The Narrative Significance of the Role of Abraham in the Identity of the Visitors in Genesis 18–19

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ABSTRACT

The identity of the visitor(s) of Abraham and Lot in the Mamre-Sodom story is characterised by ambiguity, which makes it difficult to determine the actual visitor in the narrative. This article therefore employs narrative critical analysis to examine the role of Abraham in relation to the visitor-identity question in the story. Abraham is mentioned in both the Mamre and Sodom accounts and he is arguably the reason for the visit in Gen 18–19. He initiates the departure to Sodom (18:16), he reappears to survey the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:27) and, lastly, the Sodom episode concludes with him (19:29). Moreover, there seems to be a special relationship between Abraham and the visitor(s) as shown by the verbs ושמרו (18:19), דבר אשר־ (18:19) and ויזכר (19:29). Abraham's significant role throughout the Mamre-Sodom narrative can be seen as a catalyst for identifying the visitor as probably YHWH.

KEYWORDS: Abraham, Lot, YHWH, Gen 18–19, Mamre, Sodom

A   INTRODUCTION

Genesis 18–19 narrates the appearance of some visitors to Abraham and Lot in Mamre and Sodom, respectively. The presentation of the visitor(s), however, is obscure, and it is not clear whether both hosts receive the same visitor(s) in the story. However, between Abraham and Lot, it is Abraham who seems to play a more significant role with regard to the plot and the identity of the visitor.[1] Thus, the appearance of Abraham in both the Mamre and the Sodom accounts in Gen

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[1]   The plot, as "the main organising principle of a story," can provide an avenue for determining the structural purpose of a narrative. The plot also provides "a beginning, a middle and an end to the course of an action"; Jan P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Translated by Ineke Smit; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 76. See also Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSS 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 93; David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 172.

18–19 may be purposeful.[2] This rather extensive and repeated appearance of Abraham at both locations throughout the narrative of Gen 18–19 cannot be considered merely accidental but it demands a critical analysis within the framework of the two accounts of the narrative.

As a composite literary piece, Gen 18–19 seems to derive from originally separate and independent narratives which have been joined together as a narrative unit.[3] Besides the provocative scholarly arguments with regard to J's

[2]   Abraham features as a special figure whose characterisation in the narrative a skilful narrator seems to deploy in order to achieve a specific goal. On characterisation, cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 2011), 116–117. See also Wolf Schmid, *Narratology: An Introduction* (Translated by Alexander Starrit, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 119; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 123; Robert I. Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom: Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 48.

[3]   Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom*, 41, observes that as a unit, "There is evidence of an external unity in the relationship of Gen 18 to Gen 19, but other aspects of this external association of the parts to the whole need to be considered before any attempt can be made at further arguments for internal unity …" See also Stuart A. Irvine, "Is Anything Too Hard for Yahweh? Fulfilment of Promise and Threat in Genesis 18–19," *JSOT* 42/3 (2018), 287. He argues that the combination of the two accounts was to help ascertain the power of YHWH in the story. Cf. John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as a Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 258, who argues that the two episodes in Mamre and Sodom cannot be seen as separate compositions due to close verbal similarities. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 162 also observes similar contradictions in verbal and pronominal forms between both Abraham and Lot's accounts. As a composite literary piece, this compositional feature in Gen 18–19 is interpreted in different ways by scholars. For Gunkel, "the alternation between singular and plural follows no principle, then, but is entirely haphazard," Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Translated by Mark E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 193. Westermann argues that, "Chapter 18 begins a large narrative complex embracing chapters 18–19 as well as 21:1–7." He also contends that, "An additional peculiarity is the development of the introduction in 18:1–8, which is so circumstantial that it seems like an independent narrative"; Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (Translated by David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 134. See also Eugene H. Maly, "Genesis," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy; Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 20–21; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (Translated by John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 274; Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 211; John H. Marks, "Genesis," in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible: Introduction and Commentary for Each Book of the Bible Including Apocrypha with General Articles* (ed. Charles M. Laymon; Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 16; Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (JSOTSS 89; Translated by John J. Scullion; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 49–50; Jan Christian Gertz, et al., *T&T Clark Handbook of the Old Testament:*

authorship of some Pentateuchal narratives, others still consider that almost every part of the story in Gen 18–19 was compiled by the J-writer who sought to edit and write the stories into an appealing literary piece in its present shape.[4] The pericope (Gen 18:1–22–19:1–29) is fraught with ambiguity when it comes to the identity of the visitor(s) in the story.

B   ABRAHAM AND LOT AND THE VISITORS IN GEN 18–19

Both Abraham and Lot tend to have different perceptions regarding the identity of the visitor(s) in Gen 18–19. Abraham is said to have been visited by YHWH in 18:1a. Then, suddenly, he sees "three men" in verse 2 whom he meets and greets as אֲדֹנָי (my Lord) in verse 3 in Mamre. Lot, on the other hand, encounters "two angels" in 19:1 and addresses them as אֲדֹנַי (my lords). He also refers to them as "men" (vv. 5, 8, 10, 12, 16) and then, later, he greets the visitor(s) as אֲדֹנָי (my Lord/s) in verse 18 in the Sodom episode.[5] It is not certain how one should define

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An Introduction to the Literature, Religion and History of the Old Testament (New York: Clark, 2008), 337.

[4]   Cf. Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and religion in Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 164. In his tabular arrangement of Pentateuchal sources, he posits that the Yahwist's materials in Genesis include Gen 18:1–33 and 19:1–28 with 19:29 belonging to the Priestly source. See also Richard M. Wright, *Linguistic Evidence for the Pre-exilic Date of the Yahwist Source* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 20; Maly, "Genesis," 21, who contends that, "Genesis 18 was an independent story but was joined to chapter 19 by the J-redactor in a literary composition of exquisite artistry." Cf. Marks, "Genesis," 16; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 192; Gertz, et al., *T&T Clark Handbook of the Old Testament*, 337. Nevertheless, this view of a J-source may be contested since recent Pentateuchal debates on J-narratives in Genesis consider J not to be a single homogeneous document, but it contains several versions and materials including non-priestly sources. Cf. Thomas C. Römer, "The Elusive Yahwist: A Short History of Research" in *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (ed. Thomas B. Dozeman & Konrad Schmid; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 12–14. See also Jean-Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Translated by Pascale Dominique, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 133–135; Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 23; Jan C. Gertz et al., *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel and North America* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 3.

[5]   Abraham and Lot differ in their use of אדני in terms of the system of vocalisation. Abraham's אדני in 18:3, which uses *qamats* (long vowel) is different from Lot's in 19:2 with *pataḥ* (short vowel), but similar to Lot's later use in 19:18. The term אֲדֹנָי points to the Divine and/or a surrogate name for God in Genesis. Cf. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 163, who argues that, "… unlike 18:3, the Masoretes' vocalization of 'my lords' (NIV) in 19:2 reflects an address to persons other than God (אֲדֹנַי rather than אֲדֹנָי) whereas when the same persons are addressed in 19:18, the Masoretic form of 'my lords' (NIV) is again the form used only to address God (אֲדֹנָי)." See also Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 129; Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary:*

the visitor(s)—whether divine or human, one or more? The identity of the visitor(s) has been proposed as God, angels or men.[6] These identity definitions are rather divergent and characterised by ambiguity.[7]

With Abraham in Mamre, we read: וירא אליו יהוה (And the Lord appeared to him – Gen 18:1a), which suggests the reader should probably identify the visitor as singular in the person of YHWH.[8] However, in verse 2a, "he looked up and saw three men standing near him" and in verse 3, he greets the visitor(s) as "my Lord" perhaps signifying a singular addressee. Abraham and his visitor(s)

The Book of Genesis (San Antonio: Ariel, 2008), 309; Lee W. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 115–116.

