

Why Do Readers Believe Lot? Genesis 19 Reconsidered¹

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ABSTRACT

The popular reading of the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 credits the destruction of the cities to rampant homosexuality. The basis of this reading is found in the ambiguous statement of the deity in Genesis 18:20 as to their “grave sin” and Lot’s statement in 19:8 that the men of Sodom should sexually assault his daughters instead of the men. These two statements, grounded in patriarchy, heterosexism, ethnocentrism and theocentrism underpin the sanction to oppress same gender loving people with the “authority of holy hatred”. This article will give an alternative reading to the narrative by concentrating on literary cues, often masked by translation choices, by characterizations of Lot and the deity, and by comparisons with other similar plot details. My contention is that the narrative can be read as a spy tale on the order of Joshua 2 and 2 Samuel 10. I also contend that the proposed use of the bodies of Lot’s daughters follows other biblical narratives of men feeling threatened and who use women’s bodies to protect themselves. Finally I argue that the translation choices of the commentators in presenting the narrative and discussing the passage ignore other options of translation and interpretation, thus, readers are kept bound to see this story as one about homosexuality instead of daughters being sexually abused. The latter possibility is so horrific that the anti-homosexual reading has been sustained by readers in order to not only exonerate the deity but also to support patriarchal, ethnocentric, theocentric and heterosexist privileges.

A INTRODUCTION

The destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah has become a trope in religious² and popular culture³ for the claim that the God of Israel is opposed to

¹ An earlier form of this article was presented at a Colloquium at UNISA on 9 February 2010.

² Cf. “What was the Sin of Sodom and Gomorrah,” n.p. [cited 13 July 2010]. Online <http://www.gotquestions.org/Sodom-and-Gomorrah.html>, “Is there any evidence for the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction by fire and brimstone (sulfur)?” n.p. [cited 13 July 2010]. Online <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-abr/abra007.html>; David Stewart, “Sodom and Gomorrah,” n.p. [cited 13 July 2010]. Online <http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Basics/sodom.htm>; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible*

homosexuality. These readings are based upon oral tradition and often not the result of a close reading of the passage. Moreover, these kinds of readings are influenced by readers' ideologies that support the view that the biblical text provides a blanket condemnation of such sexual practices and activities. Often these readings rely upon a few details within the text while they ignore other details or narrative strategies such as ambiguity, irony, and layering of perspectives.

As an ideological critic, I have struggled with ways of introducing people to new readings and to new ideas within and around texts especially to intersectional ways of reading⁴ that deal with issues of race/ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality, nationality, and power. Most often, readers have been trained to only look at one, and in some cases, none of these dimensions. Readers have not been trained to take seriously the ways in which many ideologies are at play, reinforcing each other in the construction of the narrative.

In this article I intend to propose a different reading of the story in Genesis 19. This reading will illuminate how the meanings of the words used in this narrative passage have different meanings in other narratives which convey different understandings for the same words.

Since my reading of the text is not a conventional reading, I begin this process by exploring other texts and concepts, which, when applied to the reading of Genesis 19, will help us to answer the question posed in the title of this article. As I shall argue, there are texts both in Genesis and other parts of the Hebrew Bible that carry the same or similar plot lines as found in Genesis 19, the story of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by YHWH, the God of Israel. I shall also argue that these plot lines, as well as translation issues found in the Hebrew text and translation choices made by other translators, have hindered us from seeing alternative possibilities of interpretation.

and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 71-91.

³ *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah*, [VHS], dir. Robert Aldridge (1963, Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox (distributor), date of distribution 1963); Alessandro Bavari, "Sodom & Gomorrah," n.p. [cited 13 July 2010]. Online <http://www.designtavern.com/2010/04/sodom-gomorrah-by-alessandro-bavari/>; Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah: In Search of Lost Time* Volume 4 Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (trans. John Sturrock; New York: Penguin Books, 2005); Francis Kikutse, "Ghana: Nation Haggles Over Fate of Accra's Sodom And Gomorrah," n.p. [cited 13 July 2010]. Online <http://allafrica.com/ghana/>, 20 September 2009; Pet Shop Boys, "The Sodom and Gomorrah Show", *Fundamental* (Neil Tennant and Diane Warren, composers; New York: Rhino Entertainment Company, 2006).

⁴ For exploration of the concept of "intersectionality" see Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, (2d ed.; ed. Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins; Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 1995), 532-40.

Finally, what I am proposing is *a* reading of the text. I am not arguing that one cannot legitimately read the story in another way. Rather I am stating that when one considers the factors which I shall be introducing, this is a credible reading. If one wants to hold on to the “established” reading of the text, one is free to do so, but should explore why that reading is preferable to the one proposed here and which ideologies are supporting and being supported by alternative readings.

B SIMILAR PLOT LINES AND WORD STUDIES

1 Spy Narratives

1a Moses sending spies

Let me begin with Numbers 13:1-3, 17-18.

The LORD said to Moses,² “Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.”³ So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the LORD, all of them leading men among the Israelites...¹⁷ Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, “Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country,¹⁸ and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many.”⁵

From this narrative readers gather that nations sent out spies to explore a territory before they would attack it. In this instance YHWH, the God of Israel comes up with the plan to send out the spies, ordering Moses to give them specific instruction as to what they are to observe and to what parts of the area they are to explore (vv. 1-2).⁶ The plan happens to be a disaster, since ten of the spies come back with a negative report. Apparently sometimes, even the best laid plans of YHWH are not always successful, though commentators on this chapter stress the importance of divine guidance in creating the plan as a positive aspect of the narrative.⁷

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations come from the NRSVB.

⁶ In *The Art of War* Sun Zu argues in pt. 13 (2) the moral authority of a general is decided in terms of how there is a moral alignment with Heaven. This could help to explain the emphasis on the role of YHWH in this narrative. Cf. Sun Zu, *The Art of War: The Ultimate Guide to Victory in Battle, Business and Life*, (www.bestsuccessbooks.com, 2009), 4.

⁷ Cf. Martin Noth, *Numbers* (trans. James D. Martin; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 101-3, and Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 140-7. Interestingly, the concern of these works is the delineation of the sources used in the passage and taking for granted the military strategy of using spies in this way.

1b Joshua sending spies

In Josh 2:1-4 we read:

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, “Go, view the land, especially Jericho.” So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there.² The king of Jericho was told, “Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.”³ Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, “Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land.”⁴ But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, “True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from.

Joshua 2 constitutes a second spy narrative⁸ in which Joshua modifies Moses and YHWH’s failed strategy in Numbers 13. He only sends two spies and instructs them on what to do (v. 1a). They go to Jericho and end up in a brothel (v. 1b). We also see in vv. 2-3 that when new men come into a city, they are often suspected of being spies by the local inhabitants and leaders, and as in this case, rightfully so.

Here is an example of translator ideology at work. A literal translation at the end of v. 1 would be, “and they laid there” (that is, in the brothel). The verb שכב, to lie down, is a euphemism for intercourse, as appropriated in Deut 22:22-24 and later in Gen 19:33-35. The translators of Josh 2:1 appear to be embarrassed by this narrative account and seem to want to cover up such activity. Thus, the NRSV translators translate שכב as “they spent the night there.”⁹ Note the comedy in this story as the king and madam negotiate in double entendre on the men “coming” בוא in her establishment.¹⁰ Interestingly, most commentaries do not deal with the sexuality in this text. The exception is Butler who states that the spies do what one would expect in such a house. He then terms the activity to “bed down”.¹¹ Again, this term is not a traditional translation of שכב. Also interesting, though the King tells Rahab to “bring out the men,” (v. 3), no commentary interprets this command of the king that he might

⁸ See Gene M. Tucker, “The Rahab Saga (Joshua 2): Some Form Critical and Tradition-Historical Observations,” in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays* (ed. William F. Stinespring & James M. Efrid; Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 66-86.

