Confronting Stories of Violence:

A Dialogue between

René Girard and the Hebrew Bible

A thesis submitted to Charles Sturt University for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy by

Sallyanne Hart

B.A. (Hons.)

January 2017
Table of Contents

Certificate of Authorship................................................................. ix
Acknowledgements........................................................................ xi
Abstract......................................................................................... xiii
List of Abbreviations....................................................................... xv
Translation Notes ........................................................................... xvii

Chapter One: Introduction .............................................................. 1
The Problem .................................................................................. 1
The Theory of René Girard as a Lens ........................................... 2
My Position ................................................................................... 7
Conclusion ................................................................................... 8

Chapter Two: The Work of René Girard ........................................ 9
Introduction ................................................................................ 9
Girard’s Theory .......................................................................... 11
The Scapegoat Mechanism ............................................................ 12
The Positive Outcomes of Mimesis .............................................. 16
Girard’s ‘Stereotypes of Persecution’ ........................................... 17
The False Sacred ....................................................................... 19
‘Monstrous Doubles’ ................................................................ 21
The Founding Murder ................................................................ 22
The Sacred as Violence ............................................................... 24
Girard and Nietzsche ................................................................ 25
Two Different Forms of ‘the Sacred’ .......................................... 26
Girard and the Bible ................................................................... 29
Conclusion ................................................................................. 32

Chapter Three: Method ................................................................. 35
Literary Criticism ........................................................................ 36
Foundations of Literary Criticism .............................................. 36
Rhetorical Criticism in Biblical Studies ....................................... 38
Narrative Criticism in Biblical Studies ........................................ 42
The Role of the Reader ............................................................... 42
Elements of Narrative ................................................................. 43
Story, Plot and Narration ............................................................. 43
Conclusion ................................................................................ 60

Chapter Four: The Surrounding of Lot’s House (Genesis 19: 1–11) ...... 63
Chapter Five: The Levite’s Concubine ................................................................. 105

Translation ........................................................................................................... 106

Scene One (vv. 1–2): Introduction .................................................................... 106

Scene Two (vv. 3–9): Hospitality in Bethlehem ................................................... 108

Scene Three (vv. 10–14): The Journey to Gibeah ................................................. 111

Scene Four (vv. 15–26): Hospitality in Gibeah .................................................... 112

Scene Five (vv. 27–28): The Journey to Ephraim ............................................... 116

Scene Six (vv. 29–30): Conclusion .................................................................... 116

Rhetorical–Narrative Analysis ......................................................................... 118

Scene One (vv. 1–2): Introduction .................................................................... 118

Scene Two (vv. 3–9): Hospitality in Bethlehem ................................................... 125

Scene Three (vv. 10–14): The Journey to Gibeah ................................................. 131

Scene Four (vv. 15–26): Hospitality in Gibeah .................................................... 132

Scene Five (vv. 27–28): The Journey to Ephraim ............................................... 136

Scene Six (vv. 29–30): Conclusion .................................................................... 136

Biblical Context .................................................................................................. 139
Elements of Narrative ................................................................. 140
Plot ............................................................................................. 140
Character .................................................................................... 143
Narrator ...................................................................................... 148
Time and Space .......................................................................... 148
Point of View .............................................................................. 151
Gaps and Ambiguities ............................................................... 152
Keywords, Motifs and Theme .................................................... 154
Conclusion .................................................................................. 159

Chapter Six: Genesis 19 and Judges 19 as Lynch Murders ................. 161
Introduction ............................................................................... 161
Similarities between Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19 ......................... 161
Differences between Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19 ......................... 164
Engaging with Girard’s Theory ...................................................... 171
Girard’s ‘Stereotypes of Persecution’ ............................................. 172
The First Stereotype: The Crisis .................................................. 172
The Second Stereotype: The Crime .............................................. 179
The Third Stereotype: The Criteria .............................................. 180
The Fourth Stereotype: The Act of Violence ................................... 187
Assessing the Stories by Means of the Stereotypes ......................... 189
Conclusion .................................................................................. 190

Chapter Seven: The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19) ...................... 191
Introduction ................................................................................. 191
Translation .................................................................................. 192
Scene One (vv. 1–2): God’s Request to Abraham ......................... 192
Scene Two (vv. 3–8): The Journey ................................................. 194
Scene Three (vv. 9–10): The Sacrifice is Prepared ......................... 196
Scene Four (vv. 11–14): The Sacrifice is Countermanded ............... 197
Scene Five (vv. 15–18): The Blessing ......................................... 200
Scene Six (v. 19): The Resolution ............................................... 203
Rhetorical-Narrative Analysis ...................................................... 204
Scene One (vv. 1–2): God’s Request to Abraham ......................... 205
Scene Two (vv. 3–8): The Journey ................................................. 211
Scene Three (vv. 9–10): The Sacrifice is Prepared ......................... 214
Scene Four (vv. 11–14): The Sacrifice is Countermanded................................. 214
Scene Five (vv. 15–18): The Blessing................................................................. 217
Scene Six (V. 19): The Resolution ................................................................. 217
Biblical Context .............................................................................................. 218
Elements of Narrative ..................................................................................... 219
Plot .................................................................................................................. 219
Character ......................................................................................................... 224
The Narrator .................................................................................................. 234
Time and Space ............................................................................................. 235
Point of View ................................................................................................ 237
Gaps and Ambiguities ................................................................................... 238
Key Words, Motifs and Theme .................................................................... 239
Conclusion ...................................................................................................... 241

Chapter Eight: The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter (Judges 11) ................. 243
Introduction .................................................................................................... 243
Translation ..................................................................................................... 244
Scene One (vv. 1–3): The Expulsion of Jephthah .......................................... 244
Scene Two (vv. 4–11): Jephthah Bargains with the Elders of Gilead ............... 245
Scene Three (vv. 12–28): Jephthah Bargains with the King of Ammon .......... 248
Scene Four (vv. 29–33): Jephthah Bargains with God ................................... 255
Scene Five (vv. 34–38): Jephthah’s Victim .................................................. 257
Scene Six (vv. 39–40): Jephthah’s Sacrifice .................................................. 259
Rhetorical-Narrative Analysis ...................................................................... 260
Scene One (vv. 1–3): The Expulsion of Jephthah .......................................... 260
Scene 2 (vv. 4–11): Jephthah Bargains with the Elders of Gilead ................. 262
Scene Three (vv. 12–28): Jephthah Bargains with the King of the Ammonites ... 263
Scene Four (vv. 29–33): Jephthah Bargains with God ................................... 266
Scene Five (vv. 34–38): Jephthah’s Victim .................................................. 273
Scene Six (vv. 39–40): Jephthah’s Sacrifice .................................................. 278
Biblical Context ............................................................................................. 281
Elements of Narrative ..................................................................................... 282
Plot .................................................................................................................. 282
Character ......................................................................................................... 284
Time and Space ............................................................................................. 293
Gaps and Ambiguities ...........................................................................................293
Key words, Motifs and Theme ..............................................................................295
Conclusion .................................................................................................................299

Chapter Nine: Genesis 22 and Judges 11 as Worship of the False Sacred............301
Introduction ...............................................................................................................301
Similarities between Genesis 22:1–19 and Judges 11 ...............................................301
Differences between Genesis 22:1–19 and Judges 11 ...............................................304
Engaging with Girard’s Theory .................................................................................308
  The Mimetic Model ..............................................................................................310
  The False Sacred in Genesis 22:1–19 ..............................................................315
    The False Sacred in Judges 11 .................................................................320
    ‘Dionysus versus the Crucified’ ........................................................................326
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................329

Chapter Ten: Evaluation and Conclusion ................................................................331
Introduction ...............................................................................................................331
Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19 ................................................................................331
Genesis 22:1–19 and Judges 11 ................................................................................333
An Evaluation of Girard’s Theory as an Exegetical Tool .........................................335
Conclusion .................................................................................................................337

Bibliography ................................................................................................................339
Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contributions made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services or nominee, for care, loan and reproduction of theses.

Name: Sallyanne Hart

Signature:
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the Australian Post-Graduate Award which supported me through the first three years of research. I thank Charles Sturt University for the unique opportunity it has provided and for the confidence in my ability that the awarding of it implied.

I thank all the staff at St Mark’s Theological Centre in Barton, ACT, for more than ten years of education, inspiration and encouragement. My thanks go especially to Dr Merilyn Clark, who guided my early steps in Old Testament Hebrew, and introduced me the joys and benefits of literary criticism. Professor David Neville has been a source of constant encouragement and assistance, without which this thesis would not have been completed.

The Reverend Canon Dr Matthew Anstey, my principal supervisor, was responsible for arousing in me the desire to undertake this project, and for helping me to believe that it was possible. For all his input into this thesis I am very grateful. The Reverend Dr Jeanette Mathews, my co-supervisor, has been helpful, responsive and knowledgeable.

Professor Scott Cowdell has been my mentor in all things Girardian, and I thank him especially for allowing me access to his excellent book, *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis* before it was published. Scott also kindly read the ‘Girardian’ chapters, and shared some further insights with me.

The librarians at St Mark’s provided expert assistance and helped to make up for my technological inadequacies. Kaye Malins was ruthless in pursuit of knowledge on my behalf and I missed her greatly when she retired a year before the completion of this
project. Fortunately, Susan Phillips stepped into the breach and enabled me to continue to access the sources I needed.

My special thanks go to my small band of encouragers – the kind of friends that all people need when writing a thesis. Roberta Hamilton has patiently read most of the thesis and shared her thoughts with me. She has been an endless source of help and inspiration. Caroline Campbell and John Barnes have always enquired after my progress and actually cared about the answer. My parish family at Taralga have been endlessly patient and supportive. Margaret Beevors and Louise Gardner have provided practical assistance and many words of encouragement. Laurie Langham and my family – Quinn, Bec, Bella, Eleanor, Abigail and Juliette – have made time for me to write and have believed unquestioningly in my ability to bring this project to a close. To all of you I extend my love and gratitude.
Abstract

This study aims to determine the contribution of René Girard’s theory concerning human violence and its relationship to religion by using it as a lens through which four stories from the Hebrew Scriptures are examined as two pairs. I have chosen to study the narrative concerning the story of the rape of the Levite’s concubine (Judges 19) alongside the aborted rape of Lot’s guests (Genesis 19:1–11), and the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11) alongside the story of the averted sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19). Studying paired texts that display great similarity of theme and language allows me to highlight the patterns they exhibit. Following careful analysis of the Hebrew texts, I scrutinise the stories using a combination of rhetorical and narrative criticisms and engage in a dialogical process that operates on several levels—between the scriptural texts and the Girardian hermeneutic, and between text and text. The theory of Girard thus serves to elucidate these narratives of violence, even as the narratives serve to evaluate the text-interpretive potential of the Girardian paradigm.
# List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FN</td>
<td>Footnote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Biblical Literature</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIDOTTE</td>
<td><em>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDOT</td>
<td><em>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td><em>Vetus Testamentum</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the Deity as ‘he’ not because I perceive God to be gendered and masculine, but because that is how the writers of these stories, whose character he is, choose to refer to God.

2. All translations in this study are my own, except in those places where translations occur within a quote.

3. In the four Translation sections, I have endeavoured to position the English translation in alignment with the Hebrew phrase translated. However, in several instances, this alignment has been compromised where it was necessary in order to make the translation intelligible.