[6]   Sailhamer, Stacy A. Knight, Thomas L. Brodie and Rashbam tend to advocate a 'God identity' definition. Cf. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as a Narrative*, 162; Sailhamer, "Genesis," in Gaebelein, Frank E. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Bible in Twelve Volumes (Genesis – Numbers)* (Vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 144–145; Knight, "Apparitions and Appellations: Questions Regarding the Identity of the Visitors in Gen 18:1–15," *PEGLMBS* 16 (1996), 102; Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 242; Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam), *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006 [cited 9 April 2023]. Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.18.1?lang=bi&with=Rashbam&lang2=en;   For   the 'men identity' definition, cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (ed. James Luther Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Achtemeier Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1971), 162; James McKeown, *Genesis: The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (ed. J. Gordon McConville & Craig Bartholomew; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 102; Westermann, *Genesis*, 134. In terms of the 'angel identity' definition, cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 192; Benno Jacob, *Das Erste Buch der Torah* (Berlin: KTAV, 1934), 435; Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi), *The Contemporary Torah* (Jerusalem: JPS, 2006) [cited 9 April 2023]. Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.18.2?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en;   Nahum   M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 128; see also Martin McNamara, ed. *Targum Neofiti1: Genesis* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992), 103; Bernard Grossfield, *Targum Neofiti 1: An Exegetical Commentary to Genesis Including Full Rabbinic Parallels*. ed., Lawrence H. Schiffman (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 2000), 153; Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah II: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation*: *Parashiyyot Thirty-four through Sixty-seven on Genesis 8:15 to 28:9* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), 212; Brian Doyle, "The Sin of Sodom: Yādá, Yādá, Yādá? A Reading of the Mamre-Sodom Narrative in Gen 18-19," *Theology and Sexuality* 9 (1998): 88.

[7]   The term ambiguity may be defined here as a text-reading phenomenon which confronts the reader with more than one meaning in the process of interpretation of a literary piece, for example, the depiction of the visitors in Gen 18–19. Identity, on the other hand, refers to the name or the designation by which a person, a thing or an entity can be clearly called and known.

[8]   The Masoretic text of Gen 18:1a differs from the LXX - which reads, Ὤφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς (And God appeared to him); The LXX translates the MT's Lord as God.

start a conversation and there appear to be mismatches between singular and plural nouns as well as pronouns and inconsistencies in grammatical constructions.[9] The narrator presents the visitors in Mamre as "Yнwн," "three men" and "the men" in Gen 18. These varied identity modes describing the visitor(s) tend to confront the reader with disagreements between nouns and pronouns in the story.[10] It is unclear whether the visitor is Yнwн along with the three men, the three men or just the men.

Regarding the visit to Lot in Sodom, we read: ויבאו שני המלאכים סדמה (And the two angels came to Sodom – Gen 19:1a).[11] Lot engages with his guests and makes provision for them. Meanwhile, the narrative sequence of events in the Lot-Sodom episode in Gen 19 is also characterised by similar recurrent contradictions and inconsistencies, as observed in Gen 18 in the Abraham-Mamre episode. In Sodom, the two initial angelic visitors are also now identified as "men" (vv. 5, 8, 10, 12, 16), "angels" (v. 15), "the Lord" (vv. 16, 18, 24) and "they" and "I" (vv. 16, 17, 19, 21–22). The Sodom episode exhibits similar issues of identity ambiguity as the Mamre account in Gen 18. This elicits a question: how does one identify the visitors of Lot—as two angels, men, angels or the Lord?

In both accounts in Gen 18–19, the ambiguity seems to be heightened when one also examines how the transition from Mamre by the supposed two men in 18:22 to Sodom who are now referred to as two angels in 19:1 develops the literary connections thereof.[12] This article attempts to analyse the narrative

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[9]   Cf. Gen 18:9–10, 13–14, 16, 22 where the phrases, "they and I," "the Lord and I" as well as "the men and the Lord" look rather contradictory and confusing to the reader. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Abraham: The Story of a Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 118, who states that, "The identity of the visitors who suddenly appear in front of Abraham's tent in the blazing Palestinian midday sun, apparently out of nowhere, is complicated by the shift between singular and plural address that cannot be reproduced in normal English."

[10]   Cf. verses 2–3, 5, 9–10, 13–14; it is not clear whether it is the three men, Yнwн or one of the three men who speaks in verses 9–10.

[11]   The Hebrew המלאכים, the angels, in 19:1 can also be rendered as messengers. See William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 196; David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Vol. v; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2011), 284–285; Camilla Hélena von Heijne, *The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 54–55.

[12]   Cf. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 215–216, who argues that, "The first episode takes place at mid-day, the second in the evening, and this accounts for all the changes in detail from reclining in the shade of a tree to spending the night in the 'shade' of Lot's house, as well as for the change in location from Abraham's tent encampment to Lot's home in the city of Sodom. There is also the change from the three strangers to the two messengers, since the two were sent on by Yahweh while he remained with Abraham." For Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom,* 31–32, "The

characterisation of Abraham as a clue to the identity of the visitor in Gen 18–19.[13]

C   THE NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK OF THE MULTIPLE PRESENCE OF ABRAHAM IN GEN 18–19

As the main character around whom the narrative revolves, Abraham is seen at the centre stage of the narrative events in the Abraham cycle, including the story of the visitors in Mamre and Sodom as well as the Abraham-Lot cycle.[14] The author of Genesis projects his role in these contexts, as significant and functional to the overall purpose and evolution of the history of the people of Israel. His relationship with God seems to lead to the self-understanding of the people of Israel about God and their history throughout the ancestral narratives.[15] For this reason, Robert L. Cohn comments on the relevance of the role of Abraham in the cycle thus:

> The Abraham cycle, beginning with the formula in 11:27, represents a considerable advance in narrative structure and in theological sophistication. Here, a single human character, Abraham appears in

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chapters are linked by the characters of the messengers who accompany YHWH on his visit to Mamre (18,1), later leave for Sodom (18,16), are seen arriving there (19,1) where they preside over events until the destruction of the city implied by YHWH in 18,17 is accomplished in 19,24–25." See also Maly, "Genesis," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 21.

[13]   This essay employs the narrative critical paradigm of Fokkelman to analyse the person and role of Abraham in an attempt to address the visitor-identity question in Gen 18–19. This approach deals with the division of the text in Gen 18–19 into various segments in order to assess the presence of Abraham in both episodes in Mamre and Sodom in relation to the definition of the identity of the visitor. According to Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 97, "When we succeed in making a correct division of the text into its various parts, everything comes together. Two useful avenues of approach are the entrances and exits of characters on stage, and the way in which the writer employs his system of time and space coordinates." He also accentuates the importance of structure to determine the "relations" or "correspondences" among structural elements in order to facilitate a better understanding of the text; cf. p. 118; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 116–117, argues that the structure of a narrative is determined by a certain symmetric pattern as may be shown in the analysis below.

[14]   The Abraham-cycle deals with individual narratives about the figure of Abraham which are archived in Gen 12–25, with Gen 11–13; 18–19; 21:1–7 constituting the Abraham-Lot cycle; see Gertz, *et al.*, *T&T Clark Handbook of the Old Testament*, 337; Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster Knox, 2003), 43.