⁹ So also NET, NJB, LXX uses κατέλυσαν, to lodge. It is followed in this by JPS and NKJV.

¹⁰ For a fuller treatment of this unit see Randall C. Bailey, “He Didn’t Even Tell Us the Worst of It,” *USQR*. 59 (2005): 15-24.

¹¹ Trent Butler, *Joshua* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 31. See also Suzanne Gilmayr-Bucher, “‘She Came to Test Him with Hard Questions’: Foreign Women and Their View on Israel,” *BibInt* 15 (2007): 144.

have intentions of having sex with these two men. Rather, it is understood that his intention is to interrogate the men to see if they are spies.

1c David's emissaries called spies

As we look at 2 Sam 10:1-5, we encounter another spy story. We read the following:

Some time afterward, the king of the Ammonites died, and his son Hanun succeeded him. ² David said, "I will deal loyally with Hanun son of Nahash, just as his father dealt loyally with me." So David sent envoys to console him concerning his father. When David's envoys came into the land of the Ammonites, ³ the princes of the Ammonites said to their lord Hanun, "Do you really think that David is honoring your father just because he has sent messengers with condolences to you? Has not David sent his envoys to you to search the city, to spy it out, and to overthrow it?" ⁴ So Hanun seized David's envoys, shaved off half the beard of each, cut off their garments in the middle at their hips, and sent them away. ⁵ When David was told, he sent to meet them, for the men were greatly ashamed. The king said, "Remain at Jericho until your beards have grown, and then return."

Unlike the previous spy stories this one leads to a full blown war. This unit is the beginning of the Ammonite War Narratives into which the David-Bathsheba-Uriah incident is interpolated. This particular narrative is used as the basis for the beginning of the wars between David and the Ammonites which will result in their subjugation as a vassal of the King of Israel and Judah (12:26-31).

The text reveals that even when people come into a new area as diplomats¹² they are sometimes accused of being spies (v. 3). Spying appears to be a

¹² David states that he wants to express דָּוָה to Hanun in exchange for that shown to him by his father (v. 2). This term, translated as "deal loyally," is the source of much discussion among commentators. Since דָּוָה is used to describe YHWH's "steadfast love for Israel" (eg. Hos 4:1; 6:6), most commentators see this attribution to humans and their actions as theologically sound, especially since it is used in Rahab's speech reciting the Salvation History of Israel and negotiating her safety with the spies (Josh 2:12), and since it is also used in 2 Sam 9:1 with David returning Jonathan's דָּוָה by supporting Mephibosheth (cf. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* [Louisville: John Knox, 1990], 267. Uriah Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008], 114-16. Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 176). What is interesting in this line of discussion is the lack of exploration into the similarities between Rahab, Jonathan, and Nahash. In all of them we see someone being traitorous to their people and supporting Israel/David. Thus, it appears that this use of דָּוָה is a way of recasting their disloyal action into "sanctified treason". For further discussion, see Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2*

literary motif in the text. We also see that the way in which supposed spies are treated causes humiliation by shaving half their beards and cutting their clothes at the buttocks, probably to expose them. Interestingly, while these are acts of gendered ritual humiliation, they lack any homoerotic intention. More exactly, the intention of these acts appears to shame the men. For this reason many commentators regard these acts as emasculation of the emissaries.¹³

Isa 7:20 conveys the following:

On that day the LORD *will shave* with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off *the beard* as well [emphasis added]

and 20:4

so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians as captives and the Ethiopians as exiles, both the young and the old, *naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered*, to the shame of Egypt. [emphasis added]

In these verses acts of sexual humiliation¹⁴ appear to be political acts related to sending people into exile. The shaving of facial and pubic hairs (7:20)¹⁵ and the

Samuel 10-12 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 59-61. It is possible that the theological leanings of these commentators kept them from seeing the ironic usage of such a heavily theologically laden term in these contexts and its narratological ironic twist, especially exemplified in translating it as “deal loyally”.

¹³ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 245; Jonathan Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2000), 182-3; P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel*, (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 270-1; Ken Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 122-3. I must admit that I did not address this matter in my earlier work on this unit in *David in Love and War*.

¹⁴ As Foucault argues, “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality; useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I - An Introduction* (trans. Robert Hurley; New York: Vantage Books, 1978), 103. In this way, Foucault advances his argument that sexuality is often used as a means of gaining power over the other.

¹⁵ This verse is one of the verses used to substantiate the understanding that the Hebrew Bible uses the word feet as a euphemism of the male genitals, (cf. *BDB*, p. 920a; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Waco: Word Books, 1985), 143. It is interesting that Watts states that “shaving the feet” is a euphemism, but given the conservative leanings of the series he does not identify to what the euphemism is pointing.

baring (20:4) of the buttocks (תש) are not acts of homoerotic penetration but military acts of conquest.

David's response to these acts of humiliation is also interesting, since he only tells them to wait until their beards grow back (2 Sam 10:5). He does not make any suggestions about their attire, but that is another issue. It is also clear from the remainder of the chapter that the response to Hanun's behaviour is one of military intervention.

We might want to keep in mind when we turn to Gen 19, that there are spy narratives which involve men from another territory entering a city and being suspected of being spies. These stories either express the desire to question these men to ascertain their mission or to declare them as spies and to act against them. Although they may certainly be humiliated, they are not threatened with sexual abuse. Notably however, are Israelite spies engaging in sexual behaviour while they are on a spy mission. Finally, two of these stories make it clear that Ancient Israel utilised the strategy of sending out spies. Thus, the practice was established in military situations.

2 The Motif of Sexualising and Using Women's Bodies

2a Abram Pimping Sarai

As I have written in another article¹⁶ there are several stories in which foreigners are accused of practicing sexually taboo acts. In these narratives, even when the accusation turns out to be false, the mud slinging sticks and Israelite oppression of non-Israelites is sanctioned. For instance Gen 12:10-20 recounts the

¹⁶ Randall C. Bailey, "They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narrative," in *Reading From This Place: Volume 1 - Social Context and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, (eds. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 121-38. In this article I referred to this unit as the "Jeopardizing of the Matriarch" (125) following von Rad's designation (cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972], 167). This patriarchal nomenclature is still alive today and crosses many cultures as noted in Dong-Gu Han's article on the duplicate narrative, "The Crisis of a Patriarch's Wife [Gen 20:1-18]: A Multicultural Interpretation of the Patriarchal Narrative," in *Mapping and Engaging the Bible in Asian Culture*, (Congress of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies 2008 Seoul Conference; Young Mee Lee and Yoon Jong Yoo, eds.; Seoul: Christian Literary Society of Korea, 200), 73-87.

I am indebted to Exum's critique of this designation, which has caused me to grow beyond the patriarchal constructs I used in the earlier piece. Cf. J. Cheryl Exum, "Who's Afraid of the 'Endangered Ancestress?'," in *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1993), 148-69. I hope the treatment in this article demonstrates how I have grown in these dimensions from my earlier treatment.

story of Abram and Sarai going down to Egypt during a famine. Abram speculates,

^{11b} “I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife’; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.”