4. I have included Notes on each scene of my chosen texts only where there are matters to be elucidated. Following several scenes, I have not deemed them to be necessary and have therefore omitted them.
Chapter One: Introduction

The Problem

This thesis has been written out of my deep disquiet at the violence which is depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures and which reaches at times even to the portrayal of God. The testimonies to YHWH the God of Israel are numerous, diverse and sometimes contradictory, resulting in a portrait of the Deity which is at best well-rounded and at worst inconsistent. Walter Brueggemann perceives these conflicting portrayals of God as contributing to two distinct testimonies: a core testimony and a counter testimony. He claims that the core testimony depicts God as ‘steadfast and faithful,’ while the counter testimony bears witness to his abusiveness, his practice of ‘deception and enticement,’ and his negativity. It also testifies to his violence. Brueggemann writes: ‘Israel’s countertestimony makes clear that Yahweh is a God capable of violence, and indeed the texture of the Old Testament is deeply marked by violence.’ Unfortunately, for those who regard the Bible as authoritative, the counter testimony is as binding as the core testimony.

The problem raised by this counter testimony is exacerbated by the way that such portrayals do not only show God as enacting violence, they also show God commanding his people to use violence. This mandating of bloodshed has functioned to justify countless acts of brutality in the last twenty centuries. Jeremy Young claims,

---

‘The violence of God becomes enacted by and used to justify the violence of Christians; and this is a direct outcome of the contents of the biblical text.’

**The Theory of René Girard as a Lens**

In this thesis, therefore, I will focus on the problem of violence in the Hebrew Scriptures. I will employ the theory of the French-American scholar René Girard as a lens through which four narratives of violence will be analysed. The purpose of this analysis is twofold. I will seek to reveal new insights into the passages, resolve some questions that are frequently raised about the texts, and give rise to a more rounded and nuanced reading of them. At the same time, the efficacy of the Girardian theory as a tool for biblical exegesis will be tested, with a view to discovering whether there is a place in the discipline of biblical studies for Girardian criticism. Thus, even as Girard asks questions of the texts, the texts will serve to evaluate his theory.

Girard’s theory reveals the presence of violence at the heart of the human race from its very beginnings and serves to distance God from responsibility for this violence. Girard finds within the Bible a unique account of violence and its foundational place in human society. His theory, with its explanation of the role and function of violence, and its perception of the Hebrew Scriptures as revelatory of that role, provides a suitable lens through which to analyse scriptural texts of violence. I therefore begin this thesis with this question: ‘Does a Girardian hermeneutic have a contribution to make to the interpretation of Hebrew Bible stories of sacrificial violence, both overt and covert?’

---

This is not a rhetorical question and the outcome of the study remains open to a positive or negative answer. I will endeavour to pay full and fair attention to each text on its own terms and the hermeneutical device of Girard’s theory on its own terms. Each must have the freedom to illuminate, challenge and enrich the other. I am prepared for the possibility that the texts may present a world at odds with Girard’s theory and also for the possibility that Girard’s approach may promote interpretations at odds with established interpretive traditions of faith communities.

Girard came upon the initial insight which underlies his theory while teaching French literature at Indiana University. Through the works of European novelists Flaubert, Proust, Stendhal, Dostoyevsky and Cervantes, he began to recognise as myth the notion of romantic individualism, and to understand something profound about human motivation. In his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, written in 1961 (and translated into English in 1965), he began his exploration of the human behaviour that he calls *mimeticism*. Some years later, in 1972, he published *Violence and the Sacred*. Scott Cowdell writes:

> Here he revealed through its traces remaining in prohibitions, rituals and myths the scapegoat mechanism that is hidden at the root of culture and religion. This uncovering of the bloody hands that humanity has used to build its venerable institutions and sacred narratives has not always been well received.

In 1978, Girard published *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, in which he continued to develop and nuance his mimetic and scapegoat theories. This book, however, added a new insight. Cowdell remarks:

---

7 James Williams (personal communication).
It explicated Girard’s new conviction that a remarkable anthropological breakthrough has taken place at the level of history, which is explicable purely in terms of scientifically objective evidence. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures in general and the texts of Jesus’ passion in particular are expounded by Girard as revealing and hence disempowering the scapegoat mechanism.\textsuperscript{10}

With this new understanding, the foundation of Girard’s theory was complete. In the years after 1978, Girard continued to develop and refine his theory.

In Chapter Two of this thesis, a basis will be laid for understanding his work through the presentation of the notions that are central to his theory. The concept of mimesis, the human drive to imitate others, the problems that flow out of acquisitive mimesis and the concept of the scapegoat or surrogate victim will be presented and discussed. The two notions of mimesis and the surrogate victim will later in the thesis be applied to the texts from the Hebrew Scriptures. A number of related matters will also be introduced in Chapter Two, including the Girardian stereotypes of persecution, the frequency of the theme of enemy brothers, the notion of the founding murder, the development of what Girard terms monstrous doubles, the concept of the sacred as violence, the pervasiveness of the false sacred with its attendant rituals, prohibitions and myths, Girard’s relationship to the work of Nietzsche, and Girard’s insights into the role of the Bible in unmasking the violence at the heart of religion. In this thesis, it will not be possible to introduce every aspect of Girard’s theory, which is complex, and far-reaching in its implications. Particular attention will be devoted to those aspects of Girard’s work that are relevant to this study.

In Chapter Three, I will describe the methods that will be employed in analysing the texts. Since my interest in these narratives lies in their final form, rather than in their

\textsuperscript{10} Cowdell, \textit{René Girard and Secular Modernity}, 4.
history, I will principally employ rhetorical and narrative critical methods. The texts will be read closely and special attention will be paid to the elements of narrative such as plot, characters, setting in time and place, point of view, key words, motifs and theme, the role of the narrator, and the use of gapping and deliberate ambiguity in the texts. This is not a thesis about narrative or rhetorical criticism, but rather one which employs such aspects of these critical methods as may bring into consideration factors within the world of these stories that can profitably be brought into dialogue with Girard’s theory. Although the methods of rhetorical and narrative criticism will predominate, I will feel free to use other methods where I feel that they will enrich the study.

After Chapter Three, the study of individual stories will begin. I have chosen four narrative texts that deal with violence, two of which are from the book of Genesis, and two from Judges. These four stories have been paired, so that each Genesis story has a counterpart in Judges. In both pairs, the stories are variants on a particular theme, and they have a long history of being studied together. In neither set of stories has a scholarly consensus been reached on the direction of dependency within the pair. It remains a possibility that one of each pair has been patterned upon the other, or that both have been written in imitation of a third narrative which is no longer available to us. I anticipate that by pairing two similar stories we will find, not just a single instance of the Girardian theory in action, but the beginnings of a pattern that either conforms, or fails to conform, to Girard’s theory. The variations in the two paired stories will draw upon different nuances of the theory.

In studying these four texts, I will attempt to find narrative coherence within the stories, so that each of the four is driven by the inner logic of what narrative theorists term its ‘storyworld’. More simply, I will strive to make sense of each story. This means
that I will pay special attention to those matters that, in the years since they were written, have given rise to speculation, concern or questioning. My readings will not be exhaustive; they will not be the only way of reading each text, but will present one coherent way of reading them. At the end of each of the four chapters devoted to reading the narratives, I will note any questions that remain unanswered, so that I can bring them into dialogue with Girard’s theory and perhaps find answers to them.

The Girardian principle of the *lynch murder* will be employed in analysing the stories of the surrounding of Lot’s house (Genesis 19:1–11) and the rape and murder of the Levite’s concubine (Judges 19). The Girardian notion of the *false sacred* will be used to analyse the stories of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19) and the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11). These two pairs of stories set occurrences in the books of Genesis and Judges beside each other.

In Chapter Four, Genesis 19:1–11 will be studied and in Chapter Five, its Judges counterpart, Judges 19, will be analysed. Both of these stories concern unprovoked attacks by the men of the city upon visitors who are staying the night in the homes of resident aliens. In both stories, the townsmen request sexual access to the male visitors. In both stories, the host, acknowledging the obligations of hospitality, offers two women in place of the men. In neither narrative will the townsmen accept the women instead of the men. At this point the two stories diverge, with Lot’s visitors striking the townsmen with blindness in the Genesis story, while in the Judges narrative, the potential victim, the Levite, pushes his concubine out to the men, who rape and abuse her until morning.

In Chapter Six, these two narratives will be compared and contrasted, and then brought into dialogue with Girard’s theory. Because they depict mob violence, the
stereotypes of persecution will be employed with each story and the insights thus gained will be noted.

In Chapter Seven, the first story of the second pair, Genesis 22:1–19, will be studied, and in Chapter Eight, the second member of this pairing, Judges 11, will be closely read and analysed. Both of these stories concern fathers who are willing to sacrifice their own children in obedience to God. In each of these stories, the child is described as an only child, and both fathers are without the support of a kinship group. In Chapter Nine, the two narratives will be compared and contrasted, and the Girardian theory, with particular regard to the false sacred, will be used to shed new light upon them.

All four of these stories concern violence that is sacrificial. In the second pair of stories, the violence is concerned with overt sacrifice, as each protagonist, Abraham and Jephthah, prepares to sacrifice his child. In the first pair of stories, the sacrificial component is brought out by the Girardian theory, where both the messengers of God and the Levite are faced with the fate of being offered as scapegoats to assuage the anger of the townsmen of Sodom and Gibeah so that harmony and peace may result.

Chapter Ten will conclude this study with an appraisal of the new insights gained into the four texts. It will then evaluate Girard’s theory as a window into texts of violence.

My Position

All texts bear the marks of the beliefs, values and experience of their authors. In writing this thesis, I operate out of a complex array of standards and understandings, some of which I share with others, but which are combined uniquely in me. I write as a woman
and a feminist, a Christian and a priest. I write as one to whom the integrity of the
Hebrew Scriptures is important, but who perceives that a strictly literal reading of the
Hebrew Scriptures as expressing the nature and being of God is neither possible nor
desirable. While I acknowledge that the Hebrew Scriptures have been inspired by the
vision of God held by many people, I nonetheless continue to recognise the human
attitudes and viewpoints of its authors, who lived in a time remote from me, and who
were anchored to their contexts by a hundred taken-for-granted beliefs that I might not
share.

I have chosen to study these texts of violence because they have been and are a
stumbling block to many people. I have chosen to employ rhetorical and narrative
criticism because my interest is, first and foremost, in the texts themselves, rather than
in their provenance, and because I believe they are the methods best suited to an
analysis of the texts in their final form.

**Conclusion**

In the next chapter, this thesis will briefly examine the theory of René Girard, outlining
its foundations, and dealing in greater depth with those aspects of the theory that will be
employed in this study.
Chapter Two: The Work of René Girard

Introduction

In this chapter, Girard’s theory will be outlined, and such aspects of it as are relevant to this thesis will be examined. As a French/American scholar, René Girard has made a significant impact in a number of disciplines in the last fifty years. Philosopher, Paul Dumouchel, summarises the range of Girard’s influence:

Beginning from literary criticism and ending up with a general theory of culture, through an explanation of the role of religion in primitive societies and a radical re-interpretation of Christianity, René Girard has completely modified the landscape of the social sciences. Ethnology, history of religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology and literary criticism are explicitly mobilised in this enterprise. Theology, economics and political sciences, history and sociology—in short, all the social sciences, and those that used to be called moral sciences—are influenced by it.11

René Noel Theophile Girard was born in 1923, in Avignon, the second oldest of six children. His father was an atheist and his mother was a practising Roman Catholic. Girard was confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church, but later became an agnostic and ceased to attend church,12 being more interested politically and intellectually in the left. At l’Ecole Nationale des Chartres in Paris, he earned a degree as an archiviste-palegraphe.13 In 1947 he visited the United States and was sufficiently impressed to move there permanently.14

---

12 James Williams (personal communication).
13 James Williams (personal communication).
In America, he presented a second doctorate in 1950 entitled ‘L’opinion americaine et la France 1940–1943.’ He began to work as a teacher of French language and literature at Indiana University, and later at Duke University, Bryn Mawr College and then at John Hopkins University where he served as Professor of Literature from 1961 to 1968. He then lectured at State University of New York until 1976 when he returned to John Hopkins. For the final years of his university career, he worked at Stanford University in California.15

In 1951, Girard married Martha McCullough, who had studied French under him. Throughout the years of their marriage, McCullough followed his work closely, and Girard had a high regard for her opinions.16 The couple had three children. When he was thirty-six, as a result of his work on mimesis and scapegoat violence, Girard began to acknowledge the role of the Bible in repudiating sacred violence, and was converted to Christianity in 1959. Girard continued to live in Stanford with his wife as a member of the Roman Catholic Church17 until his death in 2015.

