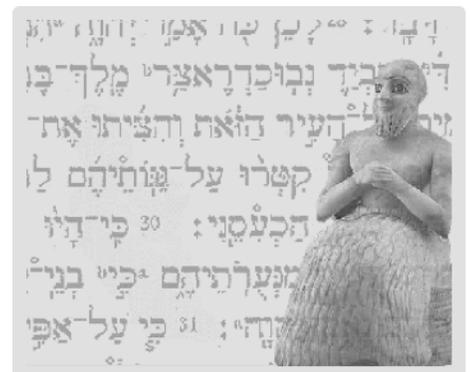


Has Lot Lost the Plot? Detail Omission and a Reconsideration of Genesis 19

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INTRODUCTION

Genesis 19 is an unsavory narrative in many respects. The narrative sees Lot playing host to two divine messengers (Gen 19:1–3).¹ While he is entertaining them, all the men of Sodom surround Lot's house and demand that he bring the two messengers out to them, seemingly intent on doing them harm (19:4–5). Lot exits his house and pleads with the mob not to do this "evil" (19:6–7). Instead, he offers to bring out his own two daughters for the predatory mob to do with them as they see fit (19:8). The mob takes offence at Lot's intervention, and threatens to do him more harm than to the two messengers (19:9). At this juncture, the two messengers pull Lot back inside the house, and urge him to get his family and flee the city before they destroy it (19:10–13).

One particularly distasteful feature of this storyline is Lot's proposal to allow the pack rape of his daughters in 19:8. Yet despite the apparent repugnance of Lot's suggestion, some commentators do not merely seek to explain it, but even attempt to justify it, as will be discussed further on. In this article, I wish to re-examine the narrative and suggest a new understanding of Lot's "shocking offer."² I will begin with a brief survey of certain commentators and their treatments of Lot's suggestion, and then put forward the case for a new reading of the narrative on the basis of a detail omission that fools the reader, leading to a surprising twist in the narrative.

SURVEY OF PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Most commentators on Gen 19 see the story within the framework of ancient Near Eastern hospitality towards guests. Lot is understood to be bound by a "code of honor" and a "sacred duty" of hospitality towards the two messengers who are his

¹ The narrative does not state whether Lot knows that his two visitors are divine messengers. In Gen 19:5, the men of Sodom refer to them simply as "men," seemingly assuming that they are ordinary human beings.

² R. Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 85.

guests.³ The narrative certainly draws a parallel between Lot and the hospitable Abraham in the previous chapter (Gen 18). As Abraham extends hospitality towards the three “men” who arrive at the entrance to his tent by the oaks of Mamre (18:2–5), so Lot extends hospitality to the two “men” who arrive at the gate of Sodom (19:1–3). Abraham, though, has settled in a region whose guilt has not yet reached a dangerous tipping point. The narrative informs us that this would not occur for another 400 years and/or four generations (cf. 15:13–16). Lot, on the other hand, has settled in the cities of the Jordan Basin, whose inhabitants are evil sinners (cf. 13:10–13). Nowhere does the narrative point out a delay in coming judgment. In fact, as the three “men” depart from Abraham’s company in chapter 18, Yahweh (who apparently is one of the “men”),⁴ reveals that the inhabitants of the Jordan Basin have now reached the critical tipping point. Yahweh has come to investigate the immense outcry against the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:20–21), and will now determine the fate of their inhabitants. What holds both Gen 18 and 19 together is a situation of hospitality towards apparent strangers. Abraham’s generous response to the three men in chapter 18 provides a foil for measuring the response of Lot and the men of Sodom in chapter 19.

Hermann Gunkel sees Gen 19 making a harsh contrast between “Lot’s cordial hospitality” and the “shameful behavior of the Sodomites.”⁵ Gunkel characterizes all of Lot’s actions as admirable:

Courageously he appears before the evildoers, coming out of his house. Cautiously he closes the door behind him so that the guests suffer no harm (v. 6). Cordially (רַחֵם) he asks them to do no injustice (v. 7). Magnanimously, he would even prefer to surrender the honor of his own daughters (v. 8). We are supposed to think, “This was an honourable man, who held sacred the right to hospitality! He deserved to be delivered!”⁶

While Gunkel goes on to acknowledge the odium the scene has for modern readers, he proclaims that the “ancient Israelite considered it admirably magnanimous to surrender one’s own daughters for the sake of foreign guests.”⁷ His evidence for this is the similar scene in Judg 19. We must, however, acknowledge that the scene in Judg 19, in which a Levite’s concubine is hor-

³ N. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 135.

⁴ For a discussion on the identification of the messengers, and the phenomenon of divine beings in human guise, see B. J. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 40–41, 199.

⁵ H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. by M. E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 207.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

rifically raped to death, also raises a moral question that by no means supports Gunkel's surmise. The assault and subsequent death of the concubine is described as a superlative evil that is unprecedented in Israel's national existence (Judg 19:30)—“an infamous and degenerate act” (זִמָּה וְנִבְלָה, Judg 20:6). Any suggestion that it would be good for such a thing to happen to any person, be they another man's concubine or one's own daughter, seems callous in the extreme, and a capital offence according to the laws in Deut 22:25–29.⁸ The Deuteronomic regulations condemn rape categorically, and are at pains to differentiate between rape and consensual sex. Rape is condemned in the harshest terms as equivalent to the murder of one's neighbor (Deut 22:26b). Gunkel's appraisal that “Lot's offer is by no means a ‘sin,’ ”⁹ is incongruent with the enormity of the situation it seeks to engender, and goes against the attitudes towards rape evident elsewhere in biblical literature.