Abram begins by suggesting that the Egyptians are typical of sexually over-charged men who would kill a man to get his beautiful wife (v. 12). Because of this speculation on his part he comes up with a plan to save his life, namely to have his wife lie about their relationship (v. 13).¹⁷ In other words, when this man feels his life is in danger, his solution is to use a woman’s body sexually to protect himself.¹⁸ Sarai appears to go along with the scam¹⁹ and ends up in Pharaoh’s harem, while Abram accepts a hefty bride price (v. 16).²⁰ YHWH then

¹⁷ As Foucault argues, “[Power’s] success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms ... For it, secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation. Not only because power imposes secrecy on those whom it dominates, but because it is perhaps just as indispensable to the latter: would they accept it if they did not see it as a mere limit placed on their desire?” (*The History of Sexuality*, 86.) Thus, the ability to enact the plan of Abram is predicated on the secrecy he expects Sarai to keep, though the narrator never lets us hear her say it. But the response of Pharaoh to the events (vv. 18-19) argues against the consequences of the secrecy.

¹⁸ For a further analysis of the plot and character development in this unit see David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 91-3.

¹⁹ Since Sarai is not given voice in the passage, one has to assume that she goes along with this plan, since on the narrative level she ends up in the harem. As Pharaoh later charges Abram in v. 19 with stating she was his sister, she is never allowed to speak for herself. While Niditch cites this passage as one of the examples in which “many of the women engage in acts of trickery or deception in order to further the careers of their sons or husbands” (“Genesis,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition, [eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 18), she gives more agency to Sarai than the narrator in this unit. As Jacobs correctly questions, does one who has no power in the relationship have any consent to give to the arrangement? Cf. Mignon R. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 85.

While Sarai indeed claims voice in Genesis 16 and 21, showing herself to be a planner and administrator, her speeches do not show her as being deceptive. Rather her characterisation is one of a mover and shaker. One, therefore, wonders why the narrator does not give her a voice in this unit. Perhaps it is to focus primarily on Abram as the key character, especially since in this narrative all that is needed is her body and not her voice for the plot to continue.

²⁰ Carr terms this as Sarai being “seized by Pharaoh” (David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* [Louisville: Westminster

hits Pharaoh and his house (v. 17), whereupon Pharaoh finds out that Sarai is Abram's wife (v. 19). As a result

¹⁸ [...] Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone." ²⁰ And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

Note, contrary to Abram's speculation, when Pharaoh finds out that she is his wife, he does not kill him (v. 19). It also appears that not only did Abram tell Sarai to lie about their relationship, but he also lied about the Egyptians, for they did not kill him. Perhaps he was even lying when he told her he thought she was beautiful. What is also interesting about this narrative is that the only story in the ancient literature where a king kills a man to marry his wife is the David-Bathsheba-Uriah story in 2 Samuel 11. Thus, Abram's speculation on the sexual misconduct of the Egyptians could actually be a projection by the narrator of Israelite sexual misconduct onto the Egyptians.

Note also that YHWH punishes Pharaoh (v. 17) and not Abram for acting as Sarai's pimp.²¹ Thus, from the narrative level YHWH is depicted as being on the side of the perpetrator.²² In order to keep the reader from reading the text in this way the narrator tells that the affliction is on account of "Sarai, Abram's wife" (v. 17b). In this phraseology Abram is exonerated both of his lie and of selling his wife into the harem of Pharaoh. Rather it is Pharaoh who is depicted as the perpetrator.²³

John Knox, 1996], 115). It is possible that he is reading *קָרַח* in the *pu'al* as seized. While this is possible, on the narrative level there is an implied negotiation over this act, given the bride price paid to Abram as recorded in v. 16, which begins with "Abram prospered". Carr's reading seems to go along with Abram's speculation on the nature of the Egyptians (v. 12b) and ignores the later detail that, when Pharaoh discovered she was Abram's wife, he gave her back and did not kill him (v. 19).

²¹ As Pharaoh states in v. 19, "I took her for my wife," which implies consummation.

²² It is important to keep in mind that a literary characterisation is being described here. Thus, YHWH as a character in a story is "depicted" in a particular way. Hence the particular wording.

²³ While Jacobs notes the ethical problem in YHWH's response, she seems to follow arguments that this should be compared to YHWH's response to the Egyptians in the plague narratives of Exodus 7-10, with Sarai prefiguring Israel. In this way she is able to both raise the problem and then "let YHWH off the hook" so to speak. (*Gender, Power and Persuasion*, 87-88). She is also relying on the reader not raising the questions of YHWH's ethics in inflicting the whole Egyptian nation with the plagues, as opposed to afflicting the national leader. She is also not engaging the question why Pharaoh's household should be required to be afflicted because of his actions. In other

Of importance in this article is the recognition that this narrative follows a pimping type-scene.²⁴ In such a type-scene, (1) members of this “called out family” enter a foreign land. (2) the male head of the house feels threatened, (3) he speculates on the sexual impropriety of the indigenous people, (4) he sexually uses his woman’s body to protect himself, and (5) YHWH helps him out with this scheme. In Genesis 20 this couple run the same trick for the supposed same reasons on Abimelech, King of Gerar, and Elohim, the other Israelite deity, helps them prosper through this act of pimping. Also in Gen 26:6-11 Isaac uses the same scheme, but he is not as successful economically as were his parents in effectuating it. Thus, the ethics of this forerunner of the faith,²⁵ of whom Paul says we are heirs (Gal 3:29), appear to be questionable. By the same token the ethics of this deity also appear to be questionable. Also in this narrative the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and power are intertwined.

One of the additional ideological aspects of this pimping-narrative is the way in which foreigners are sexualised as a way of sanctioning the behaviour of the Israelite characters in the narrative. As noted above, Abram makes a claim about the Egyptians’ unacceptable sexual behaviour (v. 12). These claims about their sexual ethics govern the understanding of his behaviour and that of Sarai. They also have the power to govern the readers of the narrative and their understanding of the events as they unfold. In other words, the narrative supports a view of Israelites being sexually pure and non-Israelites being sexually deviant. As Foucault warns us, however,

there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy... [W]e must question then on the two levels of their tactical productivity (what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure) and their strategic integration.²⁶

words, where is the justice in YHWH’s actions? It appears that in this line of reading proposed by Jacobs, the actions of the deity must be taken as just and explained in ways that deflect the reader from questioning the ethical dimensions of the narrative.

²⁴ For a discussion of the function of “type-scenes” see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 81-2. What I am proposing here is an additional example of a type-scene to the ones Alter identifies.

²⁵ As Harold Bloom notes, “It is difficult to contravene the moral judgment against Abram of the normative Jewish sage Nachmanides: ‘It was a sin.’ Yet that is not J’s judgment; J never makes a judgment, here or elsewhere. It is one of the multitude of extraordinary ironies concerning J that this author upon whom Western religious moralism ultimately must rely is herself the least moralistic of writers...” (*The Book of J* [New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990], 200). Note that Bloom does not raise the issue of the ethics of the deity in this unit.

²⁶ Foucault, *History*, 102.

In other words, the sexualising of the Egyptians has an ideological function of producing knowledge that will focus the reader on the actions of these characters and not on the actions of the Israelites. As Foucault notes, however, the same knowledge can be used to focus the reader into questioning the Israelite characters and exonerating the Egyptians. The power is both in the discourse and the engagement of the discourse. This use of discourse of sexualising the foreigner and presenting the Israelite as sexually appropriate occurs in several narratives in the Hebrew Bible and will be explored later in this article.²⁷

2b Jephthah and his daughter

Another example of a narrative in which a woman's body is sexualised and used as a way of ensuring safety for a male character is found in Judg 11:30b-40. Once the Spirit of YHWH (11:29) comes upon Jephthah, he makes a vow (vv. 30b-31):

^{30b} "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering."

