zoar after sunrise, just as their city is razed by brimstone and fire. At the last moment they lose their mother as she is exposed to the conflagration. The trauma must be enormous, yet the narrator reveals nothing about the girls' reactions to any of these horrific events.

After an unknown interval, Lot's daughters again flee a city, but this time their refuge is a mountain cave. The situation is dire: their mother is dead, and the messengers and YHWH are absent. Only Lot is present, and his one emotion seems to be fear. To whom can the *b^etuloth* turn, for "the texts do not speak of the faith of Lot's daughters"?¹⁴⁹ YHWH has destroyed their home and marriage prospects.

Thus placed, the firstborn (*hab^ekiyrah* הַבְּכִירָה) daughter now displays exceptional initiative because of her apparent belief that not only is the survival of Lot's *toledoth* at stake here, but the survival of humankind. She refers to her father's old age and the fact that he has no male heir, adding, "There is not a man (*'ysh 'yn אִין אִישׁ*) to come into us... we will preserve life through our

¹⁴⁸ Although the girls are betrothed, they have little choice but to flee the holocaust with their current 'protector' Lot.

¹⁴⁹ Jackson, "Lot's Daughters," 34.

father's seed" (vss. 31-32).¹⁵⁰ Either she believes that no males apart from Lot are left alive, or - and this seems more realistic - that no man would associate himself with the only survivors of an accursed valley.¹⁵¹ Lot, it seems, has nothing to say, underscoring the girls' social isolation. This, together with their spatial isolation, might very well lead to the older daughter's thoughts.

In Act One Lot's daughters' total silence, passivity and non-resistance throughout the events leading up to Sodom's annihilation means that they barely rate even as agents in the narrative. In the second act, Lot's younger daughter remains an agent - albeit an active agent - but her older sister emerges as the type character of "trickster."¹⁵² Both her speech and actions demonstrate that she has the traits of the trickster in her decisive, articulate discourse and in her skills of deduction, recruitment and execution of a deceptive plan of action.

It is probable that this young woman's proposal to commit incest would not be tolerated in ordinary circumstances in the world of the ANE.¹⁵³ But Lot's family

¹⁵⁰ In the first phrase of the quotation, the placement of 'sh ("man") before 'yn ("there is not") means that the subject 'sh is emphasised.

¹⁵¹ Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of YHWH: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 431. Hamilton, however, says the daughter's lament is probably hyperbole: "After all, Zoar was spared." Hamilton, "Book of Genesis," 51. Yet Lot fled in fear from Zoar. Were people also dying there from the after-effects of the holocaust?

¹⁵² Jackson, "Lot's Daughters," 33. (See discussion about the "trickster" in "Retrieval," p.175. I do not categorise the older daughter as a fully-fledged character because the information about her, interesting as it may be, is simply not broad enough.

¹⁵³ Octavio Paz discusses Claude Lévi-Strauss' conclusions about the incest taboo which the latter regards as "a complex unconscious structure, like language." This taboo is predicated on the primary kinship element of "brother and sister, father and daughter....The taboo has no other object than to permit the circulation of women." Paz, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: An Introduction*, trans. J. S. Bernstein and Maxine Bernstein (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 18-19; Archer, *Her Price*, 134. In ancient Israel, incest is a crime punished by ostracism, childlessness or death (Lev. 18:6, 29; 20:21, 20:11-13). According to Deuteronomy 22:20-21,

is in an extreme situation which the older daughter believes requires an extreme response. She becomes a risk-taker and by her assessment, the risk is worth the anticipated result. She sees her plan as a solution to childlessness which in the ancient world is the worst fate to befall a woman.¹⁵⁴

The younger daughter complies with every detail of her sister's plan. She has no ideas of her own and nothing at all to say, but by co-operating with her sister's plan she gives birth to the child whose descendants become the people of Ammon. As in many a legend, the least significant of characters eventually triumph over adversity.

Given the names chosen for their babies, it is probable that the *b^etuloth* view the birth of sons as a gift to their father. Lawrence Stager proposes that in the light of Israelite inheritance rights and burial practices, a man's "happiness in the afterlife was intimately linked to preservation of the patrimonial estate by his

a non-virginal bride brings shame to her family "by prostituting herself in her father's house." Her punishment is stoning to death at the door of his house. The 18th century BCE Hammurabic Code also condemns father-daughter incest. Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Macon, Ga.: Smith & Helwys, 2001), 536. The Levitical code has a general prohibition against uncovering the nakedness of "anyone near of kin" (Lev. 18:6), but there is no specific prohibition against father-daughter incest, perhaps because the purpose of Israel's code is to prevent violation of sexual ownership. Since a *b^etulah* is the property of her father before her marriage, no crime can be committed. Gail Corrington Streete, *The STRANGE Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1997), 49-50. Without any evidence apart from Genesis 19: 31-38, Archer asserts that "in the earliest strands of the Old Testament even incest... was condoned if it were to produce male offspring." Archer, *Her Price*, 18. Earl Bennett Cross intimates that this is the view of the narrator of Genesis 19. In discussing Israel's law codes, Cross quotes the maxim, "Silence [of the narrator] gives consent." Cross, *The Hebrew Family: A Study in Historical Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 14.

¹⁵⁴ de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 41.

descendants.”¹⁵⁵ Whether Lot enjoys an afterlife or not, the sisters have ensured that Lot has two lines of descendants to preserve his estate and *toledoth*, and that he will always be remembered as both grandfather and father of their nations.

Point of View

Names

Apart from the enigmatic YHWH and Abraham’s brief appearance in the Interlude,¹⁵⁶ the only named character in this narrative is Lot. While Abraham and YHWH are the pivotal characters in the broad narrative of Genesis 12:1-25:11, in Genesis 19 the narrator focuses on Lot as the main character in the drama of Sodom, and therefore in Act One his point of view is primary.

In the second act, Lot’s perspective of events is lost because after reaching the cave, his unnamed daughters initiate all the action. Here, however, the older daughter is called the “firstborn” (*b^ekiyrah*), a term which gives her some narrative status.¹⁵⁷ The second *b^etulah* identified as the “younger” (*ts‘iyrah*

צעירה) - a noun which can be translated either as “younger daughter” or

¹⁵⁵ Regarding Lot’s emotions after death, Stager seems to contradict himself when on the same page he states that the ancient Israelites regard Sheol as a shadowy place of the dead where one goes “to sleep with, or be gathered to, his [*sic*] forefathers.” Lawrence E. Stager, “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel,” in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 260 (November 1985): 23.

¹⁵⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, Abraham’s God has a name: “YHWH,” but this name is never voiced.

¹⁵⁷ Berlin, *Poetics*, 48. *B^ekiyrah* is a term used in only three narratives in the Hebrew Bible: in Genesis 19, Genesis 29:26 (referring to Leah), and in 1 Sam 14:49 (referring to Saul’s daughter Merab, who has brothers but also a younger sister, Michal). It would appear, therefore, to be the usual term for a girl who has a younger sister. In contrast, *bekor* (**בכר**) is a most significant title for a son, as the *bekor* receives the father’s blessing and double the inheritance of his younger brother(s). M. Tsevat, “*b^ekhôr*: ‘firstborn,’” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, rev. ed., ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgen, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 125-25.

“younger sister” - has significance only in relation to her father or sister.

However Lot’s daughters finally gain status by becoming the mothers of sons whom they name.¹⁵⁸

***Hinneh* (הינה)**

Hinneh, meaning “Look!” as an indicator of point of view,¹⁵⁹ occurs as a preface to three of Lot’s speeches (vss. 2a, 8a, 19a) as he seeks attentive audience response to his words. This means that his point of view dominates Act One.