In his International Critical Commentary of 1930, John Skinner is even more positive than Gunkel. He gives a glowing assessment of Lot's proposal to give up his daughters to the men of Sodom. Rather than focus on it as a suggestion of rape, he depicts it as a noble “sacrifice” of his daughters' honor.¹⁰ As such, Skinner sees the incident as being to Lot's credit as a “courageous champion of the obligations of hospitality in a

⁸ In the scenario of Deut 22:28–29, the rapist is permitted to live, but only so that the victim can become his wife and, thereby, have permanent access to all his resources. In this instance, the rapist is given the equivalent of a life sentence that forces him to compensate the victim for the rest of his life, because she has no other male relative to provide for her. The perpetrator is thus forced to do what the victim's (would be) husband does in the previous scenario (Deut 22:25–27). This is the only reason for the commuting of the death sentence in 22:28–29. For further discussion, see my public lecture, “The Bible's Attitude to Rape,” accessible at <https://vimeo.com/98386481>.

In addition, H. Brunner draws attention to Papyrus Insigner, a Demotic wisdom text dating to the Ptolemaic Era. Amongst the papyrus' manifold maxims is the statement that the stranger “must forget the crime of (being treated as) a woman because he is a stranger” (Papyrus Insigner 28.22). Brunner interprets this as a reference to homosexual rape, arguing that the instruction teaches that a stranger has no right to protest against being raped, but should rather accept and simply try to forget it. See Brunner, “Gen 19 und das ‘Frauenverbrechen,’ ” *Biblische Notizen* 44 (1988): 21–22. However, rather than advocating the acceptability of raping a guest, the text appears to be describing the possible harsh realities that strangers might experience. For a translation of the Papyrus, see M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings. Volume III: The Late Period* (Berkeley, CA: university of California Press, 1980), 191–217 (esp. 213).

⁹ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 207.

¹⁰ J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 307. This is despite the fact that Lot's daughters have no say in the matter.

situation of extreme embarrassment.”¹¹ However, even within a collectivist ancient society, we must distinguish between personal sacrifice for the sake of hospitality to a stranger, and the obligation one has towards kin, especially to protect and ensure the wellbeing of one’s children.

Jephthah’s moral dilemma in Judg 11:34–40 gives us useful leverage for this issue. Jephthah inadvertently commits himself by oath to sacrificing his own daughter after returning victoriously from battle. The act of taking an oath, especially to offer thanksgiving to Yahweh for victory, may itself be a noble task. However, the narrative strongly disapproves of Jephthah’s specific oath in this instance. Phyllis Trible interprets Jephthah’s words to his daughter in 11:35a (“Oh, my daughter! You have brought me low. You have turned me to ruin.”) as an indication that he is blaming his daughter for the situation.¹² However, this must be tempered by Jephthah’s very next line, in which he admits, “I’ve opened my big mouth to Yahweh and I cannot take it back” (וְאָנֹכִי פָּצִיתִי־פִי אֶל־יְהוָה וְלֹא אוּכַל לָשׁוּב) (Judg 11:35).¹³ Jephthah’s victory turns into defeat, and both are his own doing. This leaves Jephthah in a terrible dilemma: save his daughter and risk divine disfavor, or keep his oath and lose his daughter. There is no good outcome in either option. Only his daughter’s consent to be sacrificed tips the scales of the dilemma. She voluntarily bears the cost of the situation, but her consent does not thereby exonerate Jephthah’s rash oath or retrieve the situation. On the contrary, the entire incident is completely tragic. In the midst of victory there is defeat, and an innocent life is lost. This forms part of the narrative strategy of Judges to highlight the flaws inherent in Israel’s leaders and the situations they engender within Israel.¹⁴ As the narrative progresses, the characters become steadily more flawed, leading to ever more tragic consequences, finishing with the rape of the Levite’s concubine and the practical implosion of Israelite society in its aftermath.

In light of this, Lot does not in any way appear noble in offering his daughters for pack rape. Quite to the contrary, he appears callous in the extreme for voluntarily putting his daughters in such a deplorable position, even if there is an element of duress in the situation. Furthermore, at no point do

¹¹ Ibid., 307.

¹² P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 102.

¹³ In translation I have opted here for an English idiom (“opened my big mouth”) that conveys the sense of speaking rashly with dire consequences, which is implied by the Hebrew expression פָּצִיתִי־פִי. For a discussion of Jephthah’s words here, carefully chosen to denote his previously rash words, and its intertextual connotations, see D. Böhler, *Jiftach und die Tora* (Österreichische Biblische Studien; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008), 291–92.

¹⁴ For more detailed consideration of how Judges presents “the failure of the judges’ leadership” (267), see Y. Amit’s monumental study, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Lot's daughters seek to tip the situation by consenting to their father's request. Indeed, one can hardly imagine them giving consent to such a proposal. Instead, they are completely silent and absent at this point of the narrative, allowing us to focus on Lot's suggestion and be thoroughly shocked by it. Though protecting his guests may be a noble thing, the narrative does not view Lot's suggestion as a noble course of action. Rather, he seems on the verge of committing a crime against his own family. This, in turn, seems to be sealing the fate of Sodom as a city of wicked inhabitants who are deserving of death—Lot included!

Gordon Wenham's treatment stops short of endorsing Lot's proposal, but is still somewhat sympathetic in appealing to the notion of Lot's hospitality. Wenham concedes that ancient audiences were probably as shocked by Lot's suggestion as modern readers are. However, he sees Lot's use of the phrase "for this reason" (בִּי-עַל-כֵּן, Gen 19:8) as functioning to curb this shock. Wenham claims this phrase draws attention to the need Lot feels to protect his guests. "Putting their welfare above his daughters' may have been questionable, but it shows just how committed he was to being a good host."¹⁵ Gad Dishy has a similar appraisal, arguing that Lot's proposal "detracts from his righteousness," and yet "his positive differentiation in taking in the guests instills in us the desire that somehow Lot at least should be spared from the impending doom."¹⁶

Victor Hamilton gives Lot's reputation less sheen. He labels Lot a "villain" who is willing to pawn his daughters as victims to a sexually aroused mob. Ironically, Lot falls prey to his own daughters' sexual advances later in the narrative (19:30–38). "One licentious act deserves another, with villain and victim exchanging roles."¹⁷ For Hamilton, the daughters practically take revenge against their father for his wanton proposal. And yet, Hamilton still explains Lot's proposal in terms of "Oriental ethics" that make the host culpable for any harm that befalls a guest.¹⁸ To illustrate this ethical principle, he refers to the Ugaritic Epic of Aqhat, in which Baal describes a model son as, amongst other things, one who "drives out those who would abuse his houseguest" (Aqhat I:30).¹⁹ Therefore,

¹⁵ G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), 56.