[15]   See Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 155; Gertz et al., *T&T Handbook of the Old Testament*, 337; Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process*, 49-50; Joan Comay, *Who's Who in the Old Testament* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10, 13.

every episode. The author shows him in a variety of circumstances,
building a personality through multiple exposures. Although the cycle
is episodic, the episodes are subordinated to a common theme stated
many times: God's promise to Abraham of a son, a great nation, and
a land.[16]

In a sense, Abraham receives the recognition as the chief among the
patriarchs of Israel who can be viewed as the source of Israel's destiny as the
people of God.[17]

Genesis 18–19 also exhibits levels of conversation between host and
visitors in each location of the narrative. In other words, the narrative points to
certain moments when hosts and visitors encounter each other and speak and
interact, including times when the narrative focuses on a host only. Abraham and
Lot differ from each other in such interactive moments between host and
visitor(s). Abraham seems to have a more direct and intimate interaction with the
visitors than Lot during the visits, respectively, in Mamre and in Sodom. It is
evident that the manner of the appearance of the visitors looks different for each
host in Gen 18–19. In Gen 18, the visitor's approach to the meeting with
Abraham indicates some sense of familiarity with him as a host: "And the Lord
appeared to him" (18:1a). This is missing in Lot's case since it is also not clear
whether the visitors intended to visit him: "And the two angels came to Sodom"
(19:1a) and "And Lot was sitting by the gate of Sodom" (19:1b).

Although both hosts display similar mannerisms in their encounters with
the visitors, they also differ slightly in how they initiate closeness with their
guests.[18] In 18:2a, Abraham's close contact with the visitors becomes rather
intensified, i.e. "he looked up and saw three men standing near him." Lot seems
to establish this form of relationship with the visitors in 19:1c when he runs to
meet them and, thereafter, his close contact and conversation can be seen in

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[16]   Robert L. Cohn, "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," *JSOT*
25 (1983), 6.
[17]   John M. Holt, *The Patriarchs of Israel* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press,
1964), 3; Joel Baden, *The Promise to the Patriarchs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2013), 7, notes that the patriarchal narrative rests on him since his calling constitutes
the patriarchal promise. Cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: the Legacy of the
Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Oxford: Princeton University Press,
2012), 20–21, who seems to argue that Abraham is the source and summit of God's
people because his vocation ushers in a new relationship between God and human
beings. He states that, "This new beginning, this new relationship, is found in the 'great
nation' that will, according to God's remarkable promise, descend from Abram through
(as Genesis later is at pains to point out) his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, whose very
name becomes that of the promised people, 'Israel'."
[18]   Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 163, points out that, "… Abraham, who
had just entered the covenant (chap. 17), recognized the Lord when he appeared to him,
whereas Lot, who now lived in Sodom, did not recognize the Lord."

verses 2a, 3a, 10a, 12a–13a and 15a–22a marking six active host-visitor encounter moments in the Sodom account.[19] On the part of Abraham, 18:2b, "When he saw them, he ran from the entrance to meet them," welcoming the visitors as did Lot, and thence, engages his visitors in a somewhat more personal and intimate conversation throughout the episode in Mamre. Such interactions can be seen in verses 3a, 3b–5b, 8b–10a, 13a–14a, 16c, 22, while from verses 17a–19b, one of the visitors (YHWH) talks about him in a soliloquy as if he were his ally. These make up ten host-visitor encounter moments including the initial contacts in verses 1a, 2a and 2b.[20]

In all these narrative scenes, Abraham's importance is evident since the visitors more willingly and readily accept his invitation to be their host than they would allow Lot to accommodate them in his house in Sodom.[21] Abraham seems to be the point of attention at various levels in the narrative. He enjoys considerably more narration time with the visitor(s) than Lot throughout Gen 18–19. Such crucial moments of narrative focus on a host are captured in 18:8b–10a, 17a–19a and in 19:6a–9d for Abraham and for Lot, respectively.[22] Abraham undertakes to prepare food for his visitors in 18:8a–10a but, in a unique way, he is the subject of discussion in the divine soliloquy recounted in verses 17–19. He also follows up his conversation with YHWH by appearing in Sodom in 19:27–28 to check the outcome of the visitors' activities there. On the other hand, Lot is confronted with a violent attack against his house by the people of Sodom in 19:6a–9a. In verse 14a–b, he conveys the message of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to his household.

Consequently, Abraham seems to be nearer to the visitor(s) while Lot often drifts away from the visitors. Abraham always moves to converse with the visitor(s), whereas Lot is seen to be dealing with people other than the visitors. Moreover, in 18:20–21, the mention of Sodom in the Mamre episode during the soliloquy seems to be caused by the focus on Abraham in the discussion.[23] It can also be observed that Abraham's final mention in the conclusion of the Sodom episode in 19:29 confirms his significance as a character-hero not only in the

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[19]   Cf. Gen 18:1–22–19:1–29.

[20]   Cf. Gen 18:1–22–19:1–29 (NRSV); For Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 204, the building of the altar by Abraham evinces his connection with God and necessitates God's appearance to him in Mamre.

[21]   For Abraham, they responded, "Do as you have said" (18:5c), but with Lot, their response was negative: "No, we will spend the night in the square" (19:2f) and if not for his insistence, they would probably not consent: "but he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house" (19:3a).

[22]   In addition to Abraham being put in a narrative focus, he is also seen in a lengthy discussion with one of the visitors (YHWH) as he sought to make intercession for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah after the visitation in Mamre (18:23–33).

[23]   Cf. 18:17–18 where YHWH's contemplation suggests that the outcry against the sin of Sodom could not be hidden from Abraham.

Mamre account, but also in the Sodom episode in the overall narrative of Gen 18–19 since God, specifically, remembered him.[24] As the character-hero, his role can also be analysed with respect to the following aspects in the pericope (Gen 18:1–22–19:1–29).[25]

1   Abraham and the Mamre Episode in Gen 18

The narrative presentation of Abraham in the Mamre episode in Gen 18 can be analysed in terms of the structural arrangements in the story. These include his meeting and interaction with the visitors, his unique address to the visitor(s) as well as his varied roles as a host in Gen 18. These aspects of the narrative in which Abraham is seen to be actively involved in the running of the plot of the story may be germane to the purpose of the Mamre episode. The entire Mamre visit is replete with his presence and activity. The Abraham-Mamre story in Gen 18:1–22 then can be divided into sections as follows:

> A: Abraham and the appearance of YHWH[26] (18:1a)
> B: Abraham and the sight of three men (18:2)

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[24] Cf. Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom*, 69–70, who argues that, "It is Abraham who rounds off the action, appearing to survey the destruction (19,27–28) and remembered by God in saving Lot (19,29) (B). Abraham is thus mentioned at the inception and resolution of the action, and forms with allusions to Sodom (18:16) and 'the cities' (19,29) elements of a framing reference around the central plot." Genesis 19:29 is regarded as part of the gamut of sources compiled by the P-writer which probably accounts for the name of the Divine as "God"; cf. Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape*, 164.

[25] The pericope defines the scope of our study of the story of Abraham, Lot and their visitors with particular focus on the question of the identity of the visitor(s) in the narrative. Verses 18:23–33 are not included because the visitors depart after verse 22 to begin the episode of Lot and his guests in 19:1–29, which together with chapter 18 forms a single visit narrative unit. On how to determine a literary unit, Walsh argues that, "when we look for the structure of a literary unit of several chapters or longer we have no choice but to resort to major themes as the principal organizing device"; Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001), 10. Though the discussions of Gen 18:17–33 have focused often on the significance of Abraham's association with YHWH, in this essay, the focus is on the different major themes in the unit, for instance, intercession, mercy and justice. Some works which deal extensively with these verses include Robert Eisen, "The Education of Abraham: The Encounter between Abraham and God over the Fate of Sodom and Gomorrah," *JBQ* 28 (2000): 80–86 (Gen 18:17–33); Nathan MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham, Listening to YHWH: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16–33," *CBQ* 66/1 (2004): 25–43; Edward Bridge, "An Audacious Request: Abraham's Dialogue with God in Gen 18," *JSOT* 40/3 (2016): 281–296.