Subsequently three other instances of *hinneh* introduce alternative points of view. The first *hinneh* is spoken by the messenger as he grants Lot’s request to escape to Zoar (vs. 21). The second appears in the Interlude’s switch to Abraham’s point of view as he watches the burning cities from afar (vs. 27).

Hinneh occurs once more in Act Two where it indicates a shift in point of view to that of the *b^ekiyrah*, whose plan now dominates the narrative (vs. 34b). “The older sister’s introductory *hinneh* in verse 34 alerts us to her improved condition. Pleasantly surprised, she may be saying, ‘Hey, look, it worked!’”¹⁶⁰

This shift in perspective means that while the post-catastrophe action continues to include Lot, the movement of *hinneh* to the speech of others points to his now-degraded status. Lot’s last *hinneh* in his plea to escape to Zoar (vs. 18) is

¹⁵⁸ de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 43. See further discussion on the names of Lot’s sons in “Retrieval,” p. 177.

¹⁵⁹ Berlin, *Poetics*, 62.

¹⁶⁰ Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters,” 33.

the end of direct speech from the story's increasingly unwise and uncertain primary protagonist.

Narrator's Purpose

As the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel passionately declare, a major reason for recounting the legend of the fate of Sodom is to warn Israel about the deadly consequences of a community's unrepentant sinfulness.¹⁶¹ Upon analysing the narrative in its context, however, it is clear that the narrator's aims are broader than the prophets imply. That is, the story of Lot in Sodom is just one aspect of the Israelite saga about the covenant between YHWH and Abraham. This covenant saga proclaims not only the power and retributive justice of Abraham's God but also his gracious choice of Abraham's *toledoth* as bearer of divine blessing for the nations of Earth.¹⁶² Abraham's nephew, however, is not destined to be Abraham's heir and Lot's inappropriate behaviour during the events recounted in Genesis 19 provides a number of reasons why this is so.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Isa. 1:10, 3:9; Jer. 20:16, 23:14; Ezek. 16:46c-50; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 46-47. Astonishingly, Ezekiel uses exclusively female metaphors to describe the Sodomites' abominations, whereas Genesis 19 refers exclusively to the evil of the male population.

¹⁶² The blessings arising from the Abrahamic covenant are repeatedly stated in Genesis 12:1-3, 15:5, 17:4-5, 18:18, 22:17-18, 28:14.

¹⁶³ The divine promise is fulfilled, not through Ishmael (Gen. 17:18-21) or Lot or even Eliezer (Gen. 15:2-4), but through Isaac. This may explain the narrator's decision to place Lot and his final humiliation between the promise of Isaac (Gen. 18:10) and Isaac's birth (Gen. 21:1-2). Meanwhile Tammi Schneider speculates that Lot's incest with his *banoth* might be the reason that Isaac does not marry one of Lot's daughters. This is a strange idea, especially since each daughter has a son before Isaac is born. Tammi J. Schneider, "Between Laughter and Tears," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, URJ Press, 2008), 91.

Thus the narrator of Genesis 19 presents a political and social story which links two ancient tales, namely, the annihilation of the cities of the Ghor Valley and the aetiology of Moab and Ammon.¹⁶⁴ He pairs the story of Sodom with a birth legend in order to tar the descendants of Moab and Ammon with the brush of Sodom and the taint of incest.¹⁶⁵ Ironically, in the story's telling the Israelites also learn that their first and most eminent patriarch is the uncle of Lot, the forebear of the tainted Moab and Ammon.¹⁶⁶

The later enmity between Israel and these two 'cousin' nations may be one explanation for the ambivalent portrayal of Lot and his daughters.¹⁶⁷ Yet the narrator does not moralise - at least not overtly - the characters are multi-layered, and the world he portrays is complex indeed.

On the basis of the narrative discussion above, the stage is set for a feminist re-reading of Genesis 19 via the application of three principles of feminist criticism - suspicion, identification and retrieval.

¹⁶⁴ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 205. In accord with Gunkel, Fields asserts, "The purpose of the storyteller... [is to give] justification for a particular historical situation which obtained much later than the original setting of the stories." Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 15.

¹⁶⁵ William E. Phipps, *Assertive Biblical Women* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 49. See also "Suspicion Applied to Act Two," p. 158.

¹⁶⁶ Israel, Moab and Ammon have a common ancestor in Terah (Gen.11:27); the Deuteronomist reminds Israel of the three nations' ancestral connections (Deut. 2:9, 19). I am assuming that this pericope was written and/or redacted after Moab and Ammon became Israel's enemies.

¹⁶⁷ See detailed discussion in "Ambiguity," pp. 120-21, 123-24.

A Feminist Re-reading

Introduction

The history of interpretation of this text is that until the mid-1980s, the story of Lot's daughters in Act Two was largely overlooked. For example, in 1964 Speiser's Genesis commentary does not even mention the daughters.¹⁶⁸ Yet since then the latter have also been ignored by feminist scholars in publications in which one would have expected a discussion on Lot's daughters.¹⁶⁹ Particularly surprising is feminists' lack of interest in Lot's firstborn daughter, Bekirah,¹⁷⁰ who is by any standard an extraordinary figure. There is further evidence that Lot's daughters elicit only cursory scholarly interest when Phyllis A. Bird writes a book about images of women in the Old Testament and only briefly alludes to Genesis 19 in a discussion about the sexual objectification of women.¹⁷¹ Apparently female as well as male scholars have blind spots regarding particular biblical women.

¹⁶⁸ Speiser, "Genesis," 142-43 (Speiser's commentary on Genesis 19).

¹⁶⁹ Some examples of feminist Bible commentaries which omit Lot's daughters in their discussions are: Athalya Brenner and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden, Neth./New York: E. J. Brill, 1993); Gale A. Yee, *Poor, Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2003); Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, ed., *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex and Violence in the Bible* (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); and Mignon R. Jacobs, *Gender, Power and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2007). Despite the promising title of the last book, Jacobs restricts Lot's daughters to one passing reference in the text (p. 79) and two footnotes.

¹⁷⁰ In order to avoid the clumsiness in repeatedly referring to "Lot's older daughter" or "the firstborn sister," in the feminist re-reading I will call her "Bekirah." Mieke Bal provides a feminist reason for naming unnamed women when she claims, "No names; no narrative power...The first act that awaits us, then, is to provide the victims [abused women in Judges] with a name. A name that makes them into subjects, that makes them speakable." Mieke Bal, "Dealing/With/Women: Daughters in the Book of Judges," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 319.

¹⁷¹ Bird, *Missing Persons*, 44.

Suspicion of Patriarchal Biblical Authority

In following the action of Act One, it is evident that an androcentric perspective of events prevails. Women are barely acknowledged, and when Lot's wife and daughters are introduced they are presented from a male viewpoint as "Other."¹⁷² The result is that, in Act One, Lot's unnamed wife and daughters are so marginalised that the wife's existence is not revealed until verse 16. Indeed, the one moment in which she actually has a view of her own is the moment she is petrified into a "pillar of salt" (vs. 26). Indisputably, the central figures of Genesis 19 are all male: YHWH, the messengers and Lot.

Suspicion Applied to Act One (vss. 1-28)

The audience's initial impression of Lot as a hospitable man may have remained positive if Lot's only offence was to breach the social code which stipulates that a *ger* has no right to host visitors to the city. But Lot's proposal to protect his guests by bringing out his daughters for the mob to do "whatever is good in your eyes" (vs. 8b) is outrageous. Having invited the men of Sodom to exploit his daughters in whatever ways they desire, as an added incentive Lot announces that they are virgins.¹⁷³ It is difficult to imagine a more abusive speech than that of a father offering his daughters as rape victims to a crowd of agitated and

¹⁷² See "Methodology: Definition of Terms: Androcentricity," p. 55.