¹⁶ G. Dishy, "Saving Zoar: How Did Lot Succeed?" *JBQ* 38 (2010): 212.

¹⁷ V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹ Ugaritic: *gr̄.d. 'šb.lnh*. See S. B. Parker (ed.), *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature/Scholars Press, 1997), 53. Although Parker translates this phrase "to drive his trouble away," there is, as Hamilton perceives, some ambiguity in the Ugaritic, and good grounds for seeing it relating to the protection of a guest (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 36). Furthermore, the common motif of threatened harm to a houseguest is, most likely, a type scene familiar to many parts of the ancient Near East.

while we may take exception to the content of Lot's proposal, Hamilton argues that we must see it as Lot's attempt to do what a good host must do, namely protect his guests. By offering the mob his two daughters rather than the two messengers, Lot opts for the lesser of two evils. Claus Westermann comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that Lot's proposal is "a desperate offer that knows no way out," and is therefore "aimed at preventing something worse in accordance with that age's way of understanding."²⁰ However, as we have seen, the Jephthah narrative calls this into question. What we have in Gen 19 is not the retrieval of a bad situation, but rather the unfolding of an ever-worsening situation that can have no good outcomes at all. Whatever happens after Lot makes his proposal, someone is clearly going to get hurt, and the entire city will be destroyed for its abject depravity.

Thus far, the commentators on Gen 19 see the chapter as playing upon an expectation of hospitality and protection for guests. Robert Alter disagrees with this. He argues that the narrative does not see Lot trying to be "the perfect ancient Near Eastern host in rather trying circumstances," but rather passes implicit judgment on him as an "accomplice in the multiple enactment of a capital crime directed against his own daughters."²¹ Alter sees the entire narrative setting up an altogether negative view of Lot. However, given the affinities with the parallel story of Abraham in Gen 18, we cannot so easily set aside the issue of hospitality, regardless of any shadow it may or may not cast over Lot. As Gerald Janzen recognizes, the motif certainly invites comparison.²² Importantly, it provides a platform whereby the reader may juxtapose the two sets of births that result from the parallel narratives: the son of the promise who will be born legitimately to Abraham and his wife, and the sons who will be born illegitimately to Lot and his daughters.

Randall Bailey takes a slightly different approach, reading Gen 19 as a spy narrative.²³ By drawing comparisons with Num 13 (Moses sending spies into Canaan), Josh 2:1–4 (Joshua sending two spies into Jericho), 2 Sam 10:1–5 (David sending emissaries to the Ammonite king, Hanun), Bailey suggests that the arrival of the two messengers at Sodom would have aroused the suspicion of Sodom's population that they were spies. Accordingly, the men of Sodom launch a military operation and surround the house. Their request that Lot bring out the men so that they might "know" (יָדָע) them is not a desire

²⁰ C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1985), 301–2.

²¹ R. Alter, "Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative," in R. M. Schwarz (ed.), *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 146–60.

²² J. G. Janzen, *Genesis 12–50: Abraham and All the Families of the Earth* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 61.

²³ R. C. Bailey, "Why Do Readers Believe Lot? Genesis 19 Reconsidered," *Old Testament Essays* 23 (2010): 519–48.

for homosexual rape, but a demand to determine whether or not the two messengers staying with Lot pose a threat to the security of Sodom. If they verify a threat, the two messengers would likely be publicly humiliated and sent away, just as Hanun, the king of the Ammonites, humiliates and sends away David's envoys (2 Sam 10:1–5).²⁴

Bailey's alternative reading does not stop there, for he also reads Lot's offer in a different light. He examines instances of "pimping" type scenes in the Bible, in which a prominent male figure assumes that the locals in the land where he has migrated must be sexually depraved and intent on harming him. Accordingly, the male figure seeks self-preservation by sexualizing the body of his wife, offering her to the perceived sexual wiles of the locals in a bid to save himself. Bailey points particularly to the patriarchal narratives where Abra(ha)m does this twice (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18), and Isaac once (26:1–11).²⁵ He also points to the Abram-Sarai-Hagar narrative (Gen 16) and the Jephthah narrative (Judg 11:34–40) as further examples in which a male figure tries to solve his own dilemma by exploiting a female body.²⁶ Bailey sees Lot doing essentially the same thing in Gen 19. On their arrival at Sodom, Lot offers the two messengers the opportunity to wash their feet (Gen 19:2), which is often used as a euphemism for sex (cf. 2 Sam 11:8–11).²⁷ Bailey suggests it is unclear whether Lot intends to offer them his wife, his daughters, or even himself, but his hospitality takes on sexual overtones. And given Lot's patriarchy, it is likely that he is offering his daughters to the messengers. Then, when the men of Sodom surround Lot's house in a military operation to investigate the two messengers he is harboring, Lot assumes they must be on a sexual rampage. After all, they are locals and, as any good patriarch would do, Lot assumes they are sex-crazed. This shouldn't surprise us, especially given Lot's own style of hospitality. But now, fearing for his own safety and honor, Lot offers the bodies of his daughters to the men of Sodom. Lot, however, has misread the situation, interpreting the men of Sodom's defense initiative as sexual overture.

Bailey's reading has much to commend it. In particular, viewing Gen 19 as a spy narrative is warranted to a certain extent. Earlier in the patriarchal narratives, we read of Chedorlaomer's invasion of the cities of the Jordan Basin, in which he takes away much spoil and many prisoners of war from Sodom, including Lot and his family (Gen 14). Since the residents of Sodom have fallen prey to a military threat before, it is only natural that they be suspicious of the two messengers staying with Lot, who is himself a foreigner in their midst. Furthermore, the vocabulary of the movement of Sodom's men is sug-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 541.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 525.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 525–39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 540.

gestive of a military operation.²⁸ We know from Gen 18:20–21 that the two messengers are indeed on a reconnaissance mission, so they are functioning pragmatically as divine spies.