[26] The name YHWH and its relationship with Abraham are given detailed attention later in this article. However, the name is used in this analysis on the grounds that it is one of the different name designations of the visitors whom Abraham encounters in Mamre in Gen 18.

C: Abraham and his address to the visitor(s) (18:3)
D: Abraham and his request and active serving (18:4–8)
E: Abraham and Sarah and the annunciation by the visitor (18:9–15)
C^1: Abraham and the visitor(s) (18:16–21)
C^1-i: Abraham and the men (18:16)
C^1-ii: Abraham and the soliloquy of YHWH (18:17–21)
A^1: Abraham and YHWH (18:22)

These divisions are symbolised by the formula, ABCDEC^{1}A^1, which when rewritten symmetrically become concentric, as illustrated below.[27]

A
   B
      C
         D
            E
      C^1
A^1

Throughout Gen 18:1–22, Abraham is the only character whose name is either mentioned categorically or implied with pronouns in every instance of the sections. He is the focus in the elements of the stages of the structure. There is no section that escapes his presence and role as a host.[28] From the structural perspective, his role in the plot is crucial since between A and A^1, he is the main character who meets with YHWH at the beginning in 18:1a and at the end in 18:22. In-between A and A^1, he is also the one single person whose presence and activity help build and sustain the narrative with the middle elements of BCDE and C^1. At point C, which shows Abraham and his address to the visitor(s), ambiguity appears because for the first time in the narrative, Abraham speaks,

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[27]   The form helps us to assess how, in terms of narrative structure, Abraham's presence is maintained at various levels as a key narrative element to discern the potential identity of the visitor(s) in Gen 18–19. The structural elements signify patterns of host-visitor(s) relationships in the narrative, see Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 98, 116–117. The form may also function in determining how we may understand the text. As Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 97, argues, "A literary approach can only flourish if we realize that all form affects content, and that all the content you may imagine for any story of quality can only be seen and discussed if it has taken some form or other."
[28]   At point E, Abraham's role may be subtle since the focus seems to be on Sarah with the birth announcement. However, Abraham, again, is the first and foremost recipient of the birth announcement while Sarah only eavesdrops on his conversation with YHWH. See Fruchtenbaum's, *The Book of Genesis*, 116, argument that, "Sarah remains necessary, but peripheral in the world being constructed by Abraham and his God. What follows is an annunciation-but addressed in this case to the woman's husband rather to the woman herself (compare Judg. 13:2–5; 1Sam. 1:17; 2Kgs 4:8–17)."

but it is uncertain which of the visitors he speaks to—YHWH or the three men.[29] This is also repeated in C[1] about his other encounters with the visitor(s), which is further divided into C[1]-i and C[1]-ii where the former refers to the group of visitors identified as men and the latter reflects the name YHWH who speaks to himself about Abraham. In this sense, the ambiguity of C regarding the identity of the visitor(s) is rehearsed since it is uncertain to conclude that the men and YHWH are one and the same.[30]

On the contrary, there seems to be a connection between AA[1] and CC[1] when one considers whom Abraham encounters and speaks to in the narrative. A clue may be found by comparing the beginning in 18:1 and the ending in 17:26 regarding the search for the antecedent of the suffixed pronoun אליו ("to him") in 18:1.[31] In the Mamre account, however, the name Abraham is not mentioned until 18:6a. The link to Gen 17 may suggest the possibility of Abraham welcoming and speaking to YHWH throughout Gen 18 under the mode of ambiguity.[32] Moreover, in the context of the soliloquy, YHWH seems to be recalling the terms of the covenant with Abraham in Gen 17.[33] There is also a clear resemblance in

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[29]   By addressing the visitor(s) in the form, "my Lord" in 18:3, Abraham appears to be confusing the reader since he is supposed to be speaking to the three men standing before him in verse 2; cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 193, who states that, "At this point, Abraham does not yet know that God is before him. Instead he believes he is speaking with 'men.' Abraham addresses the three men in the singular." See also Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 162; Knight, "Apparitions and Appellations," 96–97.

[30]   See Eibert Tigchelaar, "Sodom and Gomorrah in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Sodom's Sin: Genesis 18–19 and Its Interpretations, TBN* 7 (ed. Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 56. He argues that, "Some of the problems of Gen 18 relate to the question of the plural and the singular forms, and as to whether one of the three men is perhaps God himself, and whether the men of Gen 18 are the angels of Gen 19:1."

[31]   It could be observed that the antecedent of 'him' (אליו) is Abraham who previously was in a covenant experience with YHWH. Cf. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 161.

[32]   As Letellier argues, "A transition between Gen 17 and Gen 18 is facilitated syntactically by the use of *'lyw* 'to him' instead of the proper noun 'Abraham' in 18,1 which would have formally underlined a sense of new direction. The narrative may change at this point, but the sense of the same basic story continuing, of the same characters involved in a new stage of an established relationship, is sustained by this transitional device which adds a sense of continuity, an immediacy of narrative movement and familiarity with the same characters (YHWH and Abraham) as they are once more depicted in colloquy"; Letellier, *Day in Mamre, night in Sodom*, 35. See also, Ahn S. Keun and Pieter M. Venter, "An Analytical Perspective on the Fellowship Narrative of Gen 18:1–15," *HTS* 66/1 (2010), 2; Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 142.

[33]   Cf. Gen 17:2: "I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly" and verse 4, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations." When one compares this with the content of the soliloquy, i.e. 18:17–18, "The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about

verb forms between 17:1, וירא יהוה אל־אברם (And the Lord appeared to Abram) and 18:1a, וירא אליו יהוה (And the Lord appeared to him).[34] The *nipʿal* form: וירא of the verb ראה (to see) is used with a specific nuance to indicate divine revelation.[35] Hence, Abraham's unique presence and conversation with YHWH seems to provide a narrative context for identifying the visitor(s) in Gen 18.[36]

2   Abraham and the Sodom Episode in Gen 19

The nature of the relationship between Abraham and the visitor(s) in Mamre in Gen 18 seems to play a major role in his subsequent link to the account in Sodom in Gen 19. The simultaneous mention of both Sodom and Abraham in Gen 18 during the double departure moments of the visitors indicates his extended role in the Sodom episode in Gen 19.[37] He is the only character-host whose place in the entire narrative of Gen 18–19 is recorded in both Gen 18 and 19 in Mamre

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to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him?", one tends to get a glimpse of who Abraham might recognise as his visitor(s) in the story of Gen 18. See Ed Noort, "For the Sake of Righteousness: Abraham's Negotiation with YHWH …" in *Sodom's Sin: Genesis 18–19 and Its Interpretation*, 5. Here, he highlights the importance of the role of Abraham in view of YHWH'S plans and acts of revelation. He observed that, "The figure of Abraham has already been developed to such an extent that Abraham 'deserves' to be informed of YHWH'S plans … Abraham here has become a Righteous One who must be kept informed, even of YHWH'S plans for destruction and, who, in the best deuteronom(ist)ic tradition, instructs his descendants in צדקה ומשפט (righteousness and justice)." See also Ed Noort, "Abraham and the Nations," in *Abraham, the Nations and the Hagarites: Jewish Christian and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, *TBN* 13 (ed. Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten & Jacques T. A. G. M van Ruiten; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 15, 17; MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham-Listening to YHWH," 27.

[34]   Cf. Gen 12:7; 26:2, 26; 35:9 where the formula with the verb form וירא (And he appeared) is also for Abram, Isaac and Jacob in their personal encounters with the deity (the Lord or God). See Keun and Venter, "An Analytical Perspective," 4; Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 91.