¹⁷³ It is interesting that Lot does not use the word *b^etulah* to advertise their virginity, but he uses the phrase, "[they] have not known a man." (vs. 8b).

angry men. The daughters are offered to the Sodomites as “sexual objects used to curb men’s desires and bargaining chips used to secure men’s well-being.”¹⁷⁴

The horror of rape - even threatened rape - is not a recent sensibility, it is simply that women’s protests can now be heard and taken seriously by men, at least by men in the developed world.¹⁷⁵ In defining rape, Bechtel writes, “Heterosexual or homosexual rape is a forceful, non-consensual boundary violation.”¹⁷⁶ While biblical narrators do discuss sexual violence (e.g. Deut. 22:25-29), they are not concerned with rape as a crime against a woman. Rather, the sexual violation of a woman “is in the first place an offense [*sic*] against her father or husband’s claims.”¹⁷⁷ In other words, laws of the ANE recognise the sexuality of a *b^etulah* only in terms of the rights of her father or husband who has ownership of her “reproductive capacity.”¹⁷⁸ This means that “The [ANE] laws do not protect women against sexual violence; rather they secure men’s property interests.”¹⁷⁹

In the patriarchal world of the ANE all sexual activity is ultimately about male power, so it appears that Lot has a legal right to barter his daughters and their

¹⁷⁴ Abraham (Gen. 12:11-13) and the Ephraimite (Judg. 19:22-30) also use their women to “secure men’s well-being.” Jacobs, *Gender*, 79.

¹⁷⁵ Lauren Novak, “Domestic Violence Victims Plea for Urgent Help,” *Adelaide Now* (15th April 2010) [online]; available from Adelaide Now Online: <<http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/.../domestic-violence.../story-e6frea83-1225853805252.htm>>, 15 April 2010.

¹⁷⁶ Bechtel, “Feminist Reading,” 118.

¹⁷⁷ Pressler, “Sexual Violence,” 103.

¹⁷⁸ Pressler, “Sexual Violence,” 103.

¹⁷⁹ Harold C. Washington, “Lest He Die in the Battle and Another Man Take Her: Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Laws,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 210; Matthews, “Hospitality,” 5.

sexuality.¹⁸⁰ For Lot, the obligations of hospitality and the rights of his male guests outweigh his own rights and thereby his daughters' rights.¹⁸¹ Although the narrator does not openly criticise him, and no matter what cultural mores prevail in the biblical world, surely no excuse can be offered for Lot's repulsive behaviour.

Male discourse in Act One informs the audience that neither the characters nor the narrator have any interest in the emotional trauma which Lot's daughters undoubtedly experience on hearing their father's proposal to the Sodomites. Also disturbing is the number of commentators who fail even to mention the possible impact of Lot's verbal abuse on the daughters.¹⁸² Indeed, Lot's behaviour is so outrageous that Bechtel attempts to rescue Lot's character, hypothesising that in order to "defuse a tense situation," Lot deliberately makes an offer to the Sodomites which is so "incongruent" that it must surely be rejected.¹⁸³ Sadly the hypothesis is unsustainable: such an offer would surely aggravate rather than calm the crowd. Further, if the townsmen are so evil that YHWH's justice demands their extinction, why would Lot believe that the Sodomites would not assault his daughters if he brought them out? The horrific

¹⁸⁰ The ancient world has the concept of "father right" in which it is the father's prerogative to decide life or death issues concerning members of his household. Carol Delaney, "The Legacy of Abraham," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 37-38.

¹⁸¹ Regarding ANE rules of hospitality, see "Theme of Dangerous Hospitality" pp. 115.

¹⁸² For example, Morschauser; "Hospitality"; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*; Coats, "Genesis"; and Sarna, "Understanding Genesis." Ilona Rashkow and Leila Bronner note that rabbinic traditions also fail to censure Lot or sympathise with his daughters. Rashkow, *Taboo*, 105; Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 113-14.

¹⁸³ Bechtel, "Feminist Reading," 123-24; Schwarz and Kaplan, *Fruit of Her Hands*, 99.

gang-rape in Judges 19:25 demonstrates that an angry mob can readily commit a sexual crime. In Sodom it is averted only by the messengers' intervention, and what exegetes generally overlook is that not only Lot but also his daughters barely escape a brutal crime.

Once the flight from Sodom is underway and the messengers urge the family to escape to the mountain, Lot's procrastinating speech reinforces the impression that he has little care for either his wife or his children since his pleas are for himself alone.¹⁸⁴ The patriarchal attitude that men make the decisions about the future because they have authority over their women is repeatedly reinforced in Act One.¹⁸⁵ Before the cataclysm, not one woman from Lot's household and not one woman of Sodom is given a voice or a point of view: women are either passive or hidden.¹⁸⁶ The decisions and actions of men - including the escape from the city - profoundly affect Lot's wife and daughters, yet their responses are not recorded. The only hint of what the women may be suffering is found in the brief reference to Lot's wife as she looks back at the burning city.¹⁸⁷

In Genesis 19, YHWH's justice demands the destruction of the Ghor Valley because of the failure to find ten righteous men in one city. When the men at

¹⁸⁴ See "Character Portrayal: Lot's Character," p. 132.

¹⁸⁵ Boose and Flowers, *Daughters*, 62.

¹⁸⁶ For example, in Genesis 19 Lot prepares the meal for the messengers. However, Meyers' research has found that food preparation is largely women's work in ANE society. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 146-47.

¹⁸⁷ Alter and Schwarz and Kaplan hypothesize that if Lot and his wife have other daughters who are married to the *chatanim* there would be good reason for Lot's wife to look back to Sodom in distress. Schwarz and Kaplan, *Fruit of Her Hands*, 99; Alter, *Genesis*, 87. The hypothesis fails, however, because the older daughter is *hab⁶kiyrah*, the firstborn (See "Lot's Daughters," p. 145). If there were other daughters, they would not be married before the firstborn sister (note Gen. 29:26).

Lot's door are described as "young and old, all the people to the last man" (vs. 4b) Sarna explains, "All this detail is but another way of emphasizing [*sic*] the righteousness of God's judgement and of justifying His actions."¹⁸⁸ Yet a terrible aspect of the tragedy of Sodom and Gomorrah which YHWH the narrator and most commentators apparently ignore is the fate of all the invisible women and children of the cities. Because YHWH condemns their sons, husbands and fathers for their unrighteousness, the members of their households are also condemned to die.¹⁸⁹

Another unacknowledged calamity is the obliteration of the creatures and land of the whole Ghor Valley. In order to punish the men of Sodom for their sins, YHWH eradicates the life of every creature, tree, stream and blade of grass in the valley. As Toensing laments, they are "collateral damage" when unrighteous men are punished.¹⁹⁰ In the most understated way, the narrator acknowledges and appears to mourn this calamity by repeating the word *eretz* (ארץ) three times as the firestorm is described (vss. 23-31).¹⁹¹ All that remains in the valley is Lot's wife. Transformed into pillar of salt - an element which the Hebrew Bible

¹⁸⁸ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 148.

¹⁸⁹ In Israel's earliest period wives and pre-pubescent children do not count as individuals. (One exception is the widow. Judah says of his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen. 38:26b)). Later, Moses introduces the law that family members cannot be judged for the sins of a relative. Instead, "only for their own crimes may persons be put to death" (Deut. 24:16). This view is also found in Jeremiah 31:29, 39 and Ezekiel 18:1-4. John J. Pilch, *Introducing the Cultural Context of the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 52-55, 140; Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago Il.: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 72.

¹⁹⁰ Toensing, "Women of Sodom," 69.