This vow is the subject of much controversy.²⁸ Exum stresses that the narrator states that it happens under the power of the Spirit. She then argues, since there is no statement of YHWH's objection to the vow and since Jephthah is successful in battle, YHWH is implicated in the whole following narrative.²⁹ On the other hand Boling argues for translating verse 31a as "anything coming out the doors of my house," so this could contribute to the suspense and ambiguity of the vow.³⁰ Tribble argues that the vow is not a sign of divine inspiration rather it is a sign of Jephthah's lack of faith, since the Spirit has already given Jephthah divine assurance.³¹

²⁷ In the prophetic literature it is Israel who is sexualised as a literary strategy of discrediting them. See Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

²⁸ Cf. David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 142-6 for a discussion of this vow in Europe from the Reformation to the present and Shulamit Valler, "The Story of Jephthah's Daughter in the Midrash," in *Judges: Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Second Series, (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 51-55 for a discussion of the vow in ancient Jewish literature.

²⁹ J. Cheryl Exum, "Murder They Wrote," in *Fragmented Women*, 19-20.

³⁰ Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 208.

³¹ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 97.

While Boling continues to argue that the central focus is not the sacrifice of the daughter but rather whether Jephthah fulfils the vow,³² Exum argues that the confluence of the daughter coming out of the house and the words of vow are both important.³³

After the battle is won, Jephthah returns home victoriously (v. 33). His daughter³⁴ comes out of the house to dance for the soldiers (v. 34), as was the custom of the women.³⁵ When he sees her, he blames her for having to carry out his vow (v. 35),³⁶ which seems strange, since he must have known the custom of the women coming out to greet the returning successful army when he made his vow.

She reassures him by saying in v. 36, “My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth.”³⁷ She then goes off with her friends to bemoan her virginity³⁸ and comes back and is sacrificed (vv. 37-40) so that *his* vow can be fulfilled.

³² Boling, *Judges*, 209.

³³ Exum, “Murder,” 20. Fuchs supports this by drawing attention to the use of נצו in vv. 31, 34, and 36 which tie the vow, war, and sacrifice of the daughter all together (*Sexual Politics*, 181).

³⁴ There is a debate within feminist scholarship around the lack of a name for this character. Mieke Bal argues for taking the Hebrew word בת (daughter) and making it a proper noun or name for this character and thus refers to her as Bath (*Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 43. Exum follows her using Bat-jiftah (“Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served,” in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* [Gale A. Yee, ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 75). Fuchs (*Sexual Politics*, 180) disagrees with this strategy on the grounds that “had she not made the fatal mistake of coming out of the house to greet her father, she might have been consigned to oblivion ... she is nameless, she is identified and defined by her filial relationship”. It appears both are responding to the androcentric nature of the text. One approach is to resist it by giving a name to the character, while the other is to highlight it by pointing to the lack of name signaling the insignificance of the character to the narrator. It is clear, though, as will be shown further in the narrative that patriarchal ideology governs this text.

³⁵ Cf. Exod 15:20 and 1 Sam 18:6-7. As Fuchs states, “there is nothing obtrusively peculiar about [the daughter’s actions]. Women greeting victorious warriors and celebrating the defeat of national enemies with ‘timbrels and dances’ appears to have been a custom in ancient Israel.” (*Sexual Politics*, 183.) See also Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 100.

³⁶ Tribble (*Texts of Terror*, 102) cites this as an example of blaming the victim.

³⁷ While Tribble takes this language to be “courageous” and while Fewell interprets this as the beginning of the daughter taking control of the situation and delineating what is to happen to her (“Judges,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 77), other feminist scholars present this as the narrator utilising this female character to model how

I have argued that this story presents the sacrifice of a woman's body in ancient Israel as acceptable. What has to be assured is her purity of sexual status, namely that she has not had sexual intercourse prior to her being put into the service of helping the male to be brought out of the situation of distress in which he is found.³⁹ Unlike the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:10-12, YHWH does not intervene and save the life of Jephthah's daughter, rather YHWH seems to desire the use of this woman's body.⁴⁰ Similarly, Saul vows that, whoever eats before the end of the battle with the Philistines, will be killed (1 Sam 14:24). When Jonathan is discovered to have broken the vow, Saul is prepared to kill him so that the vow can be fulfilled (vv. 43-44). In this instance the people keep Saul from enacting this fulfilment of his vow and save the life of Jonathan (v. 45). In Judges 11 the people, in this case the women, are depicted as going along with the sacrifice by going to the hills with Jephthah's daughter and then holding a yearly festival in remembrance of this sacrifice.⁴¹ Unlike the cases of Isaac and Jonathan neither YHWH nor the people intervene to stop the sacrifice/killing of the daughter in Judges 11.

I have also argued that women are expected to act and say things which support the abuse of their bodies in their patriarchal society. As Exum argues, we have to hold the narrator accountable for putting such speeches in the mouths of characters that exonerate patriarchy and support abuse by the fathers. This also indicates that YHWH is depicted as complicit in the abuse of women's bodies, as was the case in Gen 12:10-20.

women ought to support patriarchal ideologies (cf. Exum, "Feminist Criticism," 76; Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 181-3.)

³⁸ See Bal's discussion of the use of בתולה, generally translated as virgin and the concluding formula in v. 39b, that "she had not known a man", to argue that these are not synonyms. Rather she claims the former speaks to her being in the rite of passage from being under the control of her father to the control of her husband, thus it should be understood as nubile, while the latter phrase is used to state that she is a "pure" bride to be (*Death and Dissymmetry*, 46-52).

³⁹ In like manner the virgin daughters of Shechem will be taken sexually and their fathers will be assured that their vows were not broken in this act (Judges 21). The difference in this story and that in Judges 11 is that the latter deals with human death while the former deals with rape. Both actions, however, are depicted as the best way to make sure that vows of men are kept.

⁴⁰ Cf. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 51.

⁴¹ While Tribble takes this as a positive sign of remembrance (*Texts of Terror*, 106), Exum cites this as another example of women being presented as supporting the patriarchy. Similarly, she argues that such interpretations as offered by Tribble perpetrate another crime against the character sacrificed ("Feminist Criticism," 77).

2c Abram-Sarai-Hagar Narrative

The most distressing story involving the sexual use of women's bodies to solve problems is the story of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar in Genesis 16.⁴² In this story, Sarai decides to solve the situation of her not having children by instructing Abram to have sex with Hagar, her Egyptian⁴³ slave.⁴⁴ He does not object and

⁴² This type-scene is called a "barren wife tale" where the assumption of the naming is that the woman is the problem in her lack of fertility. The problem is, thus, that she cannot perform up to social expectations of producing a male heir for her husband. This is demonstrated in the use of זרע, seed/semen, as the term for progeny. In other words in Ancient Israel women were viewed as incubators for male sperm. If he deposits the sperm inside of her and no pregnancy or child results from this activity, she is blamed. Clearly, they have no understanding of low sperm count. Thus the type-scene is named "the barren wife", thereby following the narrative point of view that the woman is the base of the problem for there being no children. For an extensive discussion of this view see Jacobs, *Gender, Power*, 130-9.