[35]   Cf. Keun and Venter's, "An Analytical Perspective," 4, assertion that, "the *Nifal* form of the verb ראה (*ra'a*) is a technical term for divine self-disclosure, meaning 'to reveal oneself,' 'to be seen' and 'make oneself visible.'" See also Sarna, *The JPS Commentary: Genesis*, 92.

[36]   Cf. Robert W. L. Moberly, *Genesis 12–50* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 24. He seems to suggest Abraham's visitor(s) was YHWH by explaining that, "In ch. 18 he not only shows hospitality to strangers but is singled out as chosen by God for moral purposes (18:19) and has the stature to engage with God on the question of righteousness, probing the justice and mercy of God (18:22–33)."

[37]   Cf. 18:16, 22a; see also Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom*, 69–70, who says, "Abraham is thus mentioned at the inception and resolution of the action, and forms with allusions to Sodom (18,16) and 'the cities' (19,29) elements of a framing reference around the central plot."

and in Sodom, respectively. The visitor(s) came to call on him in Mamre in Gen 18 but he also seems to have a role to play in the story of Lot and the visitors in Sodom in Gen 19. In like manner, YHWH'S discourse about him in the soliloquy (18:17–19) as well as his rapport with him in 18:22b (cf. 18:23–33) appears to be a catalyst for his influence in the Sodom narrative. Abraham's presence is a sign of unity between both episodes in Gen 18–19.

Ed Noort claims that this uniting role of Abraham is of benefit to Lot. Concerning Lot, he comments:

> He looks like a צדיק ('a righteous one') because of the foregoing scene of the dialogue and negotiations between Abraham and YHWH. Here, the fundamental question of the fate of the righteous who live among the wicked is treated. Therefore, Lot's rescue seems to be presented as the rescue of a צדיק ('a righteous one'). Nevertheless, Gen 19:29 offers another and more fitting solution: God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow.[38]

In this regard, Abraham can also be seen as a narrative connection between the visitor(s) and Lot in Sodom. The Sodom account in Gen 19 relates Abraham's presence and role in Sodom in 19:27–28 and 19:29. In these verses, Abraham's special relationship with the events in Sodom, already anticipated and hinted at in the Mamre episode in Gen 18, becomes evident.[39] By way of narrative sequence, 19:27–28 is a flashback to 18:22 and supports the narrative unity between Gen 18 and Gen 19 in the pericope (Gen 18:1–22–19:1–29).[40] Abraham and the Sodom episode can be analysed based on the number of times Sodom is mentioned alongside Abraham, his relationship with the visitor(s) in Gen 18 and his appearance in the Sodom episode in Gen 19. These occurrences can be seen in 18:16 and 22; 19:27–28 and 19:29. There is also a consistent pairing of Abraham and Sodom with the visitors in 18:16, 22 during the Mamre visit. The situation of Abraham's repeated appearance in the Sodom account is probably a reminiscence of the Mamre experience to enhance, update and offer fresh insights for the reader.

The relationship between Abraham-Sodom and the visitor(s) can be expressed in the following ways:

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[38]   Noort, "Abraham and the Nations," 16.
[39]   Cf. 18:17: "The Lord said, 'shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do'." In this verse in the soliloquy (vv. 17–21), YHWH feels the need to confide in Abraham His plans towards Sodom and Gomorrah. This, then, culminates in Abraham's lengthy conversation with YHWH in verses 23-33 where he sought to intercede on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.
[40]   Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom*, 39, contends that, "The resultant consistency of allusion and intention serves to weld the elements of fiction spanning the two chapters into a narrative unity."

A: Abraham and the departure of the visitors (men) to Sodom – 18:16

A^1: Abraham and the second departure of the visitors' (men) to Sodom (18:22a)[41]

B: Abraham and his meeting with Y$_{HWH}$ (concerning Sodom; cf. 18:23–33) – 18:22b

B^1: Abraham and his return to the place of meeting with Y$_{HWH}$ (in the Sodom episode) (19:27–28)

C: Abraham and God's remembrance of him in Sodom (19:29)

The above structure produces the scheme: AA^{1}BB^{1}C which can be represented symmetrically as:

A
A^1
  B
  B^1
    C

This scheme appears to follow a unique symmetric pattern[42] that shows a close connection between Abraham and the visitors from A to A^1 and from B to B^1, a sense of connection with the visitor(s) is observable, as he is left alone with Y$_{HWH}$ at point B and returns in B^1 to where he remained and conversed with Y$_{HWH}$ about Sodom. Within these points, Abraham is not left alone without the presence of the visitor(s) and the visitors' movement in and out of Mamre seems to have been guided by him. What is central along these axes is the visitors' departure from Mamre (first place of visit) to Sodom (second place of visit). Nevertheless, before the final destination in Sodom, there is a transition point in verse 22b where Abraham remains with Y$_{HWH}$ while the other visitors (the men)

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[41]   The repeated departure scenes in 18:16 and 18:22 may be explained in terms of narrative doublets and probably a deliberate scribal activity. Cf. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch*, 17, who alludes to the existence of problematic doublets in Pentateuchal narratives by citing the double naming of the city of Luz as Bethel by Jacob in Gen 28:19 and 35:15. In 18:22b, where "Abraham remained standing before Y$_{HWH}$," a scribal activity can be discerned with respect to the so-called *Tiqqun Sopherim*, i.e. scribal redaction of the ancient text of Gen 18:22. Cf. Jacob Weingreen, *Introduction to the Critical Study of the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 26; Tim Hegg, "Genesis 22 & *Tiqqun Sopherim*: Textual, Midrashic and for What Purpose," *Torah Resource Institute, Masorah Section* (SBL 2016), 7; Martin Pröbstle, "Y$_{HWH}$ Standing Before Abraham: Genesis 18:22 and Its Theological Force," *Inicios* (2004), 173–174.

[42]   Cf. Walsh, *Style and Structure*, 8, suggests that a symmetric pattern may sometimes look irregular. Thus he argues, "One variation of symmetry deserves particular attention. Hebrew narrative will sometimes violate an otherwise symmetrical pattern with an insertion, deletion, or other disturbance of the patterned regularity." See also Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 118.

leave for Sodom.[43] In Sodom in Gen 19, the visitors mention the Hebrew מקום (place) in reference to Sodom during the warning and escape moments in 19:12, מן־המקום (out of the place) and 19:13, את־המקום הזה (this place). Lot also uses the term in verse 14, מן־המקום הזה (out of the place) to ask his household to vacate Sodom.

Regarding 19:27–28, Abraham's return to the place (אל־המקום) becomes a narrative strategy that apparently establishes a relationship between המקום (the place) of the first visit, i.e. Mamre, המקום of the transition (Abraham's meeting with YHWH as well as the second departure of the other visitors [the men]) and, lastly, המקום of the final destination in Sodom. Therefore, the term המקום plays a vital role in the connection between Mamre and Sodom and Abraham's relationship to the events and to the visitors in Sodom. The Abraham-Mamre account in Gen 18 shows that verse 16 correlates with verse 22 on the departure of the visitors from Mamre to Sodom where verse 22 serves as the Mamre-Sodom transition point until the journey ends in Sodom in 19:1, i.e. with "And the two angels came to Sodom." This verse corresponds to 18:22 in line with the Hebrew that Sodom is to be seen as the rightful destination.[44] The connection between Abraham and the visitors in Sodom can be ascertained by his return to המקום (the place) where he had conversed with YHWH about Sodom and from where he now looks upon Sodom.[45] The function of המקום in 19:27–28 tends to suggest that perhaps Lot met with the same visitor(s) as Abraham's in Mamre.[46] There appears to be a connection between the place and the visitors probably because of the significance the narrator seems to attribute to the person of Abraham in the narrative. It is Abraham who has become ubiquitous throughout the entire narrative in Gen 18–19. His presence causes the reader to be mindful of the visitors he receives at the "place," i.e. first, Mamre, second, the transition place and, finally, his return to the transition spot in 19:27–28, which calls to

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[43]   They were set for Sodom which is indicated by the Hebrew directional *he* in verse 22a סדמה (… towards Sodom) to signify the destination; cf. Christo Van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 218, 259.