¹⁹¹ Land is always important in biblical discourse; land is the issue which earlier led to the parting of ways between Abraham and Lot (Gen. 13:5-12).

uses ambiguously as a symbol of both life and desolation¹⁹² - the salt-woman symbolises the tragic loss of land and every living thing it supports.

Suspicion Applied to Act Two (vss. 30-38)

Along with the long-cherished notion of male heroes of the Bible is the equally influential tradition regarding the danger of female trickery and seduction,¹⁹³ a tradition strengthened by the recounting of the events in the cave (vss. 30-35). Bekirah's monologue, in which she outlines her plans to deceive and seduce Lot, is spoken in words which are calculated and dispassionate. Taking advantage of her father's apparent susceptibility to alcohol,¹⁹⁴ Bekirah's plans are so efficient that Lot not once, but twice, becomes the dupe in her project. However the narrator does not develop Bekirah's character, and since her active role in the story is limited to these events it is difficult for the audience to empathise with her. I agree with Esther Fuchs when she adds wryly that "even when women's motivation for deceiving is defensible, their very act of deception produces an ambivalent effect that is bound to compromise their character as a whole."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² J. F. Ross, "Salt," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:167. John Pilch explains that ovens for bread – the staff of life – only bake effectively if salt is used as the catalyst to fire animal dung fuel. Pilch, *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville, Mn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 4-5.

¹⁹³ Proverbs 2:16-19; 5:3-8; 6:24-26; Ecclesiasticus 25:24; 26:7; Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, i. I. Tertullian is quoted in D. S. Bailey, *The Man-Woman Relation in Christian Thought* (London: Longman, 1959), 4.

¹⁹⁴ The narrator does not say that Lot has a problem with alcohol, but his daughter seems confident that she and her sister can encourage him to drink excessively on two successive nights.

¹⁹⁵ Esther Fuchs, "Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1985), 140.

Although this ambivalence also surrounds male characters like Abraham who in the very next chapter of Genesis deceives Abimelech (Gen. 20:1-2), in the past commentators have been disinclined to criticise him.¹⁹⁶ In contrast they have rolled out their negative assessments of the sisters, disparaging Bekirah as the deceitful plotter of two acts of incest. Roland Faley summarises their story as “an account of drunkenness and incest which merits only bitter reproach,”¹⁹⁷ while Gerhard von Rad dismisses Act Two as originating in a Moabite myth which glorifies “the wild determination of both ancestral mothers” but which the Israelite narrator condemns.¹⁹⁸ Meanwhile Derek Kidner reviles the daughters by concluding that the depraved descendants of Moab and Ammon provide “the worst carnal seduction in the history of Israel” in the Baal–Peor incident (Num. 25:1-3) and, ignoring Jephthah’s sacrifice of his virgin daughter to YHWH (Judg. 11:39), recalls only Ammon’s child sacrifice to Molech as “the cruellest religious perversion” (Lev. 18:21).¹⁹⁹

More recently, Vawter (1997) labels the daughters as “voracious,” Alexander (1985) writes, “Lot is a victim of this disgraceful affair,” and Hamilton (1995) and Meyer (2002) assert that Bekirah’s motive is just as objectionable as Lot’s

¹⁹⁶ For example, R. Lansing Hicks, “Abraham,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:19.

¹⁹⁷ Faley, *Genesis*, 32.

¹⁹⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972), 224. Von Rad does not state how he knows that the Israelite narrator is condemnatory of the sisters.

¹⁹⁹ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1967), 136. Why Kidner chooses the Baal-Peor incident as the worst seduction in Israel’s history is unclear. Perhaps it accentuates his condemnation of Lot and his daughters.

offer to the Sodomites.²⁰⁰ Populist books on biblical women which do mention Lot's daughters are similarly censorious of them.²⁰¹ In contrast, Tamar *bat-Shua* and Ruth, who also deceive and seduce drunken father-figure relatives (Gen. 38:13-19; Ruth 3:7-9), are not censured but celebrated because Judah - the man tricked by Tamar - states, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen. 38:26) and because Boaz affirms Ruth when he says, "All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of worth" (Ruth 3:11b). In his bias towards Tamar and Ruth, Harold Fisch attempts to explain this discrepancy by contrasting the "crudity and directness of the daughter of Lot" with the "more 'civilized' behaviour of Tamar and Ruth's "clear moral advance [in reaching] a stage of delicacy which marks the acme of 'culture'." ²⁰² According to Fisch, seduction is fine so long as it is done, and told, with finesse.

Another suspicious narratorial decision is to assign Bekirah a prominent role in scenes which are set in the darkness of a remote mountain cave. Although a few scholars commend the narrator for not overtly criticising Lot's daughters,²⁰³ by twice giving the centre stage to Bekirah to describe the details of her plans it appears that the narrator is not only censuring her suspect behaviour but also

²⁰⁰ Vawter, *On Genesis*, 242; T. Desmond Alexander, "Lot's Hospitality: A Clue to his Righteousness", *JSOT* 104, no. 2 (1985), 291; Hamilton, *Book of Genesis*, 51; Lester V. Meyer, "Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't: Moral Dilemmas in the Story of Lot and His Family," *Trinity Seminary Review* 24, no. 2 (2002), 133. See also "Irony and Contrast," p. 128.

²⁰¹ Sue and Larry Richards exemplify these negative assessments of Lot's daughters. Richards and Richards, *Every Woman*, 58.

²⁰² Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 3, no. 4 (1982): 433-34.

²⁰³ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 46; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 176.

minimising Lot's responsibility in the affair.²⁰⁴ The seven-fold repetition of the term "father" and the twice repeated "daughters" also reminds the audience of the irregularity of the behaviour of the *b^etuloth*. Even the sisters' choice of names for their sons has been construed as a narratorial taunt about the incestuous origins of Israel's enemies, Moab and Ammon.²⁰⁵ It seems that if deceptive daughters rather than an "unknowing" father can be blamed for the shameful origins of these enemies, so much the better.²⁰⁶

The implication is that although YHWH saves Lot and his daughters from annihilation, the recipients of saving grace may be unworthy. Terence Fretheim has muted his criticism of the daughters' behaviour by regarding it as an outcome of their father's abuse of them in Act One. "Their father showed them the way, as have abusive fathers over the centuries."²⁰⁷ In other words, Fretheim concurs that the sisters are sexual offenders but that Lot must also bear some blame for their behaviour.²⁰⁸

It is also possible that Act Two originates from - or becomes - a legend about the dangers of permitting a woman to plan and conspire against a man in order to

²⁰⁴ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 148; Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 79-80.

²⁰⁵ Robert J. Faley, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 12-50* (Collegeville, Mn.: The Liturgical Press, 1952), 32.

²⁰⁶ August Dillmann agrees: "Lot, the opponent of the immorality of Sodom, would not, so long as sober, agree to such an immoral connection." Dillmann, *Genesis: Critically and Exegetically Expanded* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1897), 114.

²⁰⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, "Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:479.

²⁰⁸ See "Retrieval," pp. 167-78 for more positive views about the sisters with which I concur.

mould him to her will. If this story is set against the background of the powerful goddess cults of the ANE, it may have been cultivated as a cautionary tale for men, young and old.²⁰⁹

In summary Jeansonne writes that in Genesis 19 as a whole, “The daughters of Lot are presented as peripheral characters, and only remnants of their story survive.”²¹⁰ Perhaps the narrator preserves these remnants principally to record the sisters’ role in the downfall of Lot and to retain the shameful aetiology of the nations of Moab and Ammon.