Girard has developed a far-reaching theory about the relationship of religion and violence. Scott Cowdell summarises it as follows:

[H]is agenda is bigger than the intellectual, or indeed the theological: Girard believes that having uncovered the origin of culture and explicated the emergence of secular modernity, he has revealed the apocalyptic acceleration of history towards a tragic denouement. Hence, from his study at Stanford, this scholar’s scholar has become a planetary prophet.18

---

15 Kirwan, Discovering Girard, 10–11.
16 James Williams (personal communication).
17 Kirwan, Discovering Girard, 10–11.
18 Cowdell, René Girard and Secular Modernity, 2.
Girard’s theory explores violence and its roots in human society, a violence that lies concealed within the sacred. Through two closely related concepts—mimetic rivalry and surrogate victimage—Girard’s model serves ultimately to place the responsibility for violence on humankind rather than on God. He claims to have ‘uncovered the origin of culture’\(^{19}\) in the systems developed to contain violence and reciprocal aggression. The very process of hominization, ‘the fascinating passage from animality to humanity,’\(^{20}\) has come about, he contends, through humanity’s need to stem damaging violence by means of a scapegoat. Andrew McKenna, in his introduction to the \textit{Semeia} volume that deals with Girard’s contribution to biblical studies, imagines the scene in graphic terms:

> In the beginning, then, was the victim. Around the victim is poised a circle of violent predators, each bent on appropriation; whence the victim in the first place, the product of a mêlée of violent approbation which has centred on a single figure whose vulnerability has marked it out for destruction.\(^{21}\)

### Girard’s Theory

Over the last sixty years, Girard has developed and refined his theory, and has explored its many ramifications. This study, lacking the space to deal with all of these, will be confined to depicting those aspects that will be brought into dialogue with the two pairs of selected texts. Because the narratives in Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19 include acts of mob violence, the notion of the \textit{lynch murder} will be employed in analysing them. Because the Genesis 22:1–18 and Judges 11 stories bring into focus acts of sacrifice that are conducted privately within the circle of family, they cannot be regarded as examples

\(^{19}\) Cowdell, \textit{René Girard and Secular Modernity}, 2.

\(^{20}\) René Girard, \textit{Battling to the End} (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2010), ix.

of mob violence, and will be analysed through the lens provided by the Girardian concept of the *false sacred*. Matters pertaining to these two areas of Girardian thought—the lynch murder and the false sacred—will therefore be explored. Though these two aspects will be emphasised to facilitate this study, it is important to state that they are always interconnected and interdependent, and form aspects of the one theory. The scapegoat mechanism and the concept of the surrogate victim form the basis of both these aspects.

*The Scapegoat Mechanism*

*Mimesis*

At the heart of the human urge toward violence, Girard perceives the force that he calls ‘mimesis.’ Although many others, from Plato onwards, have expressed a profound unease with the imitation of one person by another or others, they have limited themselves to the imitation of representation, that is, of behaviour and speech.22 Girard writes:

> If you survey the literature on imitation, you will quickly discover that acquisition and appropriation are never considered among the modes of behaviour that are likely to be imitated. If acquisition and appropriation were included, imitation as a social phenomenon would turn out to be more problematic than it appears, and above all, conflictual.23

Because imitative desire places humans in perpetual competition with each other, Girard regards it as being of greater consequence than imitation of representation. When one person reaches for an object, his appropriative gesture may be imitated by

---


another, so that both people enter into a relationship of rivalry for the same object. The desire of the initiator, called the ‘model’ by Girard, invests the object with value in the eyes of the imitator. Reciprocally, the object becomes more desirable to the model as he imitates the desire of his imitator. Thus acquisitive behaviour will escalate and continue to be reflected from one to the other.  

Girard claims, ‘Each becomes the imitator of his own imitator and the model of his own model.’ When each person attempts to prevent his rival from appropriating the object of their mutual desire, he becomes an obstacle to the other, and violence may result. Cowdell writes:

‘[T]he desire to thwart rivals replaces desire for whatever constituted the original object of rivalry. ...In a variation of this, such rivalry can turn attention to an object, which suddenly becomes more desirable because to have it would foil the rival.’

Two people who are locked in mimetic rivalry will reflect each other more and more. Girard claims:

In the last resort, there are no genuine differences left between the two…. In rivalry, everyone occupies all the positions, one after another, then simultaneously, and there are no longer any distinct positions…. There is no longer any way of differentiating the partners from one another.

Girard distinguishes between two different kinds of mimesis. Mimesis that is externally mediated involves an imitator who does not inhabit the same sphere of life as the model. The imitator may be distanced from the model by social position, or by age, or may simply live in a different place. In this situation, hero worship is more likely

---

to develop than two-way rivalry. In externally mediated mimesis, the distance between model and imitator creates a kind of safety zone. *Internally mediated mimesis* occurs when the model and imitator are close in status and age, and share the same geographical location. This is the type of mimetic relationship which readily escalates into mimetic rivalry.

**The Scapegoat**

When neither party is able to step back from the confrontation, a *mimetic crisis* (or *sacrificial crisis*) will result. Violence can no longer be contained and spreads beyond the imitator and model to threaten the stability of their community. In pre-state societies, rivalry and retaliation have the potential to escalate into blood-feuds that can wipe out entire clans. Sacrificing a victim or group of victims who are vulnerable and unable to retaliate provides the antidote to uncontrolled rivalry and violence. Girard writes, ‘*[t]he rivalrous and conflictual mimesis is spontaneously and automatically transformed into reconciliatory mimesis.*’³⁰ All-against-all violence is replaced by the unanimity of all-against-one in the lynch mechanism, or what Girard calls the ‘scapegoat effect.’ Girard writes:

> By a scapegoat effect, I mean the strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs or frightens the scapegoaters. They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group. They now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying him.³¹

---

³¹ Girard, *Girard Reader*, 12.
In order to find unity in the murder of a scapegoat, it is necessary for the community to believe that the victim is guilty of causing the crisis that confronts it.32 Girard writes: ‘The community satisfies its rage against an arbitrary victim in the unshakable conviction that it has found the one and only cause of its trouble.’33 Members of the community genuinely accept that the chosen victim is the originator of disharmony and conflict among them, and that he or she must therefore be eliminated. Girard stresses this self-deception among those who victimize scapegoats when he says:

[O]riginal scapegoating … must be completely spontaneous, unplanned, and even unconscious in the sense of the victim being misunderstood for a real culprit, a powerful troublemaker responsible for the ills from which the community suffers. If the victimizers realised that their victims are arbitrary, they would not be able to transfer their hostilities on them, and peace would not be restored. Effective scapegoating, it is evident, entails unanimous self-deception.34

This is the dark secret that lies at the heart of all civilization—that human society is built and maintained upon the shed blood of innocent scapegoats.

Because this lynch murder has a unifying effect, the victim ceases to be seen only as the bringer of disharmony, and becomes simultaneously the bringer of peace. Girard declares:

These same scapegoats may arouse such gratitude and reverence that they are ultimately made divine. But their peacemaking power is always dependent on a previous belief in their power as troublemakers.35

---

32 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 12.
Thus the victim is both blamed for causing conflict, and deified for removing it. The community that has found peace through the murder of the scapegoat will mimic the act ritually for a time, until another scapegoat becomes necessary. At the same time, taboos and prohibitions will grow up around the necessity to avoid situations that generate mimetic conflict. While the lynch murder is the most obvious form of scapegoating, Girard stresses that there are other expressions of surrogate victimage. He explains: ‘Scapegoat effects are not confined to mobs, but they are most conspicuously effective in the case of mobs.’

**The Positive Outcomes of Mimesis**

Girard does not regard mimesis as having only negative outcomes any more than he perceives desire to be inherently evil. He acknowledges that mimesis is a necessary component of human behaviour because humans learn most of what they need to know through imitation, and that not all mimesis is destructive or unhelpful. Cowdell states:

> Inspired and apprenticed, our particular skills and commitments are evoked and formed by others. How many of us can testify to the formative effect on our desires of fine teachers, exemplary craftspersons or musicians, inspiring colleagues—indeed, any kind of influential role models?

The results of the mimetic drive depend upon the model and the objects or qualities that are desired. When desire is modelled upon that of someone who desires only what is good and freely available to all, conflict will not result and the harmony within a community will be enhanced. Mimesis that is based in genuine love will not result in mimetic violence. Girard concludes:

---

36 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 12.
Even if the mimetic nature of human desire is responsible for most of the violent acts that distress us, we should not conclude that mimetic desire is bad in itself. If our desires were not mimetic, they would be forever fixed on predetermined objects; they would be a particular form of instinct. Human beings could no more change their desire than cows their appetite for grass. Without mimetic desire there would be neither freedom nor humanity. Mimetic desire is intrinsically good.38

**Girard’s ‘Stereotypes of Persecution’**

In his book, *The Scapegoat*, Girard describes what he terms the ‘stereotypes of persecution.’39 The first, called *the crisis* by Girard, is the situation that provides the context for the scapegoat murder. This may be civil unrest, drought, disease, famine, or anything that causes ‘an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and “differences” that define cultural divisions’;40 that is, ‘the absence of difference, the lack of cultural differentiation, and the confusion that results.’41 Girard’s second stereotype of persecution refers to the *crimes* that victims will be accused of. These are frequently ‘crimes involving the worst boundary violations’42 such as the killing of people who should be regarded as inviolable (children or the king, for example), religious crimes such as the profaning of holy objects, or sexual crimes that blur boundaries, like incest or bestiality. The third stereotype consists of the *criteria* by which a victim is chosen. The surrogate victim is frequently one who belongs to a religious or ethnic minority, one who exhibits ‘physical criteria of sickness, madness, deformity, injury and disability’43 or one who diverges from the social norm, for

---

42 Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, 75.
43 Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, 75.
example, the very rich or the very poor. It is desirable that the victim should be a friendless or unsupported person, whose death will not precipitate further violence in the form of payback.

Girard points to the fact that 'crisis,' ‘crime,’ and ‘criteria’ all share the same root in the Greek verb, krino, ‘which means not only to judge, distinguish, differentiate, but also to accuse and condemn a victim.’ Girard suggests that this semantic linkage indicates a concealed relationship between culture and collective persecution which has never been explained.

Because the ability to believe in the guilt of the chosen scapegoat is absolutely necessary to those who need to find the peace and unity that the act of sacrificial murder brings, all victimisers unconsciously conceal the traces of the true nature of their act of scapegoating. In order to uncover this truth, Girard believes that we must examine the testimonies to all acts of violence that are ‘directly or indirectly collective.’ We need to ask whether or not the act took place within a context of community crisis (the first stereotype of persecution), whether the victim is accused of crimes within their society that diminish the proper interpersonal differences (the second stereotype), and whether those identified by their community as causes of the crisis bear those attributes which make them suitable as victims (the third stereotype). The act of violence itself is the fourth stereotype of persecution.

Girard suggests:

The juxtaposition of more than one stereotype within a single document indicates persecution. Not all the stereotypes must be present: three are

---

44 Cowdell, René Girard and Secular Modernity, 75.
45 Girard, The Scapegoat, 22.
46 Girard, The Scapegoat, 23.
enough and often even two. Their existence convinces us that (1) the acts of violence are real; (2) the crisis is real (3) the victims are chosen not for the crimes they are accused of but for the victim’s signs that they bear, for everything that suggests their guilty relationship with the crisis; and (4) the import of the operation is to lay the responsibility for the crisis on the victims and to exert an influence on it by destroying these victims or at least by banishing them from the community they ‘pollute.’