Weems argues that this is really Abram's story serving androcentric ends (Renita J. Weems, "Reading *Her Way* through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 75-6. Guest pushes this line of reading further and gives an interesting critique of the way these narratives function in reinforcing patriarchal notions that the primary function of women is to become wives and bear children. In this way readers are reinforced to accept this as the norm and to conform to it, especially given the lengths to which women in such situations in the text go to achieve the status of mother of a son. Thus, Guest argues these are not women's tales. Rather they are "scripted characters in a male play." They are [o]perating as the male director's puppets" (Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics*[London: SCM, 2005], 132.)

⁴³ Gen 16:1 introduces the characters in an interesting way: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar." Note that Sarai is introduced to the reader in terms of her name, marital status, and role performance. Hagar, on the other hand is introduced in the Hebrew text by her social status, nationality, and then name. Thus, these introductions are in a chiasmic structure, illustrated in this way

A *Sarai* B wife of Abram C **non-fertile** – C¹ **slave** B¹ Egyptian A¹ *Hagar*.

In this arrangement the centre focus is on a non-fertile Abrahamite vs. Egyptian slave. Both of these are ironic designations, since the promises of YHWH in Gen 12 and 15 to being a great nation are not manifest in this pre-Israelite woman, while the social status of the Egyptians in the narrative time period would make one believe that nomads had slaves from the most powerful region of the world. It would be almost like a Latino migrant worker in the US saying they had one of Bill Gates' children as a cleaning lady. To the ancient reader this irony would have turned the story into an aggrandizement of the forerunners of Ancient Israel by using the status of Egyptians to boost the status of Abram and Sarai. See Randall C. Bailey, "Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives," in *Stony the Road We*

as verse 4 states, “He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.”⁴⁵ This is a

Trod: African-American Biblical Interpretation (ed. Cain H. Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 165-184. It is interesting to see how this nationalist/ethnic designation is overlooked by modern interpreters. Those who do note the designation, link its significance to the slaves given to Abram as a bride price from Pharaoh in Gen 12. See Claus Westermann’s discussion of this in *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 238.

⁴⁴ There is a lot of discussion on this social designation of Hagar as to whether שפחה should be understood differently from אמה, with the former being understood as a “lady in waiting” and the latter being understood as a slave. The comparison to Bilhah and Zilpah being given as “gifts” to Leah and Rachel as “bride presents” from their father is often used to establish this line of argument. See James C. Okoye, “Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 16 and 21,” *JSOT* 32(2007): 167n11. Jacobs (*Gender, Power*, 142-6) has the most extensive review of this argument with bibliographic citations. She falls on the side of “maid-servant”, which is most surprising, since she then states, “Hagar has little say in the use of her body.”

Jacobs resolves this contradiction by appealing to v. 3, where the narrator states that Hagar becomes Abram’s wife. The problem with this argument is that in the subsequent verses she is always described in terms of her relationship with Sarai. Hagar is said to have contempt for her mistress (v. 4). Sarai then describes the situation as giving “my slave-girl into your embrace” (v. 5). Abram responds by saying, “Your slave-girl is in your power” (v. 6). When confronted with the Angel of YHWH Hagar states she is fleeing from her “mistress Sarai” (v. 8). Finally she is commanded to return and submit to her mistress (v. 9). Even in the subsequent narrative in Gen 21 Hagar is referred to as Hagar the Egyptian (v. 9) by the narrator, this slave woman (v. 10) by Sarai, and your slave woman (v. 12) by God. None of these refer to her as Abram’s wife. Even Abram is distressed at following Sarai and God’s instructions to cast out Hagar and Ishmael not because he will lose his wife, but because of the impending loss of his son (v. 11). While it becomes clear that Gen 16:3 serves to soften the amazement of the reader over the sexual abuse of Hagar, the rest of the narrative tells the reader, do not be fooled by v. 3.

⁴⁵ See Tribble (*Texts of Terror*, 12) for a discussion of the Hebrew syntax in this clause and the varieties of interpretations and translations possible. She then argues that Sarai’s status was lessened in the view of Hagar. What is amazing to me is the way the narrator through the use of קלל speaks to a lessening of status as opposed to righteous indignation of a rape victim. In the translations of the text, whether one goes with “contempt” or “despised” or “lessened”, Hagar is once again assaulted by the narrator and the interpreters. The interpretations which suggest that she feels she is better than Sarai because she has fallen pregnant (see Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 240 for a discussion of and advocacy for this line of argument) follow the patriarchal leanings of the narrative, namely that women ought to want to get pregnant and have children, regardless of how this occurs. These interpretations are not only androcentric but also classist in their ideologies.

What is also interesting in this type of scholarship is that while feminist, womanist and bosadi scholars give attention to Hagar, they give almost none to Bilhah and Zilpah. Even Jacobs’ argument that these two women have the status of wives runs

story of the rape of an enslaved woman, where her feelings of having been raped are described as having contempt for her mistress over getting pregnant. Subsequently, the narrator denies her the right to have legitimate anger.

Hagar flees and meets the angel of YHWH who tells her in verse 9 to “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.”⁴⁶ Once again Abram/Sarai is the perpetrators and YHWH is portrayed as their support system, similar to the story in Gen 12:10-20. What makes it even worse is that Hagar is not to return and struggle *against* oppression but rather to *submit* to oppression! While several scholars try to let this character, YHWH, off the hook,⁴⁷ the horror of sexual violence against women’s bodies and personhood being sanctioned by the deity is truly frightening for the reader. This fright and anger can push one to struggle against such texts or to find a theological ointment, as does Williams in her highlighting this speech as the first theophany to a woman in the canon.⁴⁸ Given the content of the speech, let us hope there are not more such occurrences.

I have argued so far that there are three narratives that depict men or women perceiving themselves to be in danger. The solution to the threat is modelled in terms of sexually (ab)using another woman’s body. Moreover, the narrator presents those whose bodies are being sexually (ab)used in these narratives as if they are going along with the exploitation, either through their speech or through their actions. Ultimately, those who resist are instructed by

into problems when one realises that they are not allowed to name their own children (Gen 30:6, 8, 11, and 13). To compound the abuse, when Jacob fears that Esau’s coming to meet him with 400 men will lead to a slaughter, “he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the *two maids*. He put the *maids with their children* in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all (33:1b-2) [emphasis added].” Note how Bilhah and Zilpah have not only lost their names but are identified by their social status and they and their children are used as cannon fodder to protect the others.

⁴⁶ The translation “submit” for הִתְעַנֵּי, softens the horror of the use of the *Hithpa`el* for עָנָה, which literally means “to place oneself into a situation of oppression or abuse” As Wenham notes, “This harsh and uncompromising command seems callous, the more so when it is realized that “submit” (hithp`ael of עָנָה) comes from the same root as “humiliate” (v 6) and “oppress” (15:13). Hagar is being told to submit not just to her mistress’ authority but to suffering at her hand.” Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed.; Waco: Word Books, 1994), 10.

⁴⁷ Weems, (“Reading *Her Way*,” 75-6) focuses on Sarai and Abram as the oppressors of Hagar but does not address the deity as a supporter of the oppression. Similarly, Wenham uses the following verses of the divine speech (vv. 10-12) as justification of the command, in that she is to be the mother of a great nation and her son will be a wild ass of a man (*Genesis 16-50*, 10). The problem is that this can only happen if she continues to submit also to Abram raping her!

⁴⁸ Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness; The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

the deity to submit to the abuse. In these narratives the deity is generally presented as supporting the ones who are proposing to or carrying out the exploitation of women's bodies. I have also argued that the sexual ethics of the (pre)/Israelite men are never called into question by the narrator. If the narrator questions the sexual ethics of characters or primary characters in the narrative, it is the sexual ethics of non-Israelite characters.