Suspicion Applied to Lot’s Righteousness

In Genesis 19 Lot is the only fully-fledged character, so the issue of his righteousness is a major point of contention. In the Jewish Apocrypha, Wisdom 10:6 states that Lot is righteous and 1 Clement 11:1 claims that Lot is rescued because of his “hospitality and piety.” The writer of 2 Peter goes further, stating three times that as “righteous Lot” lived among the licentious Sodomites, he suffered daily distress and anger as he witnessed their evil deeds (2 Pet. 2:7, 8).

In 1986, Archaeological evidence of this reverence has been found in remains of a fifth century monastery and church built at the entrance of a cave south east of the Dead Sea. Three carved stone inscriptions calling on “Saint Lot” for blessings were once constructed over an even more ancient “Sanctuary of Saint

²⁰⁹ Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1973), 27, 60, 140-143. In goddess cults, it is common to find goddesses like Ishtar, Astarte and Anath possessing power over love-making and fertility: powers which Bekirah appears to possess here. See “Retrieval” for an alternative view on the Lot legend’s origins, p.??

²¹⁰ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 31.

Lot.”²¹¹ Islamic tradition also reveres Lot as a prophet.²¹² Thus through the millennia, honouring Lot as a biblical hero has been important to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Until the rapid growth of feminist biblical scholarship less than forty years ago, it has been disturbing to discover that almost all biblical exegetes seem eager to exonerate Lot’s behaviour, and some unhesitatingly praise Lot. In 1930 John Skinner writes that “to his credit” Lot uses his daughters to protect his male guests and is therefore a “courageous champion of the obligations of hospitality.”²¹³ Similarly, Gunkel asserts that “Lot’s hospitality and helpfulness forms [*sic*] an impressive counterpart” to the crime of Sodom,²¹⁴ and that “Lot’s offer is by no means a ‘sin’ ... by the fact that the ‘men’ [the *mal’akiym*] let it pass.” Gunkel also surmises that Lot, “the righteous one,” is saved because of his “noble disposition.”²¹⁵

Even in recent years a number of commentators continue to support Lot’s status as a righteous man by excusing his behaviour as obligatory due to the code of hospitality.²¹⁶ The most creative approach is that of Scott Morschauser. Quoting ANE legal documents in his 2003 article, Morschauser argues that the townsmen

²¹¹ Konstantinos Politis, “Where Lot’s Daughters Seduced Their Father,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 30, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2004): 20.

²¹² Politis, “Lot’s Daughters,” 28.

²¹³ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), 307.

²¹⁴ Gunkel, *Folktale*, 93.

²¹⁵ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 207-208.

²¹⁶ This cohort of commentators include Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 128; Alexander, “Lot’s Hospitality,” 289; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 61; Tonson, “Mercy,” 99; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 46.

simply want to interrogate the strangers. Lot does not want his guests subjected to this, so he asks the crowd to take his daughters as substitutes, keep them in custody overnight, and thereby ensure that the messengers leave the city at daybreak.²¹⁷ Morschauser's explanation makes little sense in the light of Lot's declaration that his daughters are virgins; otherwise what would be his purpose in giving this information to the Sodomites? Assuredly Lot knows that the Sodomites' 'interrogation' also means sexual abuse.

Other exegetes like Coats, in accord with von Rad, Stuart Lasine and Melissa Jackson, read Genesis 19 as a comic tragedy in which Lot is portrayed as a buffoon whose bumbling behaviour reveals him as "a passive, rather helpless object for the narrative's action."²¹⁸ While these commentators have doubts about Lot's moral position, they use his purported ridiculousness to shield him from sharper criticism. In the Interlude, the narrator states that Lot is rescued by YHWH because "God remembered Abraham" (vs. 29). Abraham is the man who pleads for Sodom - in other words, for Lot - and Abraham's faith in God's promises is that which defines his righteousness (Gen. 15:6). In contrast, Lot pleads to the messengers for himself alone (vss. 18-20). Perhaps Lot is portrayed as a buffoon in order to elicit more sympathy for a nephew of Abraham. But a fool is still responsible for, and to, his family. This leads to Jeansonne's conclusion, "There are not ten righteous men in Sodom. In fact there are

²¹⁷ Scott Morschauser, "Hospitality," 477-78.

²¹⁸ Coats, *Genesis*, 143-44; von Rad, *Genesis*, 219; Lasine, "Guest and Host," 40; Jackson, "Lot's Daughters," 29-30, 33, 35-46.

none.”²¹⁹ Together with those feminist scholars who have shown interest in Genesis 19, I think that Lot’s attitude towards his daughters places him among the Bible’s more repugnant characters.

Yet sinful behaviour, according to the Yahwist narratives, is not the criterion for judging who is righteous. “Righteousness” is concerned with the quality of a relationship between people and God.²²⁰ Lot is rescued because “YHWH’s compassion (*chumlah*) was with him” (vs. 16c). While Lot may be abusive towards his daughters, YHWH sees Lot as righteous because the relationship between Lot and YHWH is based on the deity’s *chumlah* for him: a gift which Lot accepts (vs. 19).²²¹ In other words, Lot escapes condemnation by the skin of his teeth.²²²

If Lot is indeed righteous in the eyes of God, what does this mean for Lot’s daughters, whom no commentator has labelled as righteous? It means that according to biblical custom Lot’s daughters, as members of Lot’s household, should also be regarded as righteous – a connection most exegetes fail to recognise when they ‘whitewash’ Lot but condemn his daughters.²²³ To counter this, it is important that feminist scholars continue to both expose Lot’s repellent

²¹⁹ Sharon Pace Jeansonne, “The Characterization of Lot in Genesis”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 18 (1988): 128.

²²⁰ See this chapter’s “Introduction,” p.93 fn. 7.

²²¹ Noah is another father who has always been regarded as a righteous man, despite his drunken and possibly incestuous encounter with his son (Gen. 9:21-25). Rashkow, *Taboo*, 104.

²²² A comment made by Professor Norman C. Habel in conversation on 5th May 2009.

²²³ Matthews, “Hospitality,” 5; Pitt-Rivers, *Fate*, 119, 159. An example of collective unrighteousness is evident in Numbers 16:1-34, where three men who had rebelled against Moses are “swallowed up” by the earth along with every member of their households. See also Pilch’s comments, “Suspicion Applied to Act One,” p.156 fn. 190??

behaviour and explore the radical notion that YHWH - the paradoxical deity - has chosen to accept Lot and his daughters as among the righteous ones within the orbit of his grace and favour.

Identification²²⁴

What do I hear and experience as I study this text? What women's stories of abuse do I recall when I imagine what life was like for Bekirah and her sister following that fateful night in Sodom? My own experience of abuse is limited to the vicarious pain I experience when traumatised women have entrusted me with their stories of suffering emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse; stories which are marked by shock, fear, revulsion, agony, shame, guilt, distress and/or numbness. In order to re-vision and connect with the thoughts and feelings of one of the abused women in Genesis 19 - Bekirah, daughter of Lot - I have written a *midrash* from her perspective. The process of 'imagining Bekirah' has given me an opportunity to experience some of her suffering and challenges as she lives through the events of her dangerous world as it is presented in the text.

Undoubtedly the most significant insight I have gained from the *midrash* is the enormity of the emotional upheaval which Bekirah, Tsirah and Netsiv²²⁵ experience during the events of Genesis 19. Shock, confusion and helplessness are the feelings which overwhelm Bekirah as one incomprehensible and/or frightening event follows another. Her most terrifying experience of all is to hear

²²⁴ This section on "Identification" is based on the *midrash*, Appendix 3, pp. 487-93.

²²⁵ Tsirah and Netsiv are the names I have created for Bekirah's younger sister and for Lot's wife.

Lot's decision to save two strangers by offering to sacrifice her and Tsirah to the rapacious crowd.²²⁶ The protective effect of shock and bewilderment in the midst of the chaos helps Bekirah, her sister and their mother to survive the night. What does not survive is any sense of kinship between daughter and father.