Girard believes that these stereotypes of persecution are present in historical accounts and in the myths of all cultures, thus demonstrating the universal nature of the mechanism of scapegoating.

The stereotypes of persecution will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six of this study.

*The False Sacred*

Myth, rituals of re-enactment including sacrifice, and prohibitions to curtail rivalrous situations together form the basis of what Girard terms the ‘false sacred.’ It is the religion of all who seek to curtail violence through the scapegoat mechanism, the object of which is, to quote Girard, ‘to keep violence outside the community.’

*Myth*

Myth, Girard insists, is the device by which we conceal the traces of victimage. ‘Myths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them.’ After studying the myths of many societies, he concludes that myths always arise out of the actual death of a victim or victims.

---

Gil Bailie defines myth as ‘the generic term for the systematic misrecognitions that have veiled the victim’s face and silenced the victim’s voice.’\textsuperscript{52} He sheds some interesting light on the word ‘myth’ when he explores its derivation:

> When the chorus in \textit{Agamemnon} says, ‘The rest I did not see, nor do I speak of it,’ it virtually defines myth. The root of the Greek word for myth, \textit{muthos}, is \textit{mu}, which means ‘to close’ or ‘keep secret.’ \textit{Mu}\textsubscript{o} means to close one’s eyes or mouth, to mute the voice, or to remain mute. Myth remembers discretely and selectively. Myth closes its eyes to certain events and closes its mouth. The agencies for the muting and transmuting of the remembered past are the Muses, and the term ‘muse’ is derived from the same root as the word ‘myth.’\textsuperscript{53}

Bailie goes on to explain that the Muses do not exist for purely aesthetic reasons. The cultural matters that the Muses preserve ‘represent the mythological remembrance of things past.’\textsuperscript{54} He claims:

> The Muses make culture possible by providing it with its myth—an enchanting story of its founding violence. But most myths contain at least faint traces of the violence they otherwise mask.\textsuperscript{55}

**Ritual**

After a time, the original or founding act of scapegoat violence may be symbolically re-enacted. Fleming writes: ‘For Girard … ritual functions to renew the salutary unity provided by the original, spontaneous violence of surrogate vicimage by a selective replaying of it.’\textsuperscript{56} These ritual re-enactments serve to keep the mimetic crisis at bay for those who participate in them, by reviving the social bonding and unanimity achieved

\textsuperscript{53} Bailie, \textit{Violence Unveiled}, 33.
\textsuperscript{54} Bailie, \textit{Violence Unveiled}, 33.
\textsuperscript{55} Bailie, \textit{Violence Unveiled}, 33.
through the original act of scapegoating. After a time, however, ritual re-enactments may begin to lose their efficacy, so that the mechanism of surrogate victimage needs to be employed again in a new act of sacrifice on another victim.

Prohibition

In order to prevent the recurrence of the mimetic crisis, some acts or objects are proscribed. Fleming states:

Girard argues that, just as sacrifice *prescribes* (in somewhat displaced form) the sacrificial crisis and the action that ended it, prohibition represents the concerted effort to *prevent* that same crisis from repeating itself. Prohibition … invariably involves rendering taboo those kinds of behaviour associated with the sacrificial crisis; it consists of rules that govern the use of objects—decrees which regulate their exchange and acquisition—as well as regimes of purification enacted to protect those who *are* able to make use of them.  

Girard declares: ‘Religious prohibitions make a good deal of sense when interpreted as efforts to prevent mimetic rivalry from spreading throughout human communities.’

‘Monstrous Doubles’

Girard’s contention that interpersonal conflict grows out of extreme similarity and lack of differentiation flies in the face of the conviction of contemporary social theory that conflict is generated by difference. He asserts:

Order, peace and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and

---

57 Fleming, *René Girard*, 64. Italics original.
sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats.\textsuperscript{59}

He suggests that cultural theorists are misled by the convictions of the two parties to the conflict who do not perceive themselves as imitating, but as opposing each other. As Chris Fleming expresses it, ‘Although individual parties in a conflict \textit{participate} in mirroring they are not able consciously to \textit{acknowledge} it.’\textsuperscript{60}

In Girard’s system, the term doubling, according to the definition of Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming and Joel Hodge:

refers to the progressive and mutually reinforcing de-differentiation of subjects that occurs by virtue of an intensification of mimesis. That is, mimesis encourages, through positive feedback, an increasing symmetry between antagonists, which emerges despite increasing attempts at differentiation; it tends toward the erasure of significant differences between individuals—those differences which mark their sociopsychological identity and position within a particular cultural order.\textsuperscript{61}

According to Girard’s theory, brothers are particularly at risk of becoming doubles, especially twin brothers.

\textit{The Founding Murder}

Girard asserts that every community or city is built upon a founding murder. He bases this conviction on a study of many myths. He claims:

When we examine the great stories of origin and the founding myths, we notice that they themselves proclaim the fundamental and founding role of the single victim and his or her unanimous murder. The idea is present

everywhere. In Sumerian mythology cultural institutions emerge from a single victim: Ea, Tiamat, Kingu. The same in India: the dismemberment of the primordial victim, Purusha, by a mob offering sacrifices produces the caste system. We find similar myths in Egypt, in China, among the Germanic peoples—everywhere. 62

In addition to its attestation in myth, the founding murder is a logical development of Girard’s belief that, for any group of people, the process of hominization, of the development of human culture, originates in the first use of the scapegoat strategy, which brings peace and unanimity to the social group which would otherwise experience mimetic violence. Before a city or community can begin to build a common life, the means of controlling the spread of violence must be at hand. It is only the death of the surrogate victim that makes possible the establishment of cultural institutions. Girard suggests, ‘We should envisage the possibility that all human institutions, and therefore humanity itself, are rooted in sacrifice.’ 63

Two of the best-known myths that illustrate this theory of the founding murder are the stories of Romulus, who kills his brother Remus so that the city of Rome can be founded, and of Cain, who kills his brother Abel, and founds the city of Enoch (Gen. 4:17). In both of these myths, the brothers are mimetic doubles who are perceived to lack adequate differentiation and are therefore possible sources of mimetic violence. Neither pair of brothers can found a new civilization until one of each pair is removed. 64

Because the founding murder inaugurates the beginning of the world of the sacred which is religion, and triggers the development of human society, Girard claims

---

62 Girard, I See Satan, 82.
63 Girard, I See Satan, 93.
64 Girard, Things Hidden, 144–149.
that ‘it is religion that invented human culture. … Humanity, in my view, is the child of religion.’ ⁶⁵

*The Sacred as Violence*

According to Girard’s theory, that which we call ‘religion’ is fuelled by mimetic desire, enacted upon an innocent victim and compounded of myths, prohibitions and sacrificial re-enactments and rituals. Rebecca Adams explains:

> The *sacred*, like the term *myth* and usually *sacrifice*, is always negative in Girard’s thought, and leads to the religious and/or metaphysical (mis)representation created by scapegoating, and the mystifying process by which the scapegoat is simultaneously demonized and expelled from the system of representation, yet also divinized and paradoxically made the cornerstone of the system. ⁶⁶

Paul Keim, in his article ‘Reading Ancient Near Eastern Literature from the Perspective of Girard’s Scapegoat Theory,’ states, concerning Girard’s theory:

> In its eloquent simplicity, Girard’s unified theory of culture and religion has the impact of a screaming headline: The Sacred is Violence. It has become a compelling and exciting lens through which old texts seem to reveal new textures; familiar plots and stereotypical characters spring transformed off the page; a seemingly static moral universe is turned inside out like slain Tiamat. In the steaming carcass of chaos an ominous truth is revealed: Our community was born in fratricide, and we deny the horror of our complicity by sacralizing the cultural mechanisms that allow us to sacrifice innocent victims in our place. In Girard’s words, ‘Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.’ ⁶⁷

---

Andrew McKenna, in his book Violence and Difference, sums up the regrettable truth of the sacred when he says, ‘To sacrilize the victim is to sacrilize violence.’

**Girard and Nietzsche**

Early in his study, Girard saw the similarities between biblical revelation and archaic religion, but credits the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche with the insights which gave him the key to understanding their differences in his opposition of Dionysus and the ‘Crucified.’ In one of Nietzsche’s aphorisms he wrote:

The two types: Dionysos and the Crucified.…. 

Dionysos versus the ‘Crucified’: there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation …. In the other case, suffering—the ‘Crucified as the innocent one’—counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation. One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning … In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence: in the latter case, being is counted as holy enough to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich and capable of deifying to do so. The Christian denies even the happiest lot on earth: he is sufficiently weak, poor, disinherited to suffer from life in whatever form he meets it …

The ‘god on the cross’ is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life. Dionysos cut to pieces is a promise of life: It will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.

---

Nietzsche sees, in the will to power and the seizing of personal ascendancy at the expense of the weak, the life-affirming path of Dionysus. Girard sees, on the other hand, in the laying down of the right to dominate and the willingness to stand beside the victim, the Other-enhancing way of the Crucified. Nietzsche argues:

Through Christianity the individual was made so important, so absolute, that he could no longer be sacrificed: but the species endures only through human sacrifice… [T]his pseudo-humanism called Christianity wants it established that no one should be sacrificed.  

Where Girard sees redemption for humanity in the way of the Crucified, Nietzsche sees it in the way of Dionysus. In Girard’s opinion, this affirmation of the way of violence and scapegoating led to Nietzsche’s madness and foreshadowed the horrors of the Holocaust. He claims, ‘By insanely condemning the real greatness of our world, not only did Nietzsche destroy himself, but he suggested the terrible destruction that was later done by National Socialism.’

*Two Different Forms of ‘the Sacred’*

Just as Girard does, Nietzsche perceives human society as being kept safe from its own violence by the shedding of the blood of victims. He regards human sacrifice as desirable since it is necessary to maintain human society, and to elevate the strong to their true position. He expresses this necessity in terms of the ‘morality of the masters’ versus the ‘morality of the slaves.’

Although Nietzsche sees the equivalence of the collective murder of Dionysus and the Passion of Jesus, he also perceives that ‘[t]he martyrdom of Dionysus is

---

73 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 246.
interpreted by the adepts of his cult in a manner quite different from the Christian interpretation of Jesus’ Passion. Nietzsche therefore identifies two different perceptions of the sacred.

In the form of the sacred which he identifies as the type of Dionysus, he includes all pagan religions in which life itself, in all its ‘eternal fruitfulness and recurrence’ is celebrated fully in both its positive and negative forms. Birth and burgeoning, suffering, and torment are celebrated equally. ‘[I]t says yes to all this; it assumes willingly the worst together with the best. It is beyond good and evil.’ This pagan religion celebrates the strength and will to dominate of the strong, and accepts the necessity of subjugating the weak. Its gods delight in sacrifice, in the blood of victims. As Girard expresses Nietzsche’s thoughts:

A culture has to pay a price in order to breed a class of higher men. It has to assume even the worst forms of violence. Time and time again, Nietzsche tells us that Dionysus accommodates all human passions, including the lust to annihilate, the most ferocious appetite for destruction. Dionysus says yes to the sacrifice of many human lives.

This pagan religion of Dionysus has no place for suffering or weakness. Stephen Williams explains:

[T]he course of Dionysus by-passes the reality of human suffering (since attending to it introduces compassion and wrecks joy); the strength of the crucified one lies in his embrace of what is darkest and deepest in reality.