3 Translation and Interpretation Issues

The Hebrew root, סבב, means to surround. In Josh 6:3-4 we read,

³You shall march around (סבב) the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, ⁴ with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets.

The word סבב is a military term for engagement for battle.⁴⁹ In Judg 16:2 we read,

The Gazites were told, "Samson has come here." So they circled around [סבב] and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They kept quiet all night, thinking, "Let us wait until the light of the morning; then we will kill him."

Again the narrator uses סבב to describe a military maneuver.⁵⁰ Similarly, in Psalm 118:10-12, which scholars describe as a Royal Thanksgiving Psalm, the king in these verses is depicted as giving testimony to a military victory by stating,⁵¹

¹⁰ All nations surrounded [סבב] me;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

¹¹ They surrounded [סבב] me, surrounded [סבב] me on every side;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

¹² They surrounded [סבב] me like bees;
they blazed like a fire of thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

In all these situations the word "surrounding" (סבב) is utilised to describe military tactics employed by soldiers as a prelude to a battle. Thus, it has a technical meaning. Note also that the intent of these soldiers is to enter into a battle or to catch the enemy. None of these situations mention sexual assault.

⁴⁹ J. Alberto Soggin, *Joshua* (trans. Richard A. Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 86-7; Butler, *Joshua*, 65n3a.

⁵⁰ Boling, *Judges*, 248.

⁵¹ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1983), 124.

Similarly, the Hebrew word **עַם** can be translated either as people or army,⁵² for example Exod 14:5-6:

⁵When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?”⁶ So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army [**עַם**] with him;⁵³

In Exod 17:13 **עַם** refers to the army: “And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people [**עַם**] with the sword.”⁵⁴ Similarly, in Num 31:32 **עַם** is coupled with another military term referencing soldiers: “The booty remaining from the spoil that the troops [**עַם הַצְּבָאָה**] had taken totalled six hundred seventy-five thousand sheep.”⁵⁵

In the War Law in Deut 20:1-5 **עַם** also refers to the military:

¹When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots, an army⁵⁶ [**עַם**] larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. ²Before you engage in battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the troops, [**עַם**]... ⁵ Then the officials shall address the troops [**עַם**], saying, “Has anyone built a new house but not dedicated it? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another dedicates it.”

In situations like that in Joshua 6 – with the ritualised conquest of Canaan through the Holy War Motif – the translators translate **עַם** as people, even though it is a military battle, while in the War Law they translate the word to mean army or troops. This indicates that ideological and theological biases guide translators when translating the biblical text.

By the same token, interpreters interpret words in the text with their own biases. This is especially the case with the word **יָדַע**, “to know”, which plays a significant part in the interpretation of Gen 19. As we all have been taught, there is a biblical meaning of the word “know.” It means to have sexual intercourse, right?

⁵² Cf. *BDB*, 766c note 2.d.

⁵³ Cf. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Waco: Word Books, 1992), 189.

⁵⁴ Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 234; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 621.

⁵⁵ Cf. Budd, *Numbers*, 332.

⁵⁶ Cf. Andrew D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, (London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1979), 292; Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9* (Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Waco: Word books, 2001), 438.

⁸Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.” ⁹ But since Onan *knew* [יָדַע] that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever *he went into* his brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. [Emphasis added]

Sexual intercourse in this text is obvious, but the verb to denote this activity is “went into”. Is it not interesting that the verb “to know” is also found in the sentence, but it does not mean to have sex? Instead it means to have knowledge of something. Later on in the story, in vv 15-16, we read

¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ He went over to her at the roadside, and said, “Come, *let me come into you*,” for he did not *know* [יָדַע] that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, “What will you give me, that you may come in to me?” [Emphasis added]

Again sexual intercourse is described here, but is denoted by the expression “come into”. Similarly, the verb “to know,” יָדַע, appears in the sentence, but it does not denote sexual intercourse. It is remarkable that commentaries do not reflect this in either of these passages!⁵⁷

Gen 19:33 recounts the story of the incest between Lot and his elder daughter. “So they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; he did not *know* [יָדַע] when she *lay down* [שָׁכַב] or when she rose” [emphasis added]. Again, intercourse is described, but the descriptive phrase is “lying down”, while the verb “to know” appears in the same verse without the meaning of having intercourse. Similarly, Gen 19:35 refers to the incest between Lot and his younger daughter: “so they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger rose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.” Again, “know” is not the verb for intercourse. The verb is rather “to lie with.” Sometimes, the Hebrew verb יָדַע, “to know,” indeed means gaining knowledge. Nevertheless, none of the commentators refers to this distinction.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Cf. Bloom, *Book of J*, 221-2; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 308-9; George W. Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 273-4; John Skinner, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 451-2; Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), 297-8; Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 394-5, 398; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Revised Edition, trans. John H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 358-9; Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* Second Edition, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 168-70; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 367-8; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 52.

⁵⁸ Cf. Bloom, *Book of J*, 205; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 176; Coats, *Genesis*, 147; Skinner, *Genesis*, 313; Speiser, *Genesis*, 145-6; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 242; von Rad,

As a last word study before we finally get to read Genesis 19, in 2 Sam 11:8 we see David instructing Uriah, “Go down to your house, and *wash your feet*” [emphasis added]. As the narrative continues Uriah does not follow the instructions. When David inquires the reasons for his disobedience, Uriah states (v. 11), “The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and *to lie with my wife?*” From these two texts, it appears that “wash the feet” is another Hebrew Bible euphemism for “to lie with”, which is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁵⁹

In summation, I have argued that when strangers come into a city, they are suspected of being spies. Secondly, stories are told of men who feel threatened and then use women’s bodies sexually as a way to protect themselves. In these stories, YHWH is portrayed as being on the side of the perpetrator. Finally, I have argued that the word, “surround,” has a military meaning; the word עָרַב not only means people but in military contexts means army; “to know” may just mean to have knowledge; and “to wash the feet” is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. With this knowledge I am now prepared to show a new reading of Gen 19:1-29.

C GENESIS 19:1-29 READ DIFFERENTLY

The story really begins in 18:17, when YHWH decides to tell Abraham that he has decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah:

²⁰“How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have

Genesis, 223; Turner, *Genesis*, 87; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 61; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 313.

⁵⁹ It should be noted that the use of feet as the euphemism for the male genitals is only attested in Hebrew Bible literature. It is not found in Greco-Roman literature. Thus, readers should not get stirred up and reject this word study, since it might be interpreted to suggest that the foot washing described in John 13:1-38 could be used to “queer” Jesus and his relationship with his disciples. While there are scholars who have used Queer Theory to so depict Jesus and his disciples, this euphemism in the Hebrew Bible is not intended to give support to such readings of the New Testament. For further discussion on this topic and for additional bibliography see Robert F. Goss, “John,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (Deryn Guest, et. al. eds.; London: SCM, 2006), 548-65; Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003); and Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John’s Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds,” in *They Were All Together in One Place?: Towards Minority Biblical Criticism*, (eds. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong-Benny Liew and Fernando Segovia; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 251-88.

done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

The problem is that YHWH never states specifically what the sin of these two cities is, and readers are left to speculate about its nature.. The deity expects Abraham to know what the sin consists of. This happens to be typical of this deity. , For example, Gen 4:4b gives no reason why Abel’s offering was acceptable and Cain’s was not, though much ink has been spent on this subject.⁶⁰ Brueggemann provides an interesting claim:

The trouble comes not from Cain, but from Yahweh, the strange God of Israel. Inexplicably, Yahweh chooses – accepts and rejects. Conventional interpretation is too hard on Cain and too easy on Yahweh. It is Yahweh who transforms a normal report into a life/death story for us and about us. Essential to the plot is the capricious freedom of Yahweh.⁶¹

Likewise, YHWH’s reflections regarding the flood show a similar feature of his character. First, the narrator says that YHWH is “sorry he had made humankind” (4:6), but nothing indicates what the “wickedness of humankind” entailed (4:5). After the flood when all human and animal and plant lives are lost, YHWH decides, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil” (8:21). In other words, this character decides to destroy people without specific charges against them, and once done, the deity regrets the strategy and says, “I sure won’t try that again.” As Brueggemann states, the character appears to be capricious.