At dawn the messengers take charge of the family and finally the women are noticed. However they are still excluded from conversations, not informed about plans and tossed about like dice in a game of chance. Any information Bekirah gleans is by eavesdropping on men's discourse. Eventually Bekirah - still reeling from the night's traumatic events - is rushed along the city streets and then made to flee across the valley to Zoar. Here Bekirah and Tsirah escape the holocaust, but the life of their mother and the world they know are lost forever. All that is left for Bekirah is her instinct for survival.

While Genesis 19 ignores the Zoar experience, the *midrash* depicts Bekirah as the lynchpin of this little refugee family struggling to repair itself physically and emotionally following this, the most horrific of disasters. Having endured the privations and dangers of subsistence survival, first in the chaos of Zoar and then in the mountainous wilderness, somehow Bekirah makes it through. The physical, mental and emotional shock caused by the catastrophe is so extreme that it is a long time before any healing can begin.

²²⁶ Terence Fretheim writes of Isaac's near-sacrifice, "Is it not likely that Isaac was traumatised by the threat of imminent and violent death at the hands of his father?" Terence E. Fretheim, "The binding of Isaac and the abuse of children (Genesis 22)," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 41, no. 2 (August 2007): 89. Similarly Bekirah and her sister are likely to be traumatised when they almost certainly overhear the threat of imminent abuse in their father's proposal.

Eventually when health is restored it seems miraculous. It takes some time for Bekirah and Tsirah's fertility cycles to return after enduring such terror and loss on the day of the holocaust and as some later stage fleeing once again – this time from Zoar into the wilderness. But in this unlikely place Bekirah and Tsirah have the time and space to mourn their mother and grieve for all they have lost. As Lot becomes more isolated and depressed, the wilderness and its offerings of sufficient food and shelter becomes a surrogate parent, nurturing Bekirah and Tsirah back to health.²²⁷ Over time the land provides so effectively for the girls' physical and emotional resilience that Bekirah is able to 'eco-map' the world²²⁸ and from there bring about a promising future for herself and her sister.

The *midrash* of Act Two has reminded me that many women survivors of war and all manner of natural and unnatural disasters can also display astonishing resilience in the face of what appear to be insurmountable odds. The sisters have lost everything in life except their father: the person who betrayed them so utterly. A patriarchal culture may have tolerated Lot's behaviour, but Bekirah is an intelligent human being whose emotional scars have not been erased. Perhaps the elimination of so many people from her life - in particular the death of her

²²⁷ The wilderness usually invites images of desolation and subsistence living as depicted, for example, in Exodus, chapters 15 to 17.

²²⁸ The 'eco-map,' an idea devised by Ann Hartmann in the 1990s, is a sociological diagram of family, community and environmental relationships which sketches the emotional and relational 'ecology' of a person's life. The map can be used to outline a person's future in the context of these relationships by 'mapping' the person's hopes, ideas and plans. Robert L. Barker, *The Social Work Dictionary*, 5th ed. (Baltimore, Md.: Port City Press, 2004), 136.

mother - has taught her that life is tenuous at best. Instead of succumbing to her adversities, she is determined to overcome them.

The *midrash* also calls attention to the importance of becoming attuned to the natural world and the development of survival strategies: the small things that work to give traumatised people a glimpse of hope, like the timely discovery of a cache of food and wine in the bushes or the capture of a milking goat. Lives can turn from debilitating despair to hesitant optimism through these otherwise insignificant events. Unexpectedly the wilderness has shared its gifts of food and shelter with this family so that Bekirah and Tsirah are able to find the courage to plan for their future. Their success in achieving their goal comes, however, at the expense of cultural mores which in their circumstances the sisters believe they must overcome despite their loathing for what they must do. This *midrash* has reminded me that in extreme situations, cultural taboos such as incest lose their power.

Genesis 19 provides the reader with the opportunity to reflect on one sphere of misery perpetuated by the injustices of patriarchal social structures. Yet, as the *midrash* reveals, a woman's resilience, intelligence and courage can not only retrieve something of what has been lost but also create something new and positive from the wreckage of the old.

Retrieval of Resistance Narrative Strands

While there may be strands of resistance narrative in Act One, I will focus on salvaging them principally from Act Two, a pericope which can be regarded as originating in ancient folklore.²²⁹ The protagonists in Act Two are the daughters of Lot making their debut as the subjects of the narrative. In a landscape stripped of structure they construct their own by using their initiative to take control of a bleak and potentially desperate situation. As Carol Meyers notes, “Women emerge as significant...[in] times of decentralized power.”²³⁰

The first resistance strand to be reclaimed from Act Two is the voice of Bekirah, the character who now emerges from the story’s margins. Indeed, she has the last word, for while only men’s voices are heard in Act One, Lot’s older daughter is the first and only character to speak in the second act. Her two monologues and their success dominate the end of the story, and Bekirah is the first un-named woman in the Bible to make plans, demonstrate assertiveness and achieve her aims.

The change in point of view from the men in Act One to Lot’s daughter in Act Two indicates that as Lot’s authority weakens throughout the narrative, Bekirah takes her father’s place as the story’s primary protagonist. She achieves this by confidently undermining Lot’s “prerogative of father-right” to decide his

²²⁹ See discussion on folklore, p. 176-77.

²³⁰ Carol Meyers, “The Hannah Narrative in Feminist Perspective,” in *Go to the Land I will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young*, ed. Joseph E. Coleson and Victor H. Matthews (Winona Lake, In.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 125; Carol Meyers, “Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 40.

family's future.²³¹ Thus the narrator, whether intentionally or not, presents the *b^etuloth* as “subverting the normal orders of male over female, parent over child, and age over youth.”²³² Through her own initiative Bekirah assumes responsibility, develops her agenda, and with her sister's help, implements it. In so doing, she demonstrates some characteristics of a folkloric figure, namely, the wise woman.²³³

Wisdom, according to the compiler of Proverbs, is “a fountain of life” (16:22) and “if you find it, you will find a future” (24:14). The industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-30) is praised for her wisdom in planning and successfully managing her husband's estate while he sits with the elders of the land. As a refugee and *b^etulah*, Bekirah does not fit this image and thus is an unlikely candidate for the role of wise woman. Yet her ability to plan, lead by example, gain cooperation and successfully implement her strategy to ensure the survival of her family is consistent with the Bible's portrayal of women of wisdom.²³⁴ The execution of Bekirah's ideas leads to the sisters' improved status as mothers of sons,²³⁵ an outcome which indicates that the behaviour of Lot's older

²³¹ Delaney, “Legacy,” 37.

²³² Jackson, “Lot's Daughters,” 33.

²³³ Bekirah as a ‘wise woman’ was suggested by Professor Norman C. Habel in discussion, 4th August 2009.

²³⁴ In 1949, S. D. Goitein studied Jewish women who migrated to Israel from traditional Yemenite villages. He discovered that the traits of the Yemeni “wise woman” were leadership skills, advice giving, watching over others from birth to old age, acting as a peacemaker and matchmaker and ‘declaiming’ poetically at weddings and funerals. S. D. Goitein, “Women as Creators of Biblical Genres,” *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 10.