---

74 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 249.
75 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 249.
76 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 250.
77 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 246.
The second form of the sacred that Nietzsche identifies and opposes to the pagan is Christianity, or the way of the Crucified. Girard remarks, ‘Nietzsche saw clearly that Jesus died not as a sacrificial victim of the Dionysian type, but against all such sacrifices.’ He adds:

The Christian Passion is not anti-Jewish as the vulgar anti-Semites believe; it is anti-pagan; it reinterprets religious violence in such a negative fashion as to make its perpetrators feel guilty for committing it, even for silently accepting it.

The way of the Crucified unmasks the violent sacred and thus disempowers it. Since a belief in the guilt of the victim is necessary to the scapegoating process, the death of the innocent Son of God reveals scapegoat victimage as arbitrary and unjust and in the process, destroys the efficacy of all such sacrificial acts. In their place, Jesus substitutes forgiveness for revenge, and love for violence.

Girard claims:

Nietzsche drew attention to the irreconcilable opposition between a mythological vision grounded in the perspective of the victimizers and a biblical inspiration that from the beginning tends to side with the victims.

Kirwan thus summarises the two forms of the sacred:

There are two types of religion therefore: one which is prepared to accept even the most severe degree of suffering, for the sake of the higher values which are thus preserved or brought into being, and one which rejects suffering and seeks to overcome it. Nietzsche sides with Dionysus, and holds the Bible and Christianity responsible for the

---

80 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 250.
destruction of all culture. As Girard asserts, this makes Christianity ‘anti-pagan’.82

This thesis understands Girard’s term *the false sacred* (sometimes *the violent sacred*) to indicate religion wherein the deity or deities worshipped are believed to desire the blood of sacrificial victims and where its adherents find an antidote to interpersonal violence in the practice of scapegoat victimage. It is correct to say that in Girard’s understanding the deities of pagan religion are nothing more than a personification of the scapegoat mechanism. As such, the false sacred is characterised by myths that conceal the nature of the violence, rituals that re-enact it, and prohibitions that seek to minimise the need for it.

**Girard and the Bible**

In the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, Girard perceives an exposé of the scapegoat mechanism and the false sacred. He declares:

> One finds everywhere in the Bible collective violence similar to that which generates sacrifice, but instead of attributing responsibility for the violence to the victims—who are only conciliators in appearance, by virtue of the transference carried out against them at the expense of the truth—the Bible and the Gospels attribute it to its true perpetrators, the persecutors of the single victim. Instead of elaborating myths, consequently, the Bible and the Gospels tell the truth.83

As has already been noted, in order for the scapegoat mechanism to function, those who persecute must wholeheartedly perceive their victim or victims as guilty in regard to the crisis that confronts the community. The Bible exposes the system of victimage, so that it is disempowered and no longer functions for those who would

---

82 Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, 86.
sacrifice. The voluntary death of Jesus Christ, by revealing the lie behind the mechanism, renders it ineffectual. In Jesus, the murdered victim at the heart of the sacrifice stands as innocent, thus vindicating all innocent victims of sacrifice from the beginning of human existence. Girard sums up:

When John the Baptist refers to Jesus as ‘The Lamb of God’ or when Jesus refers to himself as ‘the stone rejected by the builders, who becomes the cornerstone,’ the sacrificial process appears and loses its efficacy. The revelation and repudiation of sacrifice go hand in hand.84

The Hebrew Scriptures represent for Girard the early and incomplete revelation of the mimetic cycle. Raymund Schwager thus describes Girard’s reading of them:

Girard understands the Old Testament as a long and laborious exodus out of the world of violence and sacred projections, an exodus plagued by many reversals and one that does not reach its goal within the Old Testament writings. Therefore, from Girard’s point of view no clear conclusions can be drawn or expected from within this framework. The mechanisms of violence and projection remain partly hidden. The old sacred notions continue in force and, through the process of revelation, are never quite exposed in their true meaning. On the level of the Old Testament one can therefore ask only whether the many individual texts, despite contradictory formulations, betray a certain common and fundamental tendency and whether this can be illuminated by Girard’s theory.85

Girard believes that in narratives from the Hebrew Bible only a partial presentation of the mimetic cycle may be found. In its complete form, this mimetic cycle is made up of the mimetic crisis, the collective violence that results from it, and what Girard calls ‘the

---

84 Girard, Sacrifice, xi.
sacred revelation, the resurrection that reveals the divinity of the victim. In the Hebrew Bible, only the first two phases are present.

Girard claims that as we study the Hebrew Scriptures, we find the ‘three great moments’ that are outlined in his theory. He describes these moments as:

1. Dissolution in conflict, removal of the differences and hierarchies which constitute the community in its wholeness;
2. The all against one of collective violence;
3. The development of prohibitions and rituals.

Girard lists some of the events from early in the biblical narrative that illustrate these ‘great moments.’ The first moment, the loss of differentiation and the dissolution of community bonds through interpersonal discord, is found in the story of the Tower of Babel, and the corruption of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The ten plagues of Egypt and the Flood can both be read as metaphors of crisis. From early in the book of Genesis, the motif of enemy brothers or twins emerges, in Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers.

The second moment, the attempt to resolve conflict through the scapegoat mechanism, is pervasive in the early stages of Israel’s story. Throughout Genesis and Exodus, we find many themes that relate to the founding murder, or to expulsion. The story of the eviction from Eden is the great example of expulsion. The resolution of conflict between warring brothers or rivals results in the expulsion of one brother in the story of Isaac’s blessing of Jacob, and in the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel at

---

86 Girard, I See Satan, 106. Some scholars have heard, in Girard’s use of the phrase ‘incomplete revelation’ and similar expressions, a supersessionist approach to Judaism. If this perception were valid, it would raise serious questions about Girard’s entire account of culture and religion. I do not share this perception of Girard. I unequivocally state that I reject supersessionism, and that I do not invoke any notion of evolution from Judaism to Christianity. In this thesis, I set aside this issue, in order to focus on how a Girardian reading attends to these four texts as they are construed as part of the Christian canon.

87 Girard, Things Hidden, 141–142.
Jabbok. Girard suggests that ‘since the single victim brings reconciliation and safety by restoring life to the community,’ 88 the situation where a single victim is saved while everyone else perishes can amount to the same thing. The story of the ark, and the escape of Lot and his family from the doomed city of Sodom conform to this paradigm. The death of Lot’s wife, Girard notes, brings that story back to the single victim. 89

He finds plentiful evidence for the establishment of rituals and prohibitions, which constitute his third moment. These include sacrifices and circumcision (which he regards as a form of sacrifice). Much space is given in the Pentateuch to such prohibitions and rituals.

McKenna sums up the importance of the Bible in Girard’s theory, when he declares that in it Girard uncovers:

the progressive revelation of the mimetic crisis in which culture originates, and to which culture persistently returns. What Scripture constitutes, from the story of Cain and Abel, of Jacob and Esau, of Joseph and his brothers, through the great prophetic imprecations against sacrifice … is nothing less than a theory of human violence, as opposed to the foundational myths of paganism in which violence is divinized because its uniquely human origins are obscured. 90

Conclusion

Girard’s theory, which first came into being as he studied the work of the great European novelists, has come a long way. An awareness of the role of mimetic desire led Girard to develop his hypothesis concerning the origins of violence in mimetic rivalry and its resulting lack of differentiation. But this does not mean that Girard in his later works regards mimesis as evil in itself. He claims:

88 Girard, Things Hidden, 143.
89 Girard, Things Hidden, 143.
Mimetic desire enables us to escape from the animal realm. It is responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it. Our unending discords are the ransom of our freedom.91

His awareness of the violence that has resulted from mimetic desire led Girard to an understanding of the scapegoat mechanism and the vital role that it has played in the establishment and maintenance of human culture. While Girard acknowledges the undesirability of the process of victimisation, he also sees that it is only through the mechanism of the false sacred that human society has been possible. Without the scapegoat, humanity would have died amidst the horrors of all-against-all violence.

It was within the pages of the Bible that Girard found the solution to the problems raised by human desire. In the Hebrew Scriptures, he found a growing awareness of the innocence of the victim. In the New Testament, he found that Jesus urged us to turn away from the violence that is the outcome of mimetic desire, and to take him as our model. In imitating Christ, Girard tells us, humanity can renounce the maintenance of peace by the death of a victim.

This thesis will now examine the methods that will be employed in analysing four stories of violence from the Hebrew Scriptures.

---

91 Girard, I See Satan, 16.
Chapter Three: Method

In the six chapters that follow, this thesis will study four texts from the Hebrew Scriptures in two pairs. Each text will be analysed separately in its original Hebrew form, with attention being paid to plot, characters, setting in time and space, the narrator’s point of view, and the way language is used. Special attention will also be paid to the gaps and ambiguities in each narrative, and the questions they provoke. The method that will be employed in this analysis is a combination of rhetorical criticism and narrative criticism. The four texts will be read closely and the focus of the study will be on their final forms.

Following this separate analysis of each text, the two texts from each pair will then be brought into dialogue with each other. In this enterprise, intertextuality will be employed to enhance meaning, highlight similarities and explore differences.

Although electing primarily to utilise rhetorical and narrative criticism and intertextuality, this study will not necessarily be confined exclusively to these methods, and will use others where they are appropriate. As Margaret Mitchell has pointed out, it is necessary to be open to more than one methodological approach. She claims:

[N]one of these methodologies should be taken as a simple three-point programme for the ‘right’ reading, or even necessarily an improved one; but each forefronts a different set of questions and resources which an astute reader may profitably bring into play in his or her readings of various biblical texts. Nor should these methodologies be treated as professions; one should not aspire to be solely a ‘rhetorical critic’ or a ‘literary critic’. Pluralism in interpretive approaches is no passing modernist or post-modernist fad; it is here to stay, and informed readers should be prepared to hear and (perhaps even) to speak in many tongues,
even as they have distinct preferences and proclivities that deserve to be
honoured.92

**Literary Criticism**

*Foundations of Literary Criticism*

Under the umbrella of ‘literary criticism’ there are many varied approaches to the
interpretation of texts. Movements that are based on a variety of theories, such as
Formalism, Imagism, Realism, Aestheticism, Decadence and Deconstruction, are
reflected in the many modes of literary analysis.93 Nonetheless, these different
approaches usually share some common ground.

Literary criticism today has inherited the structuralist preoccupation with the
‘final form’ of a text. David Gunn claims to interpret:

> the existing text (in its ‘final form’) in terms primarily of its own story
> world, seen as replete with meaning, rather than understanding the text
> by attempting to reconstruct its sources and editorial history, its original
> setting and audience, and its author’s or editor’s intention in writing.94

Literary critics see the text itself as we have it now as the locus of meaning,
rather than the texts of the past.95 As Susan Gillingham declares, ‘[t]he text, read and
interpreted by the reader in their own contemporary setting, is the paramount concern of
the literary approach.’96

The literary critic begins with close study of the text, preferably in its original
language. Trible suggests that particular attention should be paid to beginnings and

---

92 Margaret Mitchell, ‘Rhetorical and New Literary Criticism’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical
94 David Gunn, ‘Narrative Criticism’ in *To Each Its Own Meaning* eds. S. McKenzie and S. Haynes
(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 205.
96 Gillingham, *One Bible*, 179.
endings, repetition of words, phrases and sentences, types of discourse, design and
structure, plot development, portrayals of character, syntax and particles. The selected
text is studied as a unified composition which is not dissected, but rather analysed to
discern the strategies which hold it together.

In the world of literary criticism, there is no one standard, or ‘correct,’ reading of
a narrative. This does not mean that every reading of a text is equally valid. Danna
Nolan Fewell and David Gunn claim that a good reading is one that ‘expends energy
wrestling with the world of the text in the text’s terms.’ The writers of The
Postmodern Bible speak of the quest to ‘share a suspicion of the claim to mastery that
characterizes traditional readings of texts, including modern biblical scholarship’ by
‘sweeping away secure notions of meaning’ and ‘by raising doubts about the capacity to
achieve ultimate clarity about the meaning of a text.’ They state:

by challenging traditional interpretations that claim universality,
completeness and supremacy over other interpretations, postmodern
readings demonstrate that traditional interpretations are themselves
enactments of domination or, in simpler terms, power plays.