[44]   In both 18:22 and 19:1, the noun form סדמה (to Sodom) is used to describe where the movement of the visitors leads thus pointing to Sodom as the destination.

[45]   Genesis 18:22, which tells of the visitors leaving Mamre for Sodom and Abraham's meeting with YHWH and 19:27–28, which is about his return to the place where he met previously with YHWH, can be viewed as a thread which connects the Mamre-Sodom scene in the narrative of Gen 18–19 and Abraham's special relationship with the visitors in both episodes.

[46]   The term המקום in 19:27 is a reference to 18:22 as the place where Abraham met with YHWH. It is also the place that links the Mamre visitors to Sodom. It is probably used in other circumstances for Sodom in the narrative of Gen 18–19. Abraham uses the term during his negotiations with YHWH about Sodom (cf. 18:24, 26) but it was also used by the visitors at the time of the warning in Sodom (cf. 19:12, 13) and by Lot as he conveys the warning about the disaster to his household (cf. 19:14).

mind the visitors he accompanied and the visitor he conversed with early on in 18:22.

Furthermore, there is a series of evidence within Genesis that seems to show that Abraham knows the visitor(s) and he is known by the visitor(s) as well. In the preceding passages of Gen 15 and 17, the sense of personal communion between Abraham and God intensifies with the making of the covenant.[47] It may be observed that God and Abraham already appear in these passages as companions. Abraham's close association with God, coupled with his own description of God as אדני יהוה (Lord God) in 15:2, lends much credence to his apparent awareness of the visitor(s) in Mamre in Gen 18.[48] There is also a relationship between the divine presence embodied by the altar in Mamre in Gen 13:18 and the revelation of Yhwh to Abraham who sits by the Oaks of Mamre in Gen 18:1.[49] The obvious question is: how do Abraham and the altar in Mamre offer hints about his knowledge and recognition of the visitor(s) in Gen 18?

Abraham is regarded as the patriarch as well as founder of the people and religion of Israel.[50] In his analysis of the concept of the God of our Fathers, Frank Cross posits the possibility that the patriarch, Abraham, had a personalised God who later became the family or national or religious God of his descendants.[51]

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[47]   See Paul Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (JSOTSS 315; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 33.

[48]   In 15:2, Abraham's אדני יהוה is an address before God just as אדני in 18:3a. The Hebrew אדני in 15:2 copies the same form as his response to the visitor(s) in 18:3. Both have the same vocalisation, i.e. אֲדֹנָי. Although the vocalisation signifies a plural, in the Old Testament, it is "an independent title for Israel's God" and means 'Lord' or 'my Lord.' Cf. William D. Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 421. It is also seen to be unique in Genesis as an address to God; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 278; Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (vol. 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 135. Cf. also Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 162; Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 4.

[49]   Cf. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 203–204, argues: "But if one accepts the connection between 13:18 and 18:1, it means that the story begins by establishing Mamre as a sacred place… It was in response to Abraham's building an altar that God appeared to him." See also Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 87.

[50]   See Comay, *Who's Who in the Old Testament*, 13; Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 21.

[51]   Cf. Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6, observes that, "the special traits of the cult of the Patriarchal gods in fact anticipate at a number of points characteristic of the religion of Yahweh, the Lord of covenant and community. These provide continuity between the old religious forms and the new, a historically credible background for emergent Yahwism and an explanation of the development of a

The meeting between Abraham and Yʜwʜ to formulate the covenant in both Gen 15 and 17 links Abraham, in a unique way, to the deity. The covenant also forms the basis and content of the soliloquy in 18:17–19.[52] The words "to keep" (שמר) articulated by Yʜwʜ in the soliloquy already draw upon the wording of the covenantal treaty in Gen 17, i.e. 17:9–10.[53] Along with other related words, Abraham as a prominent figure, is portrayed as a clue to the identity of the visitor(s) in Gen 18–19.[54]

D   ABRAHAM–Yʜwʜ RELATIONSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF SOME KEY HEBREW WORDS IN GEN 18–19

The relationship between Abraham and Yʜwʜ in the narrative is unique and significant to the response to the identity question in Gen 18–19. The narrative is structured to begin and end with them. Without Abraham, the visit would lose its full significance and the soliloquy of Yʜwʜ becomes meaningless. This Abraham-Yʜwʜ relationship seems to be a narrative motif within the Abraham narrative cycle in Genesis. The expression, "The Lord appeared to him" in 18:1 parallels how the narrator introduces several Abraham–Yʜwʜ encounters, for instance, in 12:7a, "Then the Lord appeared to Abram" (וירא יהוה אל־אברם) ; in 15:1a, "After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (אחר הדברים האלה היה דבר־יהוה אל־אברם במחזה), in 15:4, "But the word of the Lord came to him" (והנה דבר־יהוה אליו) and in 17:1b, "the Lord appeared to Abram" (וירא יהוה אל־אברם). In these instances, the technical term וירא is used probably to show the level of the interaction between Abraham and Yʜwʜ.[55] In a narrative critical way, this shows the significance of Abraham to the identity issue in the Mamre-Sodom story in Gen 18–19. Thus, the importance of this relationship cannot be

religious unity of apparently disparate clans which came together in the Yahwistic league." See also Moberly, *The Old Testament*, 87.

[52]   The soliloquy seems to become the medium through which Yʜwʜ recalls the terms of the covenant with Abraham.

[53]   Verse 9 says, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant" and verse 10 says, "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you."

[54]   Abraham is a major figure at the forefront of the patriarchal stories and Yʜwʜ's presence with him gives force to his remarkable role in the history of the people of Israel; see Moberly, *Genesis 12–50*, 20.

[55]   Though the *nipʻal* verb does not appear in verse 15, Abraham also seems to relate uniquely to the word of Yʜwʜ just as he encounters and interacts with Yʜwʜ Himself. Abraham interacts indirectly with Yʜwʜ through His word; cf. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 93. In addition, apart from Gen 18:1, the phrase, "the Lord appeared to," is used elsewhere in Genesis to "indicate that the Lord visits covenant partners to give them a hopeful promise of both land and descendants," according to Keun and Venter, "An Analytical Perspective," 4. They cite Gen 12:7; 17:1–8; 26:2–4 and 35:9–13 where the Lord appeared to Abram, Isaac and Jacob, respectively to engage them in such discourses.

overemphasised. He appears to walk with God, speaks to Him and interacts with Him in a way that sometimes looks like a relationship between two equals.[56]

With these words: ושמרו (they may keep in 18:19) and אשר־דבר (which has been spoken in 18:19) in relation to Abraham, it is obvious that personal acquaintance and knowledge between YHWH and Abraham are undeniably crucial.[57] In the same vein, YHWH knows Abraham and Abraham also seems to be familiar with YHWH who probably now poses as the visitor or one of the visitors in Mamre. This Abraham-YHWH relationship seems to be the turning point in the Sodom episode since God remembers Abraham and saves Lot, as the verb ויזכר in 19:29 shows–.[58] By virtue of these words, "And He remembered," it seems that YHWH and Abraham have become the two key players in the narrative as visitor and host, respectively.