²³⁵ “In Mediterranean culture, a woman has no standing until she bears a child, especially a son.” Pilch, *Cultural Dictionary*, 37. See also Jackson, “Lot's Daughters,” 32-34; Miller, *Tell*, 87.

daughter is remarkably astute.²³⁶ Indeed, astuteness is a respected quality of the wise woman of ancient lore.²³⁷

Emerging from a comparison of the various speeches in Genesis 19 is the realisation that Bekirah's proposals have more in common with the words of the messengers than with the discourse of the other characters in Genesis 19. During the course of the first act Lot's words are pleading, abusive of his daughters, self-serving and fearful as he attempts to maintain control, while the Sodomites' words are accusatory and abusive. In contrast, the messengers and Bekirah all make plans before they speak, explain the procedures with reasoned arguments, give instructions to further their goals and follow through with action. The messengers and daughters' identical purpose is to rescue Lot and his family, and they all achieve this purpose with the reluctant or unconscious cooperation of Lot. Just as the messengers have 'honourable reasons' for the destruction of two cities and the salvation of one family, Bekirah has honourable reasons for disregarding social morés since her objective is to bring about the long-term salvation of that same family.²³⁸

YHWH chooses to save Lot's family, but without procreation the effort is limited. Consequently, when Bekirah and her sister extend and fulfil YHWH's purpose their actions can justifiably be regarded as a continuation of the

²³⁶ Jesus tells a story of an 'unjust' steward who is perspicacious in providing for his own future, and even commends the steward's foresight (Luke 16:1-13).

²³⁷ Goitein, "Women as Creators," 10.

²³⁸ Ken Stone, "Daughters of Lot," in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 179. Stone, however, does not link the daughters' purpose with that of the messengers.

messengers' salvific work. Both messengers and *b^etuloth* are saviours of lives and lineage. Indeed, why have the acts of Lot's *banoth* never been viewed in this favourable light? Commentators have readily criticised the sisters' irregular actions through which they rescue Lot's family from oblivion, yet they have unquestioningly accepted YHWH and his messengers' destruction of all living beings in the Ghor Valley. Our modern sensibilities mourn the loss of life in today's disasters no matter where they occur, yet many who hold the Bible sacred continue to accept the events of Genesis 19 as the deserved punishment of a cluster of sinful ancient communities.

Also apposite to the retrieval process is an examination of the content of Bekirah's speeches. While Bekirah's emotions are hidden, the audience does hear her thoughts about the state of the world and what she plans to do about it. Observing that there are no other men and that Lot is ageing, Bekirah implies that unless she and her sister take action, theirs will be the last generation of Lot's family. The sisters are isolated, motherless and almost certainly emotionally damaged following the holocaust. Nevertheless Bekirah finds the energy to act where Lot has failed, namely, to establish and continue the family line. Using her knowledge about her and her sister's cyclical body changes,²³⁹ Bekirah's strategy is laid out to their own and ultimately to their father's advantage.²⁴⁰ In other words, they ensure that Lot's determination to preserve

²³⁹ If a woman wants to conceive a child it helps if she understands the phases of her menstrual cycle.

²⁴⁰ See "Knowledge and Ignorance," p.109.

his life (vs. 19e) is realised. Such behaviour requires creative thinking and the courage of desperation.

As *b^etuloth*, Bekirah and Tsirah are vulnerable young women in that liminal state, namely, the threshold of adulthood.²⁴¹ It is significant that their activity occurs in the liminality of the wilderness where the term ‘desperation’ is not out of place.²⁴² Bekirah’s words, her actions and Tsirah’s cooperation reveal that the sisters manage to struggle beyond the liminality of *b^etulim*²⁴³ in order to belong to a world where a woman’s worth is invested in the motherhood of sons.

Bekirah’s calculated strategy for survival is remarkable in that it does not punish Lot; paradoxically he is granted the most valued achievement of men in the ANE, namely, the continuation of his *toledoth*. In a strange twist of justice, only when inebriated does Lot finally provide for his daughters.²⁴⁴ Yet it is not Lot who provides but the daughters. In other words, one old man filled with fear is both supplanted and supported by two young women full of courage. Bekirah and her sister have decided to “preserve life,” and that is what they achieve for themselves and for their undeserving father. Disappointingly, we do not hear Lot say of his firstborn daughter, “She is more in the right than I” (Gen. 38:26a).²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ Turner, *Ritual*, 95; Boose and Flowers, *Daughters*, 67. See ‘liminality’ also in “Theme of Dangerous Hospitality,” p.117.

²⁴² Note Hannah’s desperate prayer for a son (1 Sam. 1:10, 11). Archer, *Her Price* 17-18.

²⁴³ The transition state of *b^etuliyim* means being of marriageable age rather than being a virgin, although virginity is usually an aspect of *b^etuliyim*. See “Chapter 4: Jephthah’s Daughter: Events,” p. 278, fn. 27, for further discussion on *b^etuliyim*.

²⁴⁴ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 41.

²⁴⁵ See “Suspicion Applied to Act Two,” p. 159.

Further validation of Bekirah's strategy may be deduced from her phrase "We will preserve (*pi'el* imperf. of *chayah* חיה) seed (*zara'* זרע)." Here she speaks the very words YHWH uses to explain to Noah that the goal of gathering male and female animals into the ark is "to preserve seed" during and after the great flood (Gen. 7:3c).²⁴⁶ Following the second great catastrophe in Genesis, Bekirah repeats YHWH's words for the same reason, that is, for the repopulation of the earth. In this instance, Lot's firstborn daughter takes the role that the deity takes in the flood narrative; she too has a vision for the future.²⁴⁷ The speech put into Bekirah's mouth, however, reveals the narrator's ambivalence about the sisters' activities. On the one hand, he appears to be protecting Lot's reputation by ensuring that the latter acts unknowingly, and on the other hand Bekirah's portrayal has a number of strengths which have been recognised only in the past twenty years.

The events of Act Two may serve another purpose, namely, to demonstrate that the deliverance of a family's future can be achieved even through unorthodox means. In different circumstances the conduct of the *b^etuloth* would be unacceptable. But in noting what is left unsaid, it appears that Lot, having survived a disaster and now required to support a family in total isolation, is unwilling - or perhaps unable - to find husbands for his daughters or plan for the future. Consequently his older unmarried daughter examines the situation and its problems. She recognises that she has few choices, so she subverts Lot's

²⁴⁶ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 41.

²⁴⁷ See "Death and Life," p. 113.

authoritative role and she makes the decision that she and her sister will provide their family with the hope that only a new generation can give.

However, “to challenge the authority of her father the biblical daughter almost invariably resorts to deception,”²⁴⁸ and Bekirah does resort to this course of action. If in the past her father has imbibed alcohol excessively, it seems logical for Bekirah to make use of alcohol and its soporific effects to achieve her aim.²⁴⁹ In order to increase the possibility of success Bekirah gains the cooperation of her sister and in this she is similar to Sarah who sends Hagar into Abraham (Gen. 16:1-4) and Naomi who instructs Ruth to seduce Boaz (Ruth 3:1-9).²⁵⁰ Yet, “if judged by the yardstick used for the evaluation of Tamar’s and Ruth’s deeds, Lot’s daughters behave in an exemplary fashion.”²⁵¹

Like Fuchs, Brenner and Jackson regard Bekirah as deceptive, but unlike Fuchs they also label her as a classic temptress or ‘trickster.’²⁵² The trickster trait is evident when Bekirah successfully plans to dupe Lot in order to remedy the sisters’ lowly *b^etulim* status and as she successfully enlists her sister’s assistance. In the circumstances, however, Bekirah’s achievement might be regarded as

²⁴⁸ Fuchs, “Who Is Hiding,” 140. Other deceptive daughters are Rachel (Gen. 31:30-35) and Michal (1 Sam. 19:11-17).

²⁴⁹ “Cheating the male whose awareness has been weakened by drink is an important ingredient of the Temptress paradigm.” Brenner, *Israelite Women*, 109.

²⁵⁰ Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters,” 34. See also “Suspicion Applied to Act Two, p. 159.