However, there are three further factors that push us to reconsider certain elements of Bailey’s reading. First, Bailey states that Gen 19:8b demonstrates that Lot’s “main concern is to protect *his* honor in terms of the shelter he is providing under his roof more so than even protecting the lives of his guests.”²⁹ However, the men of Sodom demand that Lot bring the two messengers out so that they might know *them* (Gen 19:5)—not Lot.³⁰ All of Lot’s subsequent discourse with the men of Sodom (Gen 19:7–8) is then configured around the two messengers, rather than his own person. He points out that the men of Sodom are seeking to do an evil thing against the messengers. And the main verbal subject in the clause relating to the protection of Lot’s roof (כִּי־עַל־כֶּן בָּאוּ בְּצֵל קַרְתִּי, Gen 19:8) is the messengers. In other words, while Lot goes beyond mere obligation and chooses to associate himself deliberately with the two messengers, he correctly perceives that the central threat lies against them, not him. Only when he has pointed this out do the men of Sodom then threaten Lot in addition to the messengers (Gen 19:9).

Second, in Gen 12, 20, and 26, Bailey proposes that the male figure wrongly assumes the sexual appetites of the locals and their likelihood of killing him, for he comes to no harm and receives his wife back.³¹ On this basis, Bailey determines that Lot misinterprets the actions of the men of Sodom as sexually motivated. However, in Gen 12, 20, and 26, the locals do indeed take the patriarch’s wife. Furthermore, it is only divine intervention that leads to the restraining of the local king’s sexual appetite, the return of the patriarch’s wife, and the subsequent departure of the patriarch in safety. In other words, there is no indication in these episodes that the patriarch’s fears were misplaced. On the contrary, they seem at least in part to be realized, occasioning the need for divine intervention. Furthermore, in Gen 19, the response of the men of Sodom to Lot’s intervention is largely xenophobic, leading to a direct threat against him also (Gen 19:9). Whether it is sexual in nature or not, there is a clear and present danger. In line with the “pimping” type scenes, then, we may very well expect the need for

²⁸ Ibid., 535.

²⁹ Ibid., 543.

³⁰ The root **יָדַע**, which conventionally denotes “knowledge,” can connote sexual knowledge in contexts where relational knowledge is on view (e.g. Gen 4:1; Num 31:17; 1 Kgs 1:4).

³¹ Bailey, “Why Do Readers Believe Lot?” 526–27. We should note that in Gen 20 there is no indication that Abraham fears for his life on account of Sarah. It may be that the type scene has this expectation built into it, since both Gen 12:11–13 and 26:7 do state that the patriarchal figure fears for his life. However, the omission of such a statement in Gen 20 could just as easily set this particular instance of the type scene apart from the other two. It is difficult to determine which is the correct surmise.

divine intervention to turn the scene around. And this is precisely what we get in Gen 19. This is not to identify Gen 19 as a “pimping” type scene, since there are clear narrative differences. Rather, it is to point out that Lot’s appraisal of the situation does not seem off the mark, and the response of the men of Sodom to his intervention confirms an underlying hostility that precedes the incident. This, in turn, raises the need for someone else to intervene on Lot’s behalf. Abraham’s discourse with Yahweh in the previous chapter has set us up to expect divine intervention.

Third, in Gen 13:13, the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah are characterized as evil and sinning greatly against Yahweh. The text at that stage does not elucidate what the nature of their sin is. And when Yahweh reveals to Abraham that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah was great (18:20), we are still none the wiser as readers. The detail omission is tantalizing, inviting readers to speculate about what their sin might be.³² The only parameters given to us come through Abraham’s bargaining with Yahweh in which he contrasts the righteous and the wicked (18:23–33). In the soliloquy that precedes this bargaining (18:17–19), Yahweh describes Abraham and his future progeny as those who “will keep the way of Yahweh by practicing righteousness and justice” (18:19). These terms resound with the kinds of norms contained in the subsequent books of the Pentateuch. They are broad rather than narrow terms, but they align the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah with the Amorites some 400 years later, who are evicted from the land for their wicked, unjust, and detestable practices (cf. 15:13–16). Furthermore, given Lot’s connection to Abraham, we easily understand that Abraham is bargaining for his nephew’s life. This means the narrative frames Lot as a righteous person.

RECONSIDERING LOT’S SHOCKING OFFER

This leads us now to reconsider the nature of Lot’s shocking offer in Gen 19:8. If the narrative sets us up to expect Lot to be a righteous man, what are we to make of his apparently scandalous proposal to give his two daughters for pack rape? We can see how this dilemma leads commentators either to attempt to exonerate Lot, or else to reinterpret Lot’s character completely. The way forward lies in identifying detail omission. We have already mentioned this narrative device, but here we need to define it and notice its particular use in Gen 19.

Detail omission occurs when a narrator deliberately hides information from the reader at one point in a narrative, only to reveal the information at a later point. It is a rhetorical device whereby the presentation of information within a narrative is delayed, in order to control the reading process, shape the reader’s expectations (either consciously or subconsciously)

³² Bailey (*ibid.*, 541) acknowledges this detail omission for Gen 18:20–21, but uses it as to characterize Yahweh as a capricious deity.

and, thereby, affect the reader's experience of the narrative.³³ Depending on whether the reader is aware of the hidden information, this creates either an element of curiosity or surprise. These are two of the three key dynamics that Meir Sternberg identifies within narratives (the third being suspense).³⁴

First, the reader may be aware that the narrator is withholding information because of a particular cue in the narrative. This produces curiosity, which Sternberg sees as a device inviting the reader to reflect on previously accomplished facts in the story and try to fill in a gap or resolve a tension that these facts raise. This contrasts with suspense, which looks forward to potential outcomes rather than backwards to accomplished facts.³⁵ We have already noticed such a detail omission engendering curiosity in Gen 13:13 and 18:20. There the reader discovers that the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah are wicked sinners, but does not know exactly what their sin consists of. This form of detail omission invites the reader to pick up other cues and piece together the information, or look for a moment in the narrative when the information is finally revealed. We can term this "Known Detail Omission," and it produces curiosity in the way we read Gen 19.