The expression ושמרו (they may keep) is connected to the covenant and related to the person of Abraham as a patriarch who must pave the way for his descendants with good deeds.[59] It establishes a unique relationship between YHWH and Abraham and for Moberly, "The Hebrew verb used of Abraham in Isaiah 41:8 and 2 Chronicles 20:7 is *'ahav*, a verb conventionally rendered "love," which can have a wide range of meaning (as can "love" in English)."[60] Moberly also argues that, "Rabbinic interpretation throws further light on this form of love relationship in that it links 'Abraham's *'ahav* with the Shema, the summary proclamation of Israel's faith (Deut. 6:4–5), where Israel's response to God, which is to be lived out through obedience to torah, is depicted as love (*'ahav*)."[61] The unique relationship between Abraham and YHWH in the narrative

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[56]   Cohn, "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," 9, notes that, "To Abraham God spoke 'naturally' without accompanying numinous phenomena. Abraham seemed neither surprised nor afraid before the divine."

[57]   Cf. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 167.

[58]   Cf. Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom*, 69, asserts that, "It is Abraham who rounds off the action, appearing to survey the destruction (19,27–28) and remembered by God in saving Lot (19,29)."

[59]   The verb derives from the root שמר, meaning to guard, keep, protect, observe. See Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic*, 337; Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* vol. viii, 475. Its use by YHWH in the soliloquy in 18:19 echoes the terms of the covenant with Abraham in 17. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 167, interprets 18:19, given the verb ושמרו that, "Here the attention is directed internally (to keep the way of the Lord) with the end in view that Abraham and his descendants should 'do that what is righteous and just.'" See also Mounce, *Complete Expository*, 375; Cephas Tushima, "Homosexuality and Liminality in Sodom: The Quests for Home, Fun and Justice (Gen 19:1-29)," *OTE* 34/1 (2021): 71.

[60]   Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73; Blenkinsopp, *Abraham: The Story of a Life*, 4.

[61]   Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith*, 73.

may be seen as an underlining motif that provides a clue about the response to the visitor-identity question in Gen 18–19.

The phrase אשר־דבר is a combination of a verb and a relative pronoun meaning "which he has spoken" in 18:19.[62] It is indicative of the terms spelt out by YHWH concerning Abraham, i.e. the promise of becoming a great nation and a father of a multitude of nations.[63] It also points to the Lord who is faithful to fulfil what He has said.[64] Throughout the Hebrew Bible and in the patriarchal stories, especially the Abraham cycle, it is the spoken word which seems to sustain the relationship between Abraham and YHWH.[65] The spoken word, which forms the basis of the covenant, also functions as a command to obedience which apparently affects and cements Abraham's intimate connection to YHWH through the interplay between שמר (to keep) and זכר (to remember). It is possible to conceive that the more Abraham keeps the word, the more he and his descendants become connected to YHWH and this causes YHWH to remember and act accordingly. There also appears to be a correlation between ושמרו (conj. *qal qatal* 3cp – שמר) and ויזכר (*qal wayyiqtol* 3ms – זכר) in 18:19 and 19:29, respectively.[66] Both verbs fulfil the same goal by highlighting the significant impact of the Abraham-YHWH relationship on the identity question in the narrative, i.e. Abraham knows and trusts God enough to do His commands and God knows him to be obedient and righteous and this makes Him remember Abraham.

In the narrative, God's remembrance (זכר) of Abraham in 19:29 can be seen as a function of his obedience to the word of YHWH, marked by שמר in 18:19. This act of remembrance on the part of YHWH tends to determine His dealings with Abraham as well as his descendants.[67] Through a careful analysis

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[62]   אשר־דבר (rel. pron. + *piʿel qatal*, 3ms); cf. Joseph J. Owens, *Analytical Key to the Old Testament: Genesis–Joshua* (Vol. I; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 68.

[63]   Cf. Gen 17.4-5; see Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 21.

[64]   Mounce, *Complete Expository*, 802.

[65]   Cf. Gen 12 in which Abraham sets off on a journey on account of the word from God; see also Gen 22.

[66]   Cf. Moshe Bar-Asher, "The Bible Interpreting Itself," in *Rewriting and Interpreting the Hebrew Bible: The Biblical Patriarchs in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Devorah Dimant & Reinhard G. Kratz; Göttingen: de Gruyter, 2013), 5–6. Based on Bar-Asher's proposition, both verbs have the same meaning: "There are also synonyms that do not appear in parallel hemistiches of one verse but rather in two parallel verse from different portions of the Bible while having an identical or very similar structure." He sees זכר and שמר as synonyms, meaning 'remember' in a few biblical verses, for example, Exod 20:8; Deut 5:12. See Owens, *Analytical Key to the Old Testament*, 65, 75.

[67]   Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32, analyses the relevance of God remembering Abraham in the Bible in the following instances, "When Pharaoh is crushing the Israelites under the yoke of Egyptian slavery, God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (ויזכראלהם את בריתי את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב

of the aforementioned verbs, one may surmise that Abraham's close association with YHWH gives a glimpse of who the visitor(s) could be in both accounts of Mamre and Sodom. His remembrance by God is crucial and Hendel argues that, "In the P comment on this story, Lot's family is saved because 'God remembered Abraham' (Gen 19:29). Remembering Abraham is raised to a theme of the story, reminding God to save the innocent people."[68] In this sense, it is possible to contend that Abraham, in the company of God throughout Gen 18–19 and elsewhere, offers an avenue to give a more appropriate response to the identity question in the Mamre-Sodom story.

E   ABRAHAM AND IDENTITY—AMBIGUITY QUESTION IN GEN 18–19

The question of YHWH, the three men, the two angels or the men as the visitor(s) in Gen 18–19 finds a plausible solution in the significant role of Abraham as an arch-host in the narrative.[69] Ambiguity as a characteristic feature in the narrative makes it difficult for the reader to interpret precisely the identity of the visitor(s) in the Abraham-Lot story.[70]

However, Abraham's significant role in the narrative appears to defuse ambiguity and serves as a guide to the definition of the exact identity of the visitor in the story. This may be ascertained through his relationship with YHWH who can be regarded as the visitor or one of the visitors in Gen 18–19. Abraham's affiliation with YHWH may be based on friendship which implies knowledge, familiarity and acquaintance. In the words of Moberly:

> Elsewhere in scripture Abraham is remembered not with the familiar honorific titles, 'man of God' or servant of YHWH' but with the remarkable title 'friend of God' (Isa. 41:8; 2 Chron. 20:7; Jas. 2:23),

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– Exod. 2:24) whereupon he conceives his great plan of rescue. The act of remembering Abraham and his successors is a turning point in the story, motivating God's salvific actions. Similarly, when God is about to destroy the rebellious Israelites during their worship of the Golden Calf, Moses implores God to 'remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel' (זכר לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל - Exod. 32:33), and God's wrath abates."

[68]   Hendel, *Remembering Abraham*, 39; Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 42.

[69]   While Lot also may have contributed to this, it is the primacy of Abraham that is more crucial in the visitor-identity issue in the narrative. Moreover, it is Abraham whose steps Lot seems to follow, for instance, in 19:18, he imitates Abraham's address in 18:3 with אֲדֹנָי. It is also because of Abraham, we are told, that God saved him in 19:29.

[70]   Ambiguity considered as a text-reading phenomenon tends to cause confusion and obscure meaning in a literary piece; cf. David G. Brooks, "Ambiguity, the Literary and Close Reading," *CLC* 12/4 (2010), 2; Timothy Bahti, "Ambiguity and Indeterminacy: The Juncture," *CL* 38/3 (1986), 210; David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 15.