After YHWH pronounced the punishment, Abraham begins to bargain with him about not destroying the cities if there are at least fifty righteous inhabitants. He bargains down to ten righteous people in order to keep YHWH from destroying the city. His basis of argument is that to destroy the righteous with the wicked would run counter to the nature of the God of justice (18:25). YHWH agrees to this stipulation. Rather, immediately thereafter readers encounter two messengers/angels coming to Sodom (19:1a).⁶² There is no description, however, of YHWH performing the agreed to investigation. The two angels/messengers merely appear at the gates of Sodom.

⁶⁰ See Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 104 for a summary of the arguments made on this matter. Note also Westermann’s theological argument (*Genesis 1-11*, 296-7).

⁶¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 56.

⁶² Moses will use a similar strategy of appealing to YHWH’s character to persuade YHWH not to destroy Israel after the incident with the Golden Calf (Exod 32:11-14. In that instance, instead of destroying the nation, YHWH sends a plague. Again, we have a situation where there appears to be an agreement, between YHWH and the other main character about the way to address a situation and YHWH makes a switch.

As they turn up at the gate, we learn that Lot is also present. In Gen 14 there was a war at Sodom and Lot was captured. His uncle Abram saved him and he returned to the city. Possibly, as Morschauser argues, Lot was on sentry duty at the time.⁶³ Lot approaches the men and says, in verse 2, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.” Unlike in the Rahab spy story, the verb for lodging, לון, is used instead of the euphemism שכב for the spies’ lying down. The word לון could suggest that Lot operated a lodging service. His invitation is likened to that of Abraham in 18:2, namely, bowing down to the men as well as offering them hospitality. In Abraham’s instance, however, he runs to them, while Lot just rises.

Upon offering them lodging Lot tells them they can “wash their feet” there. Several questions arise. Are these words a euphemism for sexual intercourse?⁶⁴ If so, was the suggestion an inducement to them to stay at his lodge? Is this why they initially refuse the invitation? Is the term “wash your feet” multivalent? Is Lot offering them food and sex if they come to his house or is he just telling them they could bathe? And if this is a euphemism, with whom will they have sex, his wife, his daughters, or with Lot himself? Significantly, Abraham also uses the phrase “wash your feet” with regard to the visitors, but he specifically states that he will provide water for them to do this (18:4). In Lot’s case, however, the phrase is left ambiguous.⁶⁵

Unfortunately, most commentaries are of no help in this regard, since all they refer to is Lot’s hospitality, comparing it with that of Abraham in Gen 18. Most seem to ignore the ambiguity of the phrase “to wash your feet”.⁶⁶ It is not

⁶³ Scott Morschauser, “‘Hospitality,’ Hostiles, and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1-9,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (2003): 464.

⁶⁴ Though this analysis is literary critical, those who have historical critical concerns in a comparison of these two passages in Genesis and 2 Samuel 10:11 can examine my arguments about the Deuteronomist origin of Genesis 19 (Bailey, “Incestuous Bastards,” 128-33). Cf. also Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, “Additional Evidence for a Deuteronomistic Redaction of the ‘Tetrateuch,’” *CBQ*, 67(2005): 405-21.

⁶⁵ The phrase “to wash their feet” also appears in Judges 19, when the Levite and his boy and concubine stay with the old man in Benjaminite territory. Here, the phrase is left ambiguous, although it is followed by a report of their eating and drinking (19:21). While there may be similarities between these two stories, the significant difference between them is that Genesis 19 is dealing with a non-Israelite indigenous population, whereas Judges 19 is dealing with an Israelite group. Other differences concern the role of the deity in both narratives and the issue of rape which does not occur in Gen 19 but in Judges 19. It is possible that the story told in Genesis 19 is yet another example of ancient Israel foisting onto other nations their own foibles.

⁶⁶ Cf. Bloom, *Book of J*, 204; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 164; Coats, *Genesis*, 143; Skinner, *Genesis*, 306-7; Speiser, *Genesis*, 138; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 231; von Rad, *Genesis*, 217; Turner, *Genesis*, 83; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 54; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 300-301.

surprising, because in other instances the multiple meanings of “to know” are ignored in passages where sex is described and where “know” is not the appropriated verb.⁶⁷

With two strangers coming into the city one would not be surprised if there were some speculation as to whether they were spies. Just like in the case of Rahab, the leaders decide to investigate. As verse 4 states, “But before they lay down (שכב), the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people (עם) to the last man, surrounded the house.” Obviously the NRSV translators decided to translate the last descriptor, עם, “all the people” instead of the “whole army”. This seems strange, since the rest of the verse stresses gender (men), age range (from young to old), and surround, סבב. It would appear that in this instance עם should be translated as army and not people.

So the army, עם, surrounds the house. Deciding not to translate the verse in this way is a conscious decision on the part of the translators to keep the reader from seeing the action, which is taking place, as being a military manoeuvre. By so doing the “sexualised intentions” of the men of Sodom will remain an option for interpretation. Given the other spy stories I have explored, however, the interpretation of the actions of all the men as a military manoeuvre (they surrounded the house) is not only plausible but seems also logical.

They tell Lot to send out the men so they can “know them.” Given the military situation, it could be that “to know” has the sense that they want to examine them, so that they could know who these visitors are. If they are discovered to be spies, the leaders of Sodom would then send them on their way, possibly shaving their beards and cutting their clothes like in the story of David’s emissaries in 2 Samuel 10. If they are not spies, they can continue washing their feet and enjoying themselves at Lot’s Lodge.

Lot, by interpreting “know” to mean “have sex”,⁶⁸ is presented as speculating that these “foreigners”/indigenous population of Sodom practice sexually taboo behaviour. This is the same type of guesswork that his Uncle Abram made in Gen 12:11-12a, speculating that the Egyptians were so sex crazed that they would kill him so that the king could marry his wife. Perhaps this is part of

⁶⁷ While the phrase, “to wash your feet,” opens the possibility of sexualising the intentions of Lot in inviting the men to stay at his house, it also disrupts the positive claims of hospitality in the passage. On the one hand, it might explain why these data are ignored. On the other hand, we have all been trained not to see sexualising going on in the biblical narrative. Thus, unless there is an established, overt reference to it, we generally gloss over such interpretations. This could also explain why the commentators fail to explore the multivalent meanings of the phrase.

⁶⁸ This sexualised interpretation of “to know” in this passage seems strange, since in the laws about sexual intercourse in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, it is not “to know”, ידע, but “to lie with”, שכב, that is the euphemism used for intercourse.

ancient Israelite culture, since in 1 Kings 11:3b the foreign wives are charged with leading Solomon astray from worshipping YHWH. Similarly, the incest laws in Lev 18:6-17 are prefaced with the admonition not to do like the Egyptians and Canaanites do (vv. 2-3). The implication is that the Egyptians and Canaanites practice incest. In other words, there appears to be a *Tendenz* in such biblical narratives to sexualise non-Israelites as an ideological sanctioning for dealing with them in an oppressive manner.⁶⁹

Again, similar to his Uncle Abraham, Lot felt threatened by the army surrounding his house. Subsequently, he offered his daughters' bodies to the men of Sodom to "do to them as you please" (19:7b-8b):

"I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof."