Contrasting historical criticism with literary criticism, Powell claims, ‘historical
criticism inevitably treats the text as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.’
One of the underpinnings of literary criticism is the notion that the text is worthy of
study in its own right. The aim of most literary analysis is to understand or interpret a

97 Phyllis Trible, Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method and the Book of Jonah (Minneapolis: Fortress
98 Powell, What is Narrative Criticism, 7.
99 Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn, Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of
101 Powell, What is Narrative Criticism, 7.
narrative. The text itself and the manner in which it is related ‘deserve full scholarly attention.’

Literary criticism, in all its forms, owes much of its impetus to models of speech-act theory, which are derived from theories about communication. The basic model, put forward by Roman Jakobson, involves a sender, a message and a receiver. These three terms translate in literature to an author, a text and a reader. Powell explains:

> The exact way in which these components interact with each other is understood differently by different schools of literary criticism. … All theories of literature, however, understand the text as a form of communication through which a message is passed from the author to the reader.

**Rhetorical Criticism in Biblical Studies**

Rhetorical criticism is a reader-centred approach to literature which ‘focuses on the means through which a work achieves a particular effect on the reader.’ W. Tate defines rhetorical criticism as

> a literary criticism that focuses on the communication between an author and a reader by analysing the strategies an author employs in a work to influence a reader’s view or shape a reader’s response. Rhetorical criticism is not a single, well-delineated methodology but a collection of critical approaches to interpreting texts.

---

102 Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 7.
103 Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 8–9.
Rhetorical criticism as a critical method employed in biblical studies had its beginnings in the presidential address delivered by James Muilenburg to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1968. In this address, entitled ‘Form Criticism and Beyond,’ Muilenburg proposed that the discipline of form criticism was in danger of losing sight of the uniqueness and individuality of each text in its drive to identify genres and traditions. He called for a renewed interest in what had once been known as ‘stylistic criticism,’ which he renamed ‘rhetorical criticism.’ He laid stress on the fact that the method he advocated was in no way to replace form criticism, but to supplement it. He claimed:

… there has been a proclivity among scholars in recent years to lay such stress upon the typical and representative that the individual, personal and unique features of the particular pericope are all but lost to view.

To counteract this tendency, Muilenburg suggested:

The circumspect scholar will not fail to supplement his form critical analysis with a careful inspection of the literary unit in its precise and unique formulation... For the more deeply one penetrates the formulations as they have been transmitted to us, the more sensitive he is to the roles which words and motifs play in a composition; the more he concentrates on the ways in which thought has been woven into linguistic patterns, the better able he is to think the thoughts of the biblical writer after him.

In 1974, Muilenburg died, and the work of cultivating rhetorical criticism was taken up by his students. Jack Lundbom, while studying under Muilenburg, wrote a

---

109 Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 5.
110 Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 7.
dissertation on rhetoric in Jeremiah, in which he explored the notion that the message of Jeremiah was carried forward by inclusio and chiasmus. Trible explains:

The analysis ... illuminated the argumentative character of the discourse to expose a resistant audience. Thereby the art of composition incorporated the art of persuasion. In asserting that ‘structure is a key to meaning and interpretation,’ Lundbom followed the rhetorical program of his mentor Muilenburg.

Another student of Muilenburg, Toni Craven, wrote a dissertation in which she employed rhetorical criticism to study the book of Judith. Reading the text closely, Craven drew attention to the use of repetition and demonstrated Muilenburg’s style of compositional analysis, but rejected form criticism and minimised the importance of the intent of the author. Three other students—Walter Brueggemann, James Ackerman, and Phyllis Trible—brought the new discipline of rhetorical criticism into the mainstream of biblical studies.

Throughout the short history of biblical rhetorical criticism, there has been a tension between the two different perceptions of rhetorical criticism which David Howard identifies as ‘literary criticism’ and ‘rhetorical criticism.’ Trible refers to them as ‘the art of composition’ and ‘the art of persuasion.’ Many, like Muilenburg, have turned their attention primarily on the exploration of literary artistry in the texts of Scripture, while others have used literary study to focus on the ways in which the Bible seeks to persuade. Lundbom, for example, while embracing much of Muilenburg’s

---

112 Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 35.
114 Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 38.
115 Gunn, ‘Narrative Criticism’, 204–205.
117 Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 32 and 41.
rhetorical method, perceived it as limited, since it is not primarily concerned with the persuasive qualities of texts or with their audiences. He considered that ‘[m]ost of the effort is expended doing close work on the biblical text’ so that it becomes ‘little more than an exercise in textual description.’ Patricia Tull suggests that … many have begun to direct attention to the hortatory nature of much of the Bible – that is, its effort to persuade audiences not merely to appreciate the aesthetic power of its language but, even more importantly, to act and think according to its norms.

Thus, while all rhetorical critics begin with a close study of the biblical text in the style of the Muilenburg school, some, according to Patrick and Scult, choose to go on and inquire about how the text ‘establishes and manages its relationship to its audience in order to achieve a particular effect.’

One principle that Muilenburg passed on to his students was that proper articulation of form yields a proper articulation of meaning. Phyllis Trible explains:

Form and content are inseparable. On the one hand the text is not a container from which ideas or substance can be abstracted to live an independent life. On the other hand, the text is not a subject matter from which stylistic and structural wrappings can be removed to exist autonomously. How the text speaks and what it says belong together in the discovery of what it is.

In studying texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, attention must therefore be paid not only to meaning, but also to the way it is conveyed and enhanced through the form and structure of the text.

---

Narrative Criticism in Biblical Studies

For several decades, narrative criticism was more generally employed by critics of the New Testament than by critics of the Hebrew Scriptures and tended to be conservative in approach. More recently, its usage within the Hebrew Scriptures has expanded and the underpinnings of secular narrative criticism have found their way into biblical narrative criticism.

Narrative criticism weaves together two strands—the study of the role of the reader and the analysis of the elements of narrative, such as plot, characterisation and setting. This study will examine both of these threads.

The Role of the Reader

Tate writes: ‘Like reader response criticism, narrative criticism assumes that the story does not exist autonomously within the text but comes into being through the interaction between the text and the reader.’ Narrative critics speak of the interaction between the real world of the author, with all of its complex social, institutional, economic and religious components, and the storyworld that can be found only within the text. Similarly, they speak of the real author who penned the narrative, and the implied author who exists only as a literary entity within the text; and the real reader who at some moment in time reads the text, and the implied reader who is an entity defined by the text. Readers, when reading the narrative, will ideally align themselves with the implied author and accept the implied world of the story with all its presuppositions and conditions, thus granting authority to the implied author. Sometimes, however, a reader

122 Gunn, ‘Narrative Criticism’, 201.
123 Tate, Handbook for Biblical Interpretation, 278.
124 Tate, Handbook for Biblical Interpretation, 278–279.
will refuse to accept the viewpoint of the implied author and will read the text in a resistant fashion, against the presuppositions of the implied author. Such a reader has refused to enter into a reading contract with the implied author.

Elements of Narrative

The second strand analysed in narrative criticism is the study of the elements of narrative. In order to perceive the full range of textual expression, rhetorical and intertextual critics also direct their attention to the various elements employed in the narrative. These include plot, characterization, settings in time and space, the narrator, dialogue, point of view, gaps and ambiguities in the text, and key words, motifs and theme.

Story, Plot and Narration

Narrative theorists draw a distinction between the notions of story, plot and narration. According to David Herman, the term story denotes the chronologically arranged sequence of events that can be constructed from the cues within a narrative text.\(^{125}\)

Plot, H. Porter Abbott explains, can be used to express three different understandings. The most common of these is plot as a type of story, or as E. M. Forster has expressed it, ‘events connected by cause.’\(^{126}\) A second understanding of plot is a value term, indicating that the events which make up the story have been shaped into a meaningful sequence with a beginning, a middle and an end: that is, plot as crafted story. The third understanding of the term, foregrounded by Gérard Genette, refers to the way plot works to control the progressive revelation of a story and thus perceives

---


\(^{126}\) E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 86.
plot as ‘the artful disclosure of story.’ Abbott sums up these three understandings thus:

‘If the first of these uses of plot comes closest to the way in which we use the term in English, the second and third, with their emphasis on the art by which a story is delivered, might more accurately be referred to as ‘emplotment.’

In this thesis, I will use the word plot to express the first of these meanings.

Narration refers to ‘the process by which a narrative is conveyed’ or more simply, the way the story is told. Abbott claims:

The distinction between plot and story, like that between narration and story, is an implicit presumption that a story is separate from its rendering. Just as a story can be narrated in different ways, so can it be plotted in different ways.

Biblical narrative, however, does not usually display complex arrangements of plot. Anachrony is rare, and plot and story are usually similar. Typically, these narratives begin with an exposition—that is, a few statements that introduce characters, name a setting and present family relationships. Often this introduction has no verbs, or has only the verb ‘to be,’ which is seldom present in the text, but is implied. Robert Alter explains, ‘The opening exposition…is pretemporal, statically enumerating data that are not bound to a specific moment in time: they are facts that stand before the time of the story proper.’ Sometimes this exposition is followed by a transitional phase, in which habitual or iterative actions (defined by adverbs or adverbial phrases, since the verbs themselves are ambiguous) are introduced, depicting actions that form ‘a background of

---

128 Abbott, ‘Story, Plot and Narration’, 44.
129 Herman, ‘Glossary’, 279.
custonarily patterned behaviour to the real plot. Then the action of the story commences, employing active verbs and usually being interspersed with dialogue.

The author arranges the events of the story into a sequence, which, in biblical stories, is usually causal and chronological. Following the exposition and transition (if any), comes the complication or crisis, which culminates in the heart of the narrative—the change. This leads to the unravelling, where we see the consequences of the change. Finally, the ending brings resolution to the story. It must signal the closing of a narrative event and dismiss the characters to another place. Some biblical stories, especially those that are chiastic in structure, feature concentric endings, where the hero returns to the place from which he came.

Character

Uri Margolin thus defines the word character:

In its widest sense, ‘character’ designates any entity, individual or collective—normally human or human-like—introduced in a work of narrative fiction. Characters thus exist within storyworlds, and play a role, no matter how minor, in one or more of the states of affairs or events told about in the narrative. Character can be succinctly defined as storyworld participant.

The characters are the means by which the plot is implemented, just as the plot is the vehicle through which the characters find expression. Adele Berlin discerns three different levels of characters in the biblical text, which she terms the fully-fledged character, the type, and the agent. Fred Burnett argues, however, that individuality is

---

132 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 80.
133 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 80–81.
a modern psychological construct and that most of the characters to be found in ancient
texts are ‘agents’ or ‘types’ rather than full characters.137 As Robert Fowler claims,
‘literary characters, like their human counterparts, are never solitary entities but are
always to be found in relationships with others.’138

Margolin suggests that characters can be studied from three principal
perspectives: as ‘an artistic product or artifice constructed by an author for some
purpose,’ as a non-actual individual ‘presumed to exist in some hypothetical, fictional
domain’ or ‘as text-based construct or mental image in the reader’s mind.’139 He
describes fictional characters as being ‘radically incomplete as regards the number and
nature of the properties ascribed to them’140 because every author is, by necessity,
selective in his or her presentation of the details of his character’s life and self. He
suggests: ‘Some authors are sparing on physical details, while others provide no access
to characters’ minds.’141 Biblical authors almost universally exhibit both of these
tendencies. Characters in the Hebrew Scriptures are seldom given more than a few
words of description, if indeed they receive any. In scriptural narratives, physical
characteristics are not introduced to help the reader visualize the character, but because
they have some significance in the developing story. Thus it is disclosed that Esau is a
hairy man, while Jacob is smooth; Leah has weak (or soft) eyes while Rachel is
beautiful; that Ehud is left-handed, and Eglon is fat; that Absalom has long, thick hair,
only because these details are significant to the plot. Similarly, inner personality, both in
direct characterization and in descriptions of the emotional states of characters, is

137 Fred Burnett, ‘Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels’, Semeia 63,
1993, 6–7.
139 Margolin, ‘Character’, 66.
140 Margolin, ‘Character’, 68.
141 Margolin, ‘Character’, 68.
typically mentioned only where it has a bearing on the story-line. Therefore, we learn that ‘Noah was a righteous man’ (Gen. 6:9) and ‘David was angry’ (2 Sam 6:8).