The second form of detail omission occurs without the reader's knowledge. That is, the narrator withholds critical information from the reader but gives no indication that there is such critical information. It is only when the narrator reveals this information that the reader becomes aware that such information existed all along, thus producing surprise. Whereas suspense and curiosity are generated consciously as a reader actively attempts to resolve perceived gaps and tensions unfolding within a narrative, surprise occurs subconsciously, passively, and suddenly. As Sternberg puts it, "the production of surprise depends on the reader's being lured into a false certitude of knowledge."³⁶ The narrative must be ordered in such a way that the reader cannot recognize the existence of a gap or tension that needs resolving. Surprise then occurs when there is an "unpredictable reordering" alerting the reader that an "imperceptible disordering" had been occurring all along.³⁷ This revelation creates a sense of surprise that allows the reader to reassess the narrative and derive fresh conclusions. Usually this involves a new understanding and reordering of the entire narrative. We can term this "Unknown Detail Omission."

Gen 19 contains a masterful use of Unknown Detail Omission creating surprise. The narrator exploits ambiguities in

³³ For detailed discussion of such rhetorical or reader-oriented models of narrative shaping, see M. Perry, "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates its Meanings [With an Analysis of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily']," *Poetics Today* 1.1–2 (1979): 35–64, 311–61.

³⁴ M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 264–320.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 283–84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

the narrative to fool the reader into ordering the narrative a particular way, and then surprises the reader at a later point by revealing that the reader has ordered the situation wrongly. This begins with Lot's offer of hospitality to the two messengers in Gen 19:2. Lot says to them:

הִנֵּה נָא־אֲדֹנָי סוּרוּ נָא אֶל־בַּיִת עֲבָדְכֶם וְלִינוּ וְרַחְצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם
וְהִשְׁכַּמְתֶּם וְהִלַּכְתֶּם לְדַרְכְּכֶם

“Here you are, my lords! Come by your servant's house, stay, wash your feet, then rise early, and go on your way.”

Bailey rightly picks up the ambiguity in the phrase “wash your feet,” which can be a euphemism for sex.³⁸ The ambiguity creates curiosity through a known detail omission: the reader knows that Lot is offering hospitality to the two messengers, but does not know what kind of hospitality he is offering. Is Lot offering the messengers an opportunity for sexual gratification? Or is Lot simply offering them the opportunity literally to wash their feet. We may compare the scene with Gen 18:4, in which Abraham also offers his guests the chance to wash their feet. However, Abraham's offer is unambiguously literal: he offers to bring some water, thereby ruling out the possibility that he is offering sexual gratification to his guests. But such is not the case with Lot. The known detail omission leads the reader to wonder whether Lot is a righteous man like his uncle, Abraham, or a licentious host. What's more, Lot is in Sodom—a city characterized by its wicked inhabitants. And in the previous chapter, Abraham's bargaining with God has set the reader up to see whether ten righteous people can be found in Sodom (18:32). The reader hopes that Lot is a righteous man and, along with Abraham, that ten righteous people can be found within its gates to spare the city, including Lot and his family. There is, therefore, a lot riding on this encounter (pun intended), but at this stage the reader does not know whether Lot's hospitality is a good thing or a bad thing. Furthermore, in Gen 18:5, Abraham's three guests accept his unambiguous offer of righteous hospitality immediately. But such is not the case with the two messengers in Gen 19. On the contrary, they initially turn down Lot's offer. This heightens the mystery and tension. Do they perhaps sense that Lot is offering them inappropriate hospitality? Has Lot himself become just like the wicked sinners of Sodom? Lot needs to urge the messengers to stay with him before they finally accept. And as they go to his house, the reader prepares to see just what kind of hospitality Lot does offer. The narrative produces crucial curiosity at this point. The fate of Sodom hangs critically in the balance.

The situation is compounded by a further ambiguity in the temporal clause at the start of Gen 19:4. The clause reads “Before they bedded down” (טָרַם יִשְׁכְּבוּ).³⁹ The reader is led to

³⁸ Bailey, “Why Do Readers Believe Lot?” 540.

³⁹ This translation is largely prompted by Butler's translation of שכב in Josh 2:1, 8 (T. C. Butler, *Joshua* [Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983], 31; Bailey, “Why Do Readers Believe

ask whether this is simply lying down to sleep for the night, or whether it also has a sexual connotation. The action does not actually occur, as is indicated by the adverb “before” (טָרַם). However, the narrator employs the power of suggestion by framing the next incident in the episode with reference to this aborted action. This not only implies that the arrival of the men of Sodom at Lot’s door is an interruption, but that the act of “bedding down” (however it is viewed) was certainly about to occur. Again, the reader hopes the potential action was innocent, but the narrator does not give sufficient clarity for the reader to be sure. The ambiguities here produce considerable curiosity and different potential interpretations of the narrative.