> which implies a relationship with God of the most desirable kind - a
> real, mutual, life-enhancing relationship.[71]

It is Abraham alone whose significance attracts attention and commentary in
both episodes in Gen 18–19. His presence throughout the Mamre–Sodom story
affirms that, regardless of ambiguity, Abraham becomes important to the
understanding of a more valid response to the visitor-identity question in Gen
18–19. From a narrative perspective, Abraham can be considered as a character
whose role provides a vivid clue to the identification of the visitor as probably
YHWH who has been presented in ambiguous ways in Gen 18–19.[72] Although the
phenomenal element of ambiguity in the story may have caused others to suggest
that the visitors are either men or angels, it is important to observe that
Abraham's special place in the narrative overrides the influence of ambiguity
and thus provides sufficient grounds to identify YHWH as the visitor in the
Mamre-Sodom story.[73] Ambiguity, therefore, functions in identifying the visitor
in the story. YHWH who is reported to be Abraham's friend is probably the
ultimate visitor while the men or the angels are manipulated as his
representatives through the technique of deliberate ambiguity in the narrative.[74]

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[71]   Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith*, 73.

[72]   By analysing the recipient recognition convention in a narrative, Stein seems to
suggest that Abraham and the visitor(s) already have a shared identity knowledge, i.e.
he knew his visitor(s) prior to his (their) arrival and his visitor(s) were also aware of
him. Cf. David E. S. Stein, "Cognitive Factors as a Key to Plain-Sense Biblical
Interpretation: Resolving Cruxes in Gen 18: 1–15 and 32:23–33," *Open Theology* 4/1
(2018), 550. He adds that, "By default, it can be assumed that upon a messenger's
arrival, the recipient knows the sender's identity." He calls this convention Recipient
Recognition (RR). Among other things, ambiguity stems from the fact that Abraham
does not meet only the sender's representatives but he also appears to encounter both
the sender and his emissaries in such an obscure fashion in the story of Gen 18–19.

[73]   Aubrey R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961), 5–6, advances the argument that Israel's
idea of God is based on her understanding of the social unit as an extension of
personality. Just as the extension comes from one person and yet forms the same thing,
so is God conceived of as an extended personality. He relates this extension theory to
the relationship between אדון (lord or master) and his מלאך (messenger) as meaning one
and the same thing in that the messenger does not merely represent the lord or master
who sent him but he is also the lord himself. This theory resonates with the episodes in
Gen 18–19 since it appears to suggest that YHWH and the men or the angels are one and
the same thing in the story, i.e. the men may not only represent YHWH, but are also
YHWH Himself. This extended personality theory reveals much weakness in the face of
the ambiguity we are confronted with in Gen 18–19, i.e. the phenomenon of YHWH and
his messengers appearing simultaneously in the same story under similar circumstances
could not be accounted for by this theory.

[74]   Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 163, argues that, "By carefully identifying
and distinguishing the characters in the narrative by means of the singular and plural

F   CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it can be asserted that the person of Abraham and his significant role in Gen 18–19 furnish us with a narrative context in which the identity of the actual visitor can be defined as probably Yʜwʜ, with whom he has become a covenant partner, an intimate companion and a friend throughout the Abraham narratives cycle. As the visitor, Yʜwʜ can be seen to be hidden, but at the same time, revealed under a mode of ambiguity in the Mamre-Sodom story.[75] On account of the relationship between the words of the covenant in Gen

verbal forms, the author is able to show that the Lord's appearing to Abraham and the visit of the three men are one and the same event. God appeared to Abraham, but not 'face to face' in his own physical form. Rather, the author has so arranged that the three men always represent God's presence and can be identified with God's presence while remaining clearly distinct from him." See also Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 96,123.

[75] The discrepancies, inconsistencies and contradictions regarding pronominal and nominal forms, plurals and singulars as well as different voices in narrative discourses all add to the complex nature of a narrative largely shrouded in ambiguity. Rather than detracting from the thesis that the visitor may be defined as probably Yʜwʜ, the phenomenon of ambiguity cannot be seen as a scribal error, but a deliberate narrative technique deployed to underscore perhaps a unique theophanic event in the case of the visit to Abraham with specific missions to be fulfilled through the agency of the men or angels. On the function of the *nip'al* verb וירא as depicting a theophanic scene, cf. Keun and Venter, "An Analytical Perspective," 4; Clines, *DCH, vol. VII*, 357. In terms of the change in number from three men to two angels along with its implication for the visitor-identity question, scholarly views are divergent. Some argue that Yʜwʜ who is in a conversation with Abraham in 18:22 is also among the three men which tends to explain the reason why the men are reduced to two angels in Sodom. Cf. Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom*, 38; Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 246; Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, 212. On the contrary, others also contend that the men are angels of Yʜwʜ as representatives and who as messengers perform their specific functions in the narrative in Mamre in ch. 18 and Sodom in ch. 19. With this assumption, scholars seem to hold that one of the angels who performed their missions in Mamre was not with the men who departed from Mamre and could not be part of the group that went to Sodom to embark on their mission there.   Rabbinic teaching interprets the three men as three angels on separate missions, i.e. "one to announce to Sarah the birth of a son, one to overthrow Sodom and one to cure Abraham, for one angel does not carry out two commissions. It is Raphael who healed Abraham who went thence to rescue Lot"; Rashi on   Gen   18:2   [cited   19   November   2023].   Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.18.2?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en.   See   also Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah II*, 183; Grossfield, *Targum Neofiti I*, 153. Thus, the narrative looks rather puzzling and still leaves one with several questions and concerns given the inevitable ambiguity that surrounds the Yʜwʜ-men/angels identity variations. Ambiguity plays a role of a representational function in which the visitor may be seen as Yʜwʜ while the men represent him in a physical form; cf. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 60; Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 163. It may also be argued that the syntactic imports of אדני in 18:3 and 18:12 do not appear to be the same since

15 and 17 and the soliloquy of Yʜwʜ in 18:17–19, Abraham's acting as the catalyst for determining the ultimate identity of the visitor can be discerned. He is the focal point in the narrative as the analysis of the verbs ושמרו and אשר־דבר in 18:19 show. These verbs recall the aforesaid Abraham-Yʜwʜ covenant and relate to the verb ויזכר in 19:29, which indicates Abraham's indispensable role in the definition of the identity of the visitor as no other than Yʜwʜ (God)

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in verse 3, אדני, distinguished by the long vowel (*qamats*), may refer to God in the book of Genesis whereas אדני in verse 12 tends to signify a reverential title for a human being. Cf. אדני in *TDOT,* vol. I, 62-63; *NIDOTTE*, vol. I, 259; Clines, *DCH,* vol. I, 133, 136; Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 163; Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary*, 129; Holladay, *CHALOT*, 4; Mounce, *Complete Expository*, 421. Moreover, the consumption of meals by the visitor(s) in Gen 18 may be seen in the context of J's anthropomorphism where the divine is made to take on human attributes, but which at the same time may be overridden by the phenomenon of ambiguity. Although Yʜwʜ can be seen with the men, he may not be thought to do the eating physically. Here, ambiguity could be caused by the uncharacteristic blending of the theophany with a unique anthropomorphism in the narrative. The presence of both the Divine and the human, i.e. Yʜwʜ and the three men, seems to cloud the definition of the actual identity of the visitor(s) in the story; thus render it ambiguous. See Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25–26; Esther Hamori, *"When Gods Were Men": The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 7. Therefore, irrespective of the ambiguity, Abraham's special and unique role as an arch-host in the narrative, his intimate relationship with the visitor(s) as well as friendship with Yʜwʜ in the pericope (Gen 18:1–22–19:1–29) and elsewhere in Genesis seem to provide an ample clue for identifying the visitor as probably Yʜwʜ. In line with Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 161, Abraham serving as a guide to determine the actual identity of the visitor is evident in the opening of the narrative.

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