The Narrator

The narrator functions as mediator between the story and the reader and can stand inside or outside the story. Genette termed these two types of narrators homodiegetic and heterodiegetic. The homodiegetic narrator is one who is a participant in the storyworld, while the heterodiegetic narrator is outside the storyworld and therefore may be regarded as more reliable and less personally concerned in the story he or she narrates.\textsuperscript{142} In Biblical narrative, it is rare to find a homodiegetic narrator – in general, Amit observes, ‘an authoritative external narrator who is above the characters’ is employed.\textsuperscript{143} She makes a case for the reliability of the narrator:

\begin{quote}

Literary studies tend to refer to the narrator in religious terminology, such as omniscient and omnipotent, because the narrator is traditionally considered the ultimate authority in the story-world. The narrator knows all there is to know about the world of the story—even the secret thoughts and feelings of the characters, including God…. Both God and the narrator must be trustworthy and hence are the benchmark of trustworthiness for all other personae.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

Not all critics accept the idea of narratorial omniscience in the Hebrew Scriptures as promoted by Amit, Alter, Bar-Efrat, Berlin and Sternberg. Gunn and Fewell, in their book, \textit{Narrative in the Hebrew Bible} (1993), disagree on methodological grounds. They believe that to read the Hebrew Bible as a literary unity is to encounter major temporal, spatial and factual disjunctions within the text. Gunn cites examples

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{143} Amit, \textit{Reading Biblical Narratives}, 94–95.
\textsuperscript{144} Amit, \textit{Reading Biblical Narratives}, 95.
\end{flushright}
like the ‘two factually irreconcilable accounts of the young David’s arrival at court,’ and the contradiction over who killed Goliath (1 Sam. 17 and 2 Sam. 21:19). 'Thus,’ R. Heard writes, ‘Gunn and Fewell find the notion of a straightforwardly reliable, omnipotent narrator to be undermined by biblical narrative itself.'

Jan Fokkelman goes further than Amit when he declares that in narrative, the relative positions of God and the narrator are reversed. The narrator becomes the creator, and God a created character. He claims:

In narrative texts, God is a character; i.e. a creation of the narrator and writer. God is a language construct; Abraham is a linguistic device; David is a portrait made up exclusively of language signs. God can only act if the narrator is willing to tell us about it. The narrator decides whether God is allowed to say anything in the story, and if so, how often and how much.

Dialogue

Hebrew narrative shows a preference for direct rather than reported speech. This has the effect of bringing the character sharply before the reader, and engaging the reader in the world of the character. The first words spoken by any character in a story are frequently important, setting before us something significant about either the speaker or the plot. In many biblical stories, narrated sections are briefer than dialogue, so that short bands of explanatory narrative link fuller interchanges of speech. Because spoken elements are so prominent, visual elements are often scanty. Where third person narration recapitulates what characters have said, it is important to be attuned to even slight changes in

---

emphasis and nuance, as significant dissonances are often thus conveyed to the reader.  

Alter suggests that although it is ‘dramatically convincing,’ biblical dialogue is not intended to be ‘entirely naturalistic.’ He writes, ‘We of course have no way of knowing what ordinary spoken Hebrew was like …but there is some internal evidence …that the “bias of stylization” affects the words assigned to the speakers.’ This ‘bias of stylization’ appears to require of all speakers an adherence to ‘normative literary Hebrew,’ which presents the writer with a challenge when it comes to showing the differences in the personalities of speakers. Since it is a convention in biblical Hebrew narrative that all dialogues take place between two characters only, or between one character and a group that speaks with one voice, writers are able to employ what Alter calls ‘the technique of contrastive dialogue.’ This technique places contrasting modes of speech side by side, so that their small differences are highlighted. Alter alerts us to some classic examples of contrastive dialogue.

We may note a few familiar examples: Esau’s inarticulate outbursts over against Jacob’s calculating legalisms in the selling of the birthright (Gen 25); Joseph’s long-winded statement of morally aghast refusal over against the two-word sexual bluntness of Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39); Saul’s choked cry after David’s impassioned speech outside the cave at Ein Gedi (1 Sam. 24).

Dialogue brings the characters sharply to life, and permits the writer to sketch personality, explain the intentions or past actions of his characters, and develop plot.

149 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 70.
150 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 72.
151 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 72.
Above all, dialogue illuminates the relationships that exist between the different people of a story.

**Time and Space**

Temporal and spatial features anchor the story in its context. Teresa Bridgeman writes:

> Time and space are ... more than background elements in narrative; they are part of its fabric, affecting our basic understanding of a narrative text and of the protocols of different narrative genres. They profoundly influence the way in which we build mental images of what we read.¹⁵²

Although time and space are frequently grouped together, time has been regarded as the more important aspect of narrative. Gabriel Zoran claims:

> Literature is basically an art of time. Although no-one today would state this as baldly as Lessing (1974: 102-115) did, the dominance of the time factor in the structuring of the narrative text remains an indisputable fact.¹⁵³

Bridgeman suggests: ‘Time has always played an important role in theories of narrative, given that we tend to think of stories as sequences of events.’¹⁵⁴

Narrative theorists distinguish between two aspects of narrative time which can be called ‘story time’ and ‘discourse time’. ‘Story time’ refers to the time that passes within the storyworld, and ‘discourse time’ to the time taken to read about it. In a section of a narrative that summarizes the outcome of an event, many years may pass in a single sentence. At moments of great narrative significance, the telling of the story

---


may slow down and become more detailed, so that a few hours of action can require
several chapters to recount. Monika Fludernik suggests:

[M]any traditional novels end with a chapter that summarises the hero’s
life after the conclusion of the main events of the story, treating twenty
years in three pages, whereas in previous sections a single day was
awarded several chapters and some hundred pages of text.\(^{155}\)

Sternberg has studied the effects of temporal patterns on the reader. He suggests
that suspense, curiosity and surprise are generated by gaps between story time and
discourse time. Suspense derives from the gap between what has already been told and
that which lies ahead; curiosity arises from what we have been told about the past, and
what we imagine might also have happened; surprise is generated by a gap in the
narrative that conceals a fact that is subsequently revealed. Sternberg believes that ‘the
play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between represented and communicative time’ is that
which defines narrativity.\(^{156}\)

Of the use of time within the Biblical text, Bar-Efrat writes:

The shaping of time within the narrative is functional and not random or
arbitrary, making a genuine contribution, in coordination and
cooperation with the other elements, to the characters, meaning and
values of the entire narrative. Apart from its role within the narrative
itself, such as providing emphases or implying connections between
separate incidents, narrated time can fulfil direct functions for the reader,
such as creating suspense or determining attitudes.\(^{157}\)

---

\(^{155}\) Monika Fludernik, ‘Time in Narrative’ in Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory edited by
David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 608.

\(^{156}\) Meir Sternberg, ‘Universals of Narrative and Their Cognitivist Fortunes (1)’, Poetics Today 24/2,

Amit points out that ‘the device of highlighting especially important events’ causes the biblical writer to slow down the narrative time, so that crucial moments may require several verses to take place, while years that are not significant pass by in a few words.\footnote{Amit, \textit{Reading Biblical Narratives}, 108.} She also makes the point that a proliferation of chronological markers within a text draws our attention to the chronological aspects of the story.\footnote{Amit, \textit{Reading Biblical Narratives}, 107.}

The location of a story or its characters in space is also revealing. Bridgeman writes:

\begin{quote}
[S]patial relationships can be constructed at a basic and relatively stable topographical level, linking objects and locations, but they can also apply to movements of things and people around a narrative world.\footnote{Bridgeman, ‘Time and Space’, 55.}
\end{quote}

Mark Johnson, in his book \textit{The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason}, draws attention to the importance in narrative of the concepts of \textit{path} and \textit{container}.\footnote{Mark Johnson, \textit{The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).} Of the notion of the \textit{path}, Bridgeman suggests: ‘our image of a work can involve the paths of the protagonists around their world, bringing together time and space to shape a plot.’\footnote{Bridgeman, ‘Time and Space’, 55.} Of the concept of container, she explains:

‘Containers may be rooms, houses, vehicles, or entire cities and are important factors in the three-dimensionality of narrative space.’\footnote{Bridgeman, ‘Time and Space’, 55.} Hilary Dannenberg adds to these the significant notion of the portal, which may be either a window or a doorway.\footnote{Hilary Dannenberg, ‘Windows, Doorways and Portals in Narrative Fiction and Media’ in \textit{Magical Objects: Things and Beyond} edited by E. Schenkel and S. Welz (Berlin: Galda and Wilch Verlag, 2007), 181–198.}

Dannenberg writes:
The window—and the doorway—are objects in terms of the frame structure on their periphery and the glass or other surface that constitutes their interior, but they are also portals between separate environments in terms of the empty space which they encompass … [T]wo key variables in the representation of the window or doorway are a) the nature of the spaces which it connects in its function as a portal and b) the representation of the space in-between that the window or doorway as a portal constitutes.\textsuperscript{165}

In biblical literature, as Amit points out, spatial indicators may serve an additional purpose. If the physical location of a story is left unspecified, it is usually an indicator that the story should be read as fictional. Amit writes: ‘A biblical author who wishes to emphasise the historical nature of the narrative will not fail to offer a geographic image with topographic indications.’\textsuperscript{166} An illustration of this principle occurs in Judges 21:19:

\begin{quote}

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִנֵּה חַג־יְהוָה בְּשִׁלוֹ מִיָּמִים יָמִים אֲשֶׁר מִצְּפוֹנָה לְבֵית־אֵל מִזְרְחָה הַשֶּׁם לִמְסִלָּה הָעֹלָה מִבֵּית־אֵל שְׁכֶמָה וּמִנֶּגֶב לִלְבוֹנָה׃
\end{quote}

‘And they said, ‘Behold, there is a feast of YHWH from year to year at Shiloh, north of Bethel, east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah’.

In contrast, in the parable that Nathan tells David in 2 Samuel 11–12, no specific place is mentioned – it simply takes place in a city somewhere, and can therefore be assigned a fictional genre.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{165} Dannenberg, ‘Windows, Doorways and Portals’, 181. Italics original.
\textsuperscript{166} Amit, Reading Biblical Narratives, 118.
Bar-Efrat makes this significant claim about the use of location in Biblical narratives:

‘[P]laces in the narratives are not merely geographic facts, but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is embodied.¹⁶⁷

Thus time and space serve to anchor the narrative securely in its storyworld and may sometimes constitute important elements of the plot.