At this point, the men of Sodom surround the house and demand Lot bring the messengers out in order to “know” them. This too is another ambiguity because of the semantic range and possible connotations of the verb יָדַע (“to know”), which include both knowing factually and knowing sexually. Are they simply carrying out a defensive investigation in order to “know” facts, as Bailey suggests, or are they demanding a sexual encounter? The ambiguity instilled in the narrative to this point heightens the stakes here. In either case, the reader is likely to interpret the scene through the lens of the narrator’s earlier note that the men of Sodom were very wicked (13:13). If the reader believes Lot has offered sexual gratification to his guests, then the reader will conclude that Lot has become like the residents of Sodom: a wicked sinner. As such, the reader will interpret the demand of the Sodomites as asking for their own sexual encounter with the guests. But even if the reader sees the scene as a defensive operation, the characterization of the Sodomites will lead the reader to expect that they will brutalize the two messengers. Rape of civilians was common enough in ancient societies (cf. Judg 5:30; Lam 5:11; Zech 14:2). As Janzen highlights, ancient warfare sought to break down city walls and gates in order to penetrate and desecrate a city. The symbolic connection between sex and politics was often embodied (in the fullest sense of the word) through the “diabolical sacrament” of the rape of defeated inhabitants.⁴⁰ When we recall that the two messengers had arrived at Sodom’s gate (Gen 19:1) and, through Lot’s hospitality, had entered the city, we may begin to see how the inhabitants of Sodom might have thought their city had been covertly infiltrated by potential conquerors. Their demand to “know” the two messengers could, therefore, be understood as seeking to respond in kind—giving conquerors a taste of their own bitter medicine. And since the reader knows that the men of Sodom were very wicked (13:13), the reader expects them to be capable of such atrocities towards perceived militants.

Furthermore, the connection between righteousness, justice, and the way of Yahweh in Gen 18:19 points to Pentateuchal norms, which include instructions for dealing with pris-

Lot?” 522).

⁴⁰ Janzen, *Genesis 12–50*, 62.

oners of war and sexual ethics (cf. Lev 18:22; 20:13; Deut 21:14). Since the wickedness of Sodom is contrasted with these kinds of norms, the reader expects the Sodomites are capable of a range of heinous crimes. Their subsequent threat to do more harm to Lot than to the messengers (Gen 19:9) simply confirms this intent to brutalize. All these considerations lead the reader to suspect that the desire of the Sodomites to “know” (Gen 19:5) the two messengers is not simply an ambiguity, but rather a double entendre. They intend to find out whether they are spies *and* to harm them through sexual assault.

In Gen 19:6–8, Lot makes his shocking offer. He has two daughters “who have never known a man” to offer to the mob to assuage their penchant for sex and violence. This offer is a pivotal moment in the narrative, for up until this point all of Lot’s words and actions have been ambiguous. Now the reader perceives Lot’s true colors, as he unambiguously shows that he is every bit as abusive as the men of Sodom, dashing any hope that he might have been a righteous man.⁴¹ While the Sodomites had wanted to “know” and brutalize the two messengers, Lot now offers the “knowledge” and brutalization of his daughters. The range of Pentateuchal norms mentioned view the brutalizing of women as heinous and potentially deserving of the death penalty. This causes the reader to evaluate Lot’s previously ambiguous offer of hospitality as inappropriate: he did indeed offer sexual gratification to the two messengers, and this must be why they had initially refused. Their final acquiescence to stay in his house, therefore, is not evidence of the messengers’ depravity, but evidence of Lot’s persistent wickedness. It turns the messengers’ reconnaissance into a mission to prove Lot’s depravity. To underline this, the narrator uses the same verb (פָּצַר) to describe the pressure Lot exerts on the messengers to accept his hospitality as the pressure the men of Sodom now put on Lot to bring the messengers out to them. Since migrating to the Jordan Basin in Gen 13:12, it seems the bad company of Sodom has corrupted Lot’s character. There is not a single righteous person in the city. Sodom’s (and Lot’s) fate is sealed!

Janzen suggests that Lot’s offer of his daughters might not be literal. He notes that in the similar incident in Judg 19, only one of the two women offered to the mob is actually raped. On that basis, Janzen suggests that the host who makes the offer has no intention of actually giving up his own offspring for rape. Therefore, it is possible (though, Janzen notes, not cer-

⁴¹ On this front, the study of K. B. Low is of great interest. She brings feminist psychoanalytical perspectives and an experience of personal family trauma to bear on an understanding of Lot’s treatment of his daughters. She concludes that Lot sexually abuses his daughters by controlling their sexuality. See Low, “The Sexual Abuse of Lot’s Daughters: Reconceptualizing Kinship for the Sake of our Daughters,” *JFSR* 26.2 (2010): 37–54. While this paper ultimately differs from her conclusion, Low’s observations form a useful preliminary platform from which to view the episode, and highlights the initial effect it is designed to have on the reader.

tain) that Lot did not literally intend to offer his daughters, but rather is seeking to shock the mob into realizing exactly what it is they are seeking to do to his guests.⁴² This is an intriguing possibility, but two factors suggest it may not adequately describe the situations in both Judg 19 and Gen 19. First, in Judg 19, a woman is indeed raped, having been given up to the mob by someone inside the house. Although the text is ambiguous as to whether the Levite or the owner of the house pushes the concubine out to the mob (Judg 19:25), it is clear that someone who should have protected her failed to do so, and brutally handed her over to abuse. Second, Lot's offer of his daughters essentially mirrors the demand of the Sodomites (the rape of two victims). The narrative, therefore, does not let us exonerate Lot. On the contrary, it condemns him as strongly as it condemns the men of Sodom.⁴³ The narrative uses the reader's revulsion at rape to turn hopes and sympathies against Lot. His own appeal to the rules of hospitality is thereby not designed to make the reader sympathetic towards him, but rather to show that Lot has "lost the plot." He is using what is essentially a good code as justification for a crime against his own daughters.

Nonetheless, the narrative does take a surprising turn. The messengers pull Lot back inside the house and stun the mob outside, thus preventing them from finding their way to the door to cause harm (Gen 19:10–11). But then, rather than condemn Lot for his depravity, the messengers ask (19:12–13):

עד מִי־לָךְ פֹּה חָתָן וּבָנִיךָ וּבְנֵי־לֶךְ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ בְּעִיר הַזֹּאת
מִזֶּה־הַמָּקוֹם: כִּי־מִשְׁחָתִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי־גָדֹל
צַעֲקָתָם אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁלַחְנוּ יְהוָה לְשַׁחֲתָהּ:

"Do you have anyone else here: a son-in-law, or your sons or daughters—anyone else in the town who belongs to you? Get them out of this place, because we are about to destroy this place. Since the outcry against them is so great before Yahweh, he has sent us to destroy it."