In his bargaining Lot understands וַיִּרְאֵם as intercourse, because he calls their request "so wicked" and then offers to the mob his daughters who are described as having not known a man.⁷⁰ Like uncle like nephew, or maybe this is a family trait, since in chapter 26 Isaac is going to tell Abimelek that Rebecca is his sister because he fears for his safety. The theme of sexual exploitation of women's bodies seems to be a well established topic in these narratives.

What is surprising about most of the scholarly treatment of this passage is the lack of connection of Lot's statement with the "she's my sister" stories and the rape of Hagar. Instead scholars appear to defend Lot's expression of hospitality to the strangers in the same way his uncle once did (Gen 18). But from my reading it appears that his first act of hospitality was to offer sex to these visiting men, first using the phrase "wash your feet" and following it up with an offer of his daughters as sexual toys to the men of the army surrounding his house. To call this hospitality is the height of patriarchal discourse.⁷¹ In

⁶⁹ See Bailey, "Incestuous Bastards" for a more full development of this argument.

⁷⁰ In this regard Morschauer's argument that Lot was utilising his daughters as collateral hostage exchange so as to protect the men and then get the daughters back the next day when the visitors leave, is not really plausible (477-8).

⁷¹ In an attempt to move this story out of the category of totally condemning homosexuality, a two pronged line of argument has developed. The first line of argument is that what is described in the intentions of the men of Sodom constitutes gang rape, which is an act of violence and not one of same gender love. The second line of argument is that the sin of Sodom is their lack of exhibiting hospitality. Consequently appeal is made to prophetic condemnations of Sodom and Gomorrah in Isa 1:10-11; Jer 23:14; and Ezek 16:48-9. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 165; Michael Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (eds. Deryn Guest, et. al.; London: SCM, 2006), 37; Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1999), 150-2; Daniel A.

addition the wording of Lot's statement in verse 8b shows that his main concern is to protect *his* honour in terms of the shelter he is providing under his roof more so than even protecting the lives of his guests.

The men of Sodom object to Lot's speculation and then threaten his safety (v. 9). The angels interfere (v. 10) and ask Lot whether there is anyone else besides those in the house who should be saved (v. 12). They then reveal to him their intention to destroy the city (v. 13). He responds (v. 14) that his future "sons in law" are out there with the army. Once more this detail is ignored by those who stake their claim of rampant homosexuality occurring in Sodom.⁷² Let me hasten to add that I am aware of the archaeological and ancient Greek discussions about male same gender sex and the humiliation of the one penetrated. What surprises me is that in buying into this line of argument one buys into heterosexist notions that women are also understood to be humiliated in the act of sex because they are penetrated.⁷³

As Lot and his family leave the city, his wife, from whom we have not heard since the beginning of the narrative, since Lot is the one who is baking the bread for the visitors (v. 3), turns and looks at the destruction and is turned into a pillar of salt by YHWH. Lot's wife is presented as being in line with the misogynistic view of the first woman, the one who fails to obey orders. But what is the effect of removing her from the narrative?

Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, Millenium Edition, (New Mexico: Alamos Square, 2000), 43-9; Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel*, (New York: Continuum, 2005), 164; John Shelby Spong, *Living in Sin?: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, (San Francisco: HarperSanfrancisco, 1988), 141-2.

Three problems arise for me in this line of argument. First is the adoption of the meaning of "to know" to imply sexual activity. Secondly, Ezekiel 16 is rampant with heteropatriarchal and misogynistic discourse (cf. Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as evil in the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], 111). Thus, to appeal to this portrayal is to use misogyny to avoid heterosexism, thereby not understanding the mutual reinforcement of these two ideological streams (cf. Marie Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*, [Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005]). Thirdly, these arguments assume a coherency in the whole Bible, such that the view of Ezekiel is also the view of the writer of Genesis. Such arguments ignore the debates between and among biblical writers.

⁷² So Skinner, *Genesis*, 308; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 236-7; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 303. Interestingly, Brueggemann argues against the homoerotic reading of this narrative but does not use these data to help construct his argument (*Genesis*, 104-5). Similarly Coats centres on demonstrating that the ways in which Lot behaved are examples of buffoonery, (*Genesis*, 144-5).

⁷³ Cf. Dale A. Dale A. *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

Now that YHWH has saved the perpetrator, Lot, and removed the mother⁷⁴ from the scene, the daughters are open to be molested by their father (vv. 30-38). However, as the story will be told, it is the daughters who are depicted as the perpetrators. Rashkow takes issue with the text on this account, since incest usually happens in the reverse with the parent being the initiator.⁷⁵ But Lot has to be exonerated, so he, like Noah in Gen 9:21, is portrayed as drunk, and does not know what is going on while he is being sexually molested by his daughters. Indeed, one may add: “That’s right, he’s too drunk to be aware of being engaged sexually but not too drunk to get an erection and perform! Please! And this is the man YHWH decides to save?”

D CONCLUSION

Given this reading, it would appear that Genesis 19 is a story of the sexual abuse of daughters, facilitated by a deity who supports the sexual abuse of women. The story also is based on the ethnocentric view that what the Israelites do is ethical while what the non-Israelites do is unethical. In this way the story is in line with other stories in Genesis, which contain the same plot elements, such as the “she’s my sister” stories, and the rapes of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah.

Such a reading might make readers a bit uncomfortable, so it might be better to go along and believe Lot that this city is rampant with same gender sex, rape of men, and the like, and therefore ought to be destroyed, just like Katrina did to New Orleans. In that way readers can still think the God described in the text who causes this destruction is rational, on their side, and they can trust that nothing like this will happen to them. It appears to me that readers are trained to believe Lot because it supports ideologies of the abuse of women, sexualising of indigenous people, exoneration of patriarchal excesses, and a God who is “on their side.” That is why I think readers believe Lot.

The danger of these kinds of reading strategies is seen in the ways in which assaults on same gender loving individuals as well as assaults on women rise. The sense of carrying out God’s mission by engaging in such aggressive behaviour helps to empower hate groups and cause hate crimes to continue. Similarly, some women who are abused and see God supporting their abusers end up internalising their oppression. If only to help curb these violent acts, we ought to reconsider the older reading strategies and consider others. As responsible believers we should be looking for ways to change people’s attitudes around such forms of oppression and aggression.

⁷⁴ See Bal’s discussion of the absence of mothers in stories which deal with the sexual abuse and/or the killing of daughters in the book of Judges (85).

⁷⁵ Ilona N. Rashkow, *Taboo or not Taboo: Sexuality and Family in the Hebrew Bible*. (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2000), 104-11.

By the same token, engaging this form of reading means that we have to seriously engage passages in the biblical text which sanction abuse of people. Engaging these texts is important to the formation of identity for our daughters *and* our sons. Reading these texts differently is important to the ways we learn to interact with people in our communities who are of different ethnicities and varied sexualities. It is even more crucial to our own spiritual development as whole people in a complex world. In this manner, we must challenge the Lot's in our lives who abuse others, make claims about people which are lies, and who try to sell us a God of the oppressor. Minus that, we may become just like Lot.

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