²⁵¹ Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1985), 109; Fisch, 429; Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2003), 54.

²⁵² Brenner, *Israelite Woman*, 108-109; Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters,” 29-39; Fuchs, “Who Is Hiding,” 140.

more than the machinations of a trickster; I believe it is rather the pragmatic and far-sighted course of action taken by a wise woman of ancient folklore.²⁵³

As Ostriker says about the Miriam legend, “All this material has very much the air of a folktale, which might well mean that women had a voice in its composition.”²⁵⁴ Folk legend qualities in Act Two are evident in the setting of an isolated family in the mountain cave of a distant land, and in the narrator’s triple repetition of words and actions. In Albert Lord’s study of Angolan oral prose he notes that there is often internal repetition of similar activities which are carried out by successive protagonists.²⁵⁵ Since this is precisely the form of repetition which appears in Act Two, I feel confident in saying that the story of Lot’s daughters retains elements of its original orality as a folktale.

Act Two also has the folktale characteristics of stories where a witch - or scheming woman - attempts to dupe an unsuspecting ‘hero’ in order to achieve greater spiritual or material control. Even the use of the definite pronoun for “the” cave implies a tradition about the cave.²⁵⁶ Consequently, in the light of the universal character of the folktale and genre of legends, I believe that the last act of Genesis 19 can be retrieved as a folk story - perhaps a women’s folk story. In this legend the lead character is the ancient woman of wisdom who has the

²⁵³ Bekirah, however, does not really fit the temptress mould, as her aim (presumably) is to benefit Lot as well as herself and Tsirah.

²⁵⁴ Ostriker, *Feminist Revision*, 43.

²⁵⁵ Albert B. Lord, “A Comparative Analysis,” in *Umbundu: Folktales from Angola*, ed. Merlin Ennis (Boston, Ma.: Beacon Press, 1962), xvi.

²⁵⁶ von Rad surmises that the narrator’s audience may have been familiar with a tradition associated with the cave. von Rad, *Genesis*, 223.

intelligence and shrewdness to organise her sphere of influence for her own creative purposes.²⁵⁷

Lot is absent from the text when the narrator states that his daughters give birth to their sons and name them. While the naming of sons by their mothers appears in a number of biblical stories (e.g. Gen. 4:1, 29:31-35, 30:1-24, Exod. 2:10, 1 Sam. 1:20), it is striking that Bekirah and her sister's choice of names for their sons connects them to Lot. One is named Moab, "from the father," and the other is Ben Ammi, "my own kinsman's son" that is, "of my father's clan."²⁵⁸ In choosing these names, it appears that the daughters are proudly proclaiming to the world that their children are indeed their father's children from the clan of Terah (Gen. 11:27). Yet their motives remain ambiguous. On the one hand, the sons' names may have been chosen in honour of Lot; on the other hand, perhaps the daughters' silent humiliation during that fateful night in the city is 'avenged' in the mountain cave.²⁵⁹ That is, it may be a subversive strategy to humiliate Lot, for as de Vaux avers, "To name it is to know it, and, consequently, to have power over it."²⁶⁰ Whatever the reason, the sisters' status as "the mothers of heroes" is considerable in the light of their son's destinies as the founders of nations.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Solomon, the king gifted with wisdom, has the shrewdness to assess a situation and to judge successfully (1 Kings 3:16-28).

²⁵⁸ Alter, *Genesis*, 90; George M. Landes, "Ammon, Ammonites," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:109. See also "Irony and Contrast," pp. 128-29.

²⁵⁹ Schwarz and Kaplan, *Fruit of Her Hands*, 100.

²⁶⁰ de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 43.

²⁶¹ Brenner, *Israelite Woman*, 109.

Thus in the midst of disgrace, grace is found. If the birth of sons is evidence of divine blessing, as is apparent in other birth narratives in the Bible, Bekirah, her sister and Lot are recipients of the divine blessing in the birth of sons.²⁶² Moab and Ammon might eventually become nations and enemies of Israel, but Moses reminds his people that these neighbouring nations have special status as “the sons of Lot” (Deut. 2:9, 19). Moreover Moab is the eponymous ancestor of Ruth (Ruth 1:4. 4:17-21), the great grandmother of David to whom the divine promise is made: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16).

Conclusions

In his introduction to Genesis 18:16-19:38 Brueggemann states that the stories of Abraham and Lot are intertwined: Abraham’s is about beginnings, Lot’s is about endings. “The awesome task of God (and his messengers) is to cause both *beginnings and endings*.”²⁶³ In the light of the success of Bekirah’s plan I would add that Genesis 19 is also about a surprising beginning created in the aftermath of an earth-shaking ending.

While Sodom’s famous “ending” dominates the story of Genesis 19, a review of all its events reminds the audience that the narratorial focus is on relationships and the hospitality which society expects of those relationships. The interactions

²⁶² See the final paragraph of “Death and Life,” p.113.

²⁶³ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 162 [his italics].

are between citizens themselves, between citizens and strangers, and between kin. Having viewed the narrative through feminist eyes, it becomes plain that only a few of its characters or groups are portrayed as people of integrity. The Sodomites die condemned for their comprehensive wickedness, and Lot's wife - who is either disobedient or unaware of the warning - dies for looking back at the conflagration. On the other hand, the *mal'akiym* are undoubtedly men of wisdom and virtue, associated as they are with the deity whose decisions biblical narrators almost invariably endorse or uncritically record.

Lot, meanwhile, is an enigma. He is not overtly censured,²⁶⁴ yet he cannot be regarded as a man of integrity. Compared with Abraham, Lot's character leaves much to be desired. I interpret the narrator's description of the downward spiral of Lot's life as implicit criticism of a man whose betrayal of his daughters is unacceptable even in an androcentric world.

Finally, what can be made of narrator's presentation of Lot's daughters? Is the achievement of the sisters in Act Two viewed as an achievement by the biblical narrator? I believe this answer is also equivocal in a narrative saturated with ambiguity. When the morally doubtful behaviour of the sisters becomes the focus at the story's conclusion, the narrator appears to be confirming Lot's dishonourable end.²⁶⁵ Yet Brueggemann sees the narrative as attaching no

²⁶⁴ Nissinen commends the narrator for shunning moral censure of Lot. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 46.

²⁶⁵ Alexander and Dillman exemplify the commentators who view Lot's inebriation as exonerating him from culpability. Alexander, "Lot's Hospitality," 291; Dillman, *Genesis*, 114.

stigma to the actions of sisters because they “appear to be celebrated for their bold and heroic action.”²⁶⁶

Meanwhile a feminist response places the perspective of the emotionally abused and socially isolated *b^etuloth* to the fore. When Bekirah finds herself in an untenable and apparently hopeless situation, she intelligently plans and effects a solution. For this achievement she deserves not only our acknowledgement for her resourcefulness but also our vindication and respect. Bekirah also merits a place in the study of women in the Hebrew Bible. While her *modus operandi* is not apposite to the ethics of the modern world, her courage and initiative in the face of abuse, social isolation and despair might be positively and judiciously utilised by those who work with traumatised women today. Inspiration can be found in the most surprising places: our challenge is to find them.

Whether intentionally or not, the narrator has placed the two sisters alongside the two messengers of YHWH as the saviours of a family whose descendants create two important nations of the ANE. As feminists continue to challenge past negative assessments of Lot’s daughters, perhaps audiences will begin to appreciate that Act Two of the Sodom narrative could or should be regarded as a folk story about a woman of wisdom. Bekirah is a woman who, together with her sister, displays traits of courage and enterprise also attributable to YHWH’s messengers, and who plays a vital role in the preservation of a family’s *toledoth* in the aftermath of a cataclysmic disaster.

²⁶⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 176.