Why would the messengers seek to save Lot when he has just unambiguously demonstrated that morally he is every bit as corrupt as the men of Sodom? Has not Lot sealed his own fate along with the rest of the city? Evidently not! But why not?

Gen 19:14 is the moment the narrator reveals a key detail that has been withheld from the reader up until this point. The verse states:

וַיֵּצֵא לוֹט וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל־חֲתָנָיו לֵקְחֵי בְנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר קוּמוּ צְאוּ מִן־
הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי־מִשְׁחִית יְהוָה אֶת־הָעִיר וַיְהִי כַמְצַחֵק בְּעֵינֵי
חֲתָנָיו:

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law who were married to his daughters. He said, "Get up! Get out of this place, because Yahweh is about to destroy the town." But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.

⁴² Janzen, *Genesis 12–50*, 63–64.

⁴³ Cf. Alter, "Sodom as Nexus," 151–52.

Surprisingly, Lot's daughters are not virgins! On the contrary, they are already married. Until this moment, the narrator has exploited the story's ambiguities to make the reader think Lot's daughters are virgins and just inside the door of his house. The reader has even come to believe that Lot might have offered his two daughters to the two messengers for sex, before the mob of Sodom interrupted, leading Lot to offer them to the mob instead. But this is clearly not the case. Lot apparently has sons-in-law (חַתָּנִים), and just to underscore this fact, the narrator employs a tautology: "his sons-in-law who were married to his daughters" (חַתָּנָיו לְקַחֵי בְּנֹתָיו). Lot also has to go out (יֵצֵא) to them, because they are not in the house with him. This can only mean that Lot's daughters are also not in the house with him. This, then, explains why the messengers have to ask Lot whether he has any sons-in-law, sons, or daughters in the city (19:12), for they simply cannot tell from the confines of Lot's house. And eventually, when Lot returns to the house, the messengers tell him to take his wife and his two daughters "who have been found" (הַנִּמְצָאֹת, 19:15) out of the city before it is destroyed. The word הַנִּמְצָאֹת ("who have been found") is used only of Lot's two daughters, and does not include Lot's wife.⁴⁴ Furthermore, its use makes no sense if Lot's daughters were already in the house, as presumably Lot's wife was. However, it makes good sense if Lot has indeed gone out, found them, and brought them back to his house, albeit without their husbands, who do not believe destruction is imminent. This also precludes the possibility that Lot had more than two daughters—that is, two unmarried daughters in the house whom he tries to substitute for the divine messengers, and other married daughters living elsewhere in the city whose husbands do not believe Lot's warning. At the end of the episode, there are indeed only two daughters with Lot (19:30), and these are the two daughters who had been found (הַנִּמְצָאֹת) in 19:15.

All this means that by withholding the key detail that Lot's daughters are already married and living elsewhere in the city, the narrator has fooled the reader into believing that Lot's daughters have been in the house all along, and that Lot is a degenerate father. So masterfully does the narrator fool the reader, that most subsequent translators are thoroughly fooled too. Instead of rightly translating the phrase חַתָּנָיו לְקַחֵי בְּנֹתָיו as "his sons-in-law who had married his daughters," translators usually depict them as "sons-in-law who were to marry his daughters" (NRSV, ESV; cf. RSV, NIV, HSCB, NET). They cannot conceive of Lot's daughters as anything but virgins immediately inside Lot's house. Even Robert Alter, who rightly recognizes that the narrative is here revealing previously concealed information in a surprising way, still sees the daughters

⁴⁴ Note the use of two direct definite object markers in the clause (Gen 19:15d) to distinguish very clearly between the two objects of the clause: (1) Lot's wife; and (2) Lot's two daughters who have been found.

as betrothed, rather than already married.⁴⁵ The LXX translates the phrase well in quite literal fashion (τοὺς γαμβροὺς αὐτοῦ τοὺς εἰληφότας τὰς θυγατέρας αὐτοῦ). Only the KJV and JPS translate the phrase correctly among English versions.

Once this key detail about Lot's daughters is revealed, the narrative suddenly turns on its head. The reader is forced to reassess the entire episode in light of this new information. Lot did not have two virgin daughters to offer to the mob outside his door. So why would he say that he did? Two factors help explain it. The first is the hospitality code of the ancient Near East. Gen 18 depicts Abraham as a paragon of hospitality, and the juxtaposition of that chapter before the Sodom episode affords easy comparison between Abraham and Lot. Furthermore, we have already mentioned the Ugaritic Epic of Aqhat, which describes the model son as one "who drives out those who would abuse his houseguest" (Aqhat I:30). Protection of guests was indeed a virtue.⁴⁶ Lot feels compelled, therefore, to protect the two messengers to whom he has offered the shelter of his roof.

The second factor is that Lot perceives the wicked intent of the Sodomite mob to brutalize the two messengers. His offer of two virgin daughters is a ruse designed to appeal to the sexual appetite of the mob. It seems Lot hopes they might accept the offer, and while they wait for him to go and bring out his daughters, he might be able to smuggle his guests safely out of town. In other words, Lot's shocking offer is a decoy to buy time. Even our translators fall for this decoy completely, which shows how skillfully the narrative depicts Lot as a quick thinker. Lot actually has no intention of bringing out two virgin daughters for pack rape, because he does not have two virgin daughters. Rather he is intent on ensuring the safety of his guests. The problem, however, is that Lot's house is surrounded. As well intentioned as we now discover him to be, his ruse probably doesn't stand a chance of working. This then explains the need for divine intervention, as the two messengers stun the mob and achieve for Lot what he had hoped his decoy might have done: buy time.

This also enables Lot's free movement. But despite it, Lot eventually hesitates to leave the city (Gen 19:16). This hesitation is critical in light of Abraham's negotiation over Sodom in the previous chapter. Despite Abraham's best bargaining efforts (18:32), not even ten righteous men can be found in Sodom to avert the city's destruction. Not even Lot's sons-in-law qualify, though even their inclusion would not be enough to avert destruction as per Abraham's terms to which Yahweh has agreed. Lot, the only righteous man in Sodom, must therefore flee the city before its cataclysmic downfall, but he hesitates.⁴⁷ His righteousness is probably what sparks Yahweh's

⁴⁵ Ibid., 151–52.

⁴⁶ We may also add 1 Sam 21 to the evidence. In that episode, the priest Ahimelech gives shelter to David who is on the run from Saul.

⁴⁷ J. C. Exum reads the chapter through a psychoanalytical grid as

compassion for him (19:16). And so, the two messengers physically escort Lot, his wife, and his two daughters “who have been found” out of the town. Lot, despite his quick thinking, was unable to safeguard his guests and smuggle them out of town. Yet, because of his own righteousness,⁴⁸ he is not destroyed with the city, but is ironically safeguarded and smuggled out of town by those very same guests. Once again, the narrative takes an ironic turn.

THE AFTERMATH

The ensuing destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah does not surprise us, for we have been primed to expect it. What perhaps is unexpected is a further ironic twist in the aftermath of the story (19:30–38). Lot’s two daughters offer their father inappropriate hospitality by getting him drunk and bedding down with him. The narrator’s original detail omission led us to suspect that Lot might have been offering this kind of nocturnal liaison to the two messengers, only to surprise us by redeeming Lot’s reputation with the revelation that Lot’s daughters had indeed “known” a man and were not in their father’s house. And yet, the tables are turned once again as these two non-virginal daughters come to where their father is and sleep with him in order to be impregnated by him. There is no ambiguity in these actions.

What’s more, Lot does not “know” that he has committed the detestable act of incest. The irony is palpable. Alter, who (along with many others) sees the girls as betrothed virgins, surmises that their virginity is necessary for the twist in the story. He views Lot as having offered the men of Sodom his

expressing “a kind of collective androcentric unconscious.” Accordingly, she sees Lot’s hesitation here as the narrator being subconsciously torn between a desire to flee to the hills where incest may be committed, and suppressing such a repulsive desire by staying. See Exum, “Desire Distorted and Exhibited: Lot and His Daughters in Psychoanalysis, Painting, and Film,” in S. M. Olyan and R. C. Culley (eds.), *“A Wise and Discerning Mind”*: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long (Brown Judaic Studies 325; Providence, RI: Brown University, 2000), 83–108 (esp. 87, 93).

⁴⁸ Some Rabbinic commentators see Lot as distinctly unrighteous, understanding his original choice to dwell in Sodom as motivated by a desire to engage in sexual promiscuity, which comes to the fore in the way he treats his daughters (see *Midrash Tanhuma VaYera* 12). I. N. Rashkow takes this a step further by suggesting, at the prompt of Freudian psychoanalysis, that Lot’s offer of his daughters to the men of Sodom betrays Lot’s own desire for an incestuous relationship with his daughters. See Rashkow, *Taboo or Not Taboo: Sexuality and Family in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 106–7. However, Lot’s lack of knowledge of his eventual incestuous encounter with his daughters (see discussion below) suggests this may over-read the situation. By contrast, the New Testament (2 Pet 2:7) takes a different view, understanding Lot as “righteous” (δικαιον) and to have been “rescued because he was tormented by the licentiousness behaviour of unprincipled men” (καταπονούμενον ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν ἀθέσμων ἐν ἀσελείᾳ ἀναστροφῆς ἐρρύσατο).

daughters' virginity, but he himself is ironically the one who deflowers them.⁴⁹ But not only are the girls not virgins, but their virginity is not actually necessary for the ironic twist. Rather, the irony indicates that Lot's only two daughters are not virgins, and then plays on the concept of "knowing": the men of Sodom wanted to "know" Lot's guests (19:5), but Lot offers them knowledge of his daughters instead, only to end up knowing them himself but without apparently knowing what he had done (19:33, 35). We might be tempted to think that Lot will eventually discover what has happened when his daughters "are found" to be pregnant. But since they had already been married and, therefore, were not virgins, the incestuous encounter can remain hidden. For all Lot knows, the sons born to his daughters are children of the Sodomite men who had married his daughters. In other words, Lot continues in his lack of knowledge and views his (grand)children as sons of Sodom.⁵⁰ But in further irony, while Lot's daughters and the readers "know" that this is not their true origin, yet the manner of their conception recalls the sexual excesses of the now destroyed city. Sodom and Gomorrah may be gone, but something of their legacy lives on in Lot's daughters and their offspring. Thus, the text portrays the Moabites and Ammonites who come from this incestuous relationship as practical "sons of Sodom." This contributes to the generally negative assessment of Moab and Ammon in biblical texts (cf. Ezra 9:1; Neh 13:21).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we see how the narrator of Gen 19 brilliantly uses detail omission to exploit ambiguities in the plot to mislead the reader about Lot's character. The narrator appeals to the reader's revulsion towards non-consensual sex and violence, so that the reader concludes Lot has become as depraved as the men of Sodom among whom he dwells. But the revelation of a key detail, that Lot's two daughters are married and not actually in Lot's house, surprises the reader. Lot has not "lost the plot." Rather, the reader has! The reader is prompted to re-evaluate the entire episode and see that Lot is not a degenerate father, but rather a quick thinking host who tries to outsmart a dangerous mob. Despite this, Lot still requires divine intervention to get himself and his family out of the dangerous situation. While Lot makes it to safety, his daughters eventually commit incest with him: a sexual encounter that occurs without his consent. Lot ends up not knowing that he has "known" his own daughters. As a result of this irony, the legacy of Sodom and Gomorrah survives in the offspring of this incestuous union. Gen 19 is replete with skillful narrative maneuvers, all turning on an example of detail omission.

⁴⁹ Alter, "Sodom as Nexus," 151.

⁵⁰ For further discussion about Lot's role in this incident, including his culpability (or lack thereof), see J. E. Miller, "Sexual Offences in Genesis," *JOT* 90 (2000): 41–53; J. R. Porter, "The Daughters of Lot," *Folklore* 89.2 (1978): 127–41.