**Point of View**

As Berlin reminds us, the reader can only experience a narrative event through the eyes of the (implied) author, the narrator, or one of the characters. She writes, ‘Never can the reader step behind the story to know a character other than in the way the narrator presents him.’¹⁶⁸ Although, as she insists, the narrator generally speaks in the third person from an omniscient perspective, she sees a variety of viewpoints being utilized. She compares a biblical narrative to a film as opposed to a play and demonstrates that the scenes are shot from a variety of angles to highlight or gloss over events or characters at the choice of the author. The biblical narrator can be made to ‘survey the scene from a distance or zoom in for a detailed look at a small part of it. He can follow one character throughout or hop from the vantage point of one to another.’¹⁶⁹

Boris Uspensky demonstrates some aspects of point of view when he distinguishes between the ideological level (in which the events of the story are judged), the phraseological level (which identifies semantic markers within the text that signal a change in viewpoint), the spatial and temporal levels (such as flashbacks and changes in

¹⁶⁸ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 43.
¹⁶⁹ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 44.
setting), and the psychological level (‘the viewpoint from which actions and behaviours are perceived or described.’)\textsuperscript{170} Berlin adds to Uspensky’s schema when she points out:

It is important to remember that point of view need not remain constant, and in fact, often switches from internal to external, from one temporal or spatial view to another.\textsuperscript{171}

The names used to describe characters can also be significant. Uspensky claims that the different names characters are given demonstrate the positions from which they are viewed. He declares:

If we know how different people habitually refer to one particular character … then it may be possible formally to define whose viewpoint the author has assumed at any one moment in the narrative.\textsuperscript{172}

Berlin speaks of instances where the narrator ‘breaks frame’ and steps outside the story to give information, often of a temporal or spatial nature.\textsuperscript{173} She also describes some of the indicators of point of view at the phraseological level of Hebrew narrative. One common expression which is thus used is the Hebrew term הִנֵּה (‘behold’), which indicates a change in viewpoint. She suggests that ‘it functions in much the same way as interior monologue … to internalize the viewpoint; it provides a kind of ‘interior vision.’”\textsuperscript{174} In some cases, הִנֵּה is followed by a verb of perception whilst in others it stands alone, but in both cases it functions to indicate the internalization of a viewpoint. When it occurs in direct speech, however, it no longer performs this function.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{171} Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 56.
\textsuperscript{172} Uspensky, Poetics of Composition, 25–26.
\textsuperscript{173} Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 57–59.
\textsuperscript{174} Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 62.
\textsuperscript{175} Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 74.
Manfred Jahn refers to point-of-view as *focalization*, and, deriving his material from Genette’s model,\(^\text{176}\) he identifies three types. The first, which he calls *non-focalization*, presents a panoramic overview in which ‘the narrator has access to in principle, limitless (i.e., unrestricted) information which clearly transcends what is available to ordinary humans.’\(^\text{177}\) He calls the second type *internal focalization*. In this mode, the storyworld is perceived through the eyes of one or more characters within it. Jahn refers to his third type of focalization as *external focalization*. It ‘marks the most drastic reduction of narrative information because it restricts itself to “outside views,” reporting what would be visible and audible to a virtual camera.’\(^\text{178}\) These three types of focalization may all be found in narratives from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Meir Sternberg perceives four different viewpoints, or focalizations, in biblical narrative—that of the narrator, of God, of the reader and of the earthly characters. He considers the ‘detached and privileged’ narrator to be aligned with God, while the reader is aligned with the ‘involved and nonprivileged’ human cast. He writes:

> The lines of demarcation are thus redrawn to establish a novel fourfold pattern, involving two assorted and roughly symmetrical couples: the elevated superhumans on one hand and the erring humans on the other. God existentially inside while perspectivally above the world, the reader wedded in some degree to his fellow men: this structure of point of view acts as a constant reminder of their respective positions in the scheme of things.\(^\text{179}\)

Because of its frequent shifts of viewpoint, the Hebrew narrative is able to place side by side different and even conflicting perspectives. This gives it ambiguity and

\(^{176}\) Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 186.
\(^{178}\) Jahn, ‘Focalization’, 98.
sophistication, and ensures that the role of the reader is not that of passive receiver but of active participant in the task of assigning meaning to the text. It is the reader’s job to weave the various viewpoints that vie for meaning into a coherent whole.\textsuperscript{180}

**Gaps and Ambiguities**

One characteristic of Hebrew narrative is its use of gaps and ambiguity to heighten suspense and to encourage reader participation in the text. ‘The narrator,’ Amit claims, ‘is omniscient but does not report everything. The narrator chooses what to tell and when.’\textsuperscript{181} Sternberg declares:

[I]nsofar as knowledge is information, the ubiquity of gaps about character and plot exposes to us our own ignorance: history unrolls as a continuum of discontinuities, a sequence of non sequiturs, which challenge us to repair the omissions by our native wit. Through a mimesis of real-life conditions of inference, we are surrounded by ambiguities, baffled and misled by appearances, reduced to piecing fragments together by trial and error, often left in the dark about essentials to the very end.\textsuperscript{182}

The filling of gaps and the interpretation of ambiguity provide an opportunity for a variety of valid interpretations of a story. Alter points out:

We are never in serious doubt that the biblical narrator knows all there is to know ... but ... he is highly selective about sharing his omniscience with his readers. Were he to invite our full participation in his comprehensive knowledge ... the effect would be to open our eyes and make us ‘become like God, knowing good and evil.’ His typically monotheistic decision is to lead us to know as flesh-and-blood knows ... with all the ambiguity that entails; motive is frequently, though not invariably, left in a penumbra of doubt; often we are able to draw

---

\textsuperscript{180} Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 82.
\textsuperscript{181} Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 97.
\textsuperscript{182} Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 47
plausible inferences about the personages and their destinies, but much remains a matter of conjecture or even of teasing multiple possibilities.  

In the gaps and ambiguities of Hebrew narrative our own experience and our creativity come into play. In the spaces of the story, we find a place to express something of who we are as readers of the text.

Key Words, Motifs and Theme

Shimon Bar-Efrat describes the stories in the Hebrew Bible as being made up of three different levels. The most basic, surface level of a text is made up of words which constitute ‘the raw material of which the narrative is made.’  

It is on this level that key words play an important part in determining the chief concerns of a story, revealing ‘the meaning and the implicit message of the narrative.’  

The second level is formed by the first, and is made up of the events of the story, and the characters. The third and deepest level is also the most abstract, and expresses ‘ideas and meanings, which are not usually expressed directly and overtly.’  

A key word is a word or root that is repeated meaningfully within a text or series of texts. Bar-Efrat, however, points out that not every word or root that is repeated is a key word. Some words are repeated simply because they are common words in the Hebrew Bible. In detecting key words, attention should be paid to how frequently the words are used in a selected text, and how close together the repetitions occur. Bar-Efrat suggests:

---

183 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 158.
184 Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art, 197.
185 Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art, 197.
186 Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art, 197.
The greater the frequency of the word in the Bible, the more densely it should occur (more often, or with greater proximity); and the rarer it is, the less intensively need it occur (less often and at a greater distance).  

Motifs are made up of a collection of key words that gather around a single notion. They are small units of meaning that are repeated throughout a narrative. Motifs may be grouped together to form the theme of the narrative. The theme underlies the surface level of the story and provides the scaffolding upon which the narrative develops.

**Intertextuality**

Mikhail Bakhtin advanced the notion that discourse, because it does not occur in a vacuum but within a greater context, can never be value-neutral. As Tate suggests: ‘Every word is already built on the “scaffolding” of past usage.’ The language in literary texts is never unique, therefore, but is multi-voiced, since it exists alongside its own history. In 1969, Julia Kristeva introduced the term ‘intertextuality’ to describe ‘the intrinsic interrelationship of texts,’ a concept which she attributed to Bakhtin. In the view of Kristeva:

Every text takes shape as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts. The notion of intertextuality comes to take the place of the notion of intersubjectivity.

---

189 Tull, ‘Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality,’ 166.
Meaning, according to Kristeva, is never absolute, but always conditional upon earlier usages of language. Texts are created in conversation with prior texts, and subsequent texts will reflect and reconfigure those that went before them.\(^{191}\)

In this thesis, intertextuality is of great significance because it provides the rationale for the two pairings of texts in my analysis.

**Conclusion**

This study will be attentive to the compositional strategies of the texts, and to the persuasive or rhetorical voices that are embedded in the narratives. It will also pay attention to the elements of narrative and their relationships. It will not claim to present a definitive or absolute reading of the four chosen texts, but in the chapters which follow, will aim to find coherence within them, and to remain true to the narrative world that finds expression in them.\(^{192}\)

At the commencement of each of these four studies, I will divide the narrative into scenes. Several factors will be taken into account in creating these scene divisions. I will create a new scene where the function of the text changes, so that, for example, verses which supply background information to the action of the story will be separated from the action that follows. Unity of time and/or place will be regarded as constituting a scene, except where this unity is compromised by a major shift in the mood or trend of the story, when a new scene will be created. A major change to the cast of characters, when it is central to the action of the story, may prompt the creation of a new scene.


\(^{192}\) The combining of historical-critical methods and literary methods, not to mention the use of Girard’s anthropological overlay, can give rise to tensions and thus questions of judgment are required when different methods push in different interpretive directions. This is perhaps most noticeable in this thesis in my treatment of Genesis 22, in which I integrate both source-redactional proposals with a narrative approach. These tensions are commonplace in Biblical studies but are often not explicitly named as such. It is my view that these tensions typically lead to richer readings, as we attempt to bring all pertinent data to the hermeneutical endeavour.
Narratives that recount journeying, which cannot by their nature display unity of time or place, will be divided into scenes on the criterion of direction/purpose. Some scenes have been created to indicate a change of pace or of subject. Where it is very strong in a section of narrative, a complete change in mood, as from terror to serenity for example, may be regarded as grounds for a scene division. These factors to be taken into account when dividing the text into scenes may be summarised as: function, and unity of time, place, cast of characters, direction and purpose, pace, subject, and mood.
Chapter Four: The Surrounding of Lot’s House (Genesis 19: 1–11)

In this chapter, I will read the text of Genesis 19:1–11 closely, using rhetorical and narrative critical methods, paying particular attention to the gaps and ambiguities within the text, and to those elements that have evoked conflicting readings among scholars. The text will be rendered into English that as closely as possible mirrors the Hebrew original and that does not take into account issues of style within the English translation. The narrative will be divided into scenes, and at the end of each scene, textual notes of clarification will be added where necessary. A rhetorical/narrative analysis, scene by scene, will follow, then a review of this narrative’s place in its context in the book of Genesis. The study of this passage will conclude with an exploration of the use of some elements of narrative within it.

I have divided the story into three scenes. Scene One (vv. 1–3) introduces the messengers and shows us Lot in his role of host. It is united by its function, which is to launch the action of the story. Scene Two (vv. 4–9) steps straight into the heart of the story and introduces the other characters. This scene contains the crisis, and Lot’s response to it. Taking place in the space outside Lot’s door, it has unity of time and place. Scene Three (vv. 10–11) functions to end the crisis and the door to Lot’s house ceases to be the focal point of the story. It is set apart from the preceding scene by its function as resolution to the story.

Translation

Scene One (vv. 1–3): Lot’s Hospitality

1. And the two messengers came to Sodom in the evening.

וַיָּבוֹאוּ שְׁנֵ֙י הַמַּלְאָכִ֤ים סְדֹ֙מָה֙ בָּﬠֶ֔רֶב
And Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom

and Lot saw them

and he rose to meet them

and he bowed down with his face to the ground.

2. And he said, ‘Behold, please, my lords,

turn aside please to the house of your servant,

and lodge, and wash your feet

and rise early and go on your way.’

And they said,

‘No, we will lodge in the square.’

3. And he pressed them strongly,

and they turned aside to him,

and came into his house.

And he made a feast for them,

and unleavened bread he baked

and they ate.

Notes on Scene 1

Verse 1

המַלְאָכִים (‘the messengers’) and בָּﬠֶרֶב (‘in the evening’) Both these expressions are definite, conveying the information that these are the messengers of Chapter 18, and that it is the evening of the same day.
Verse 2

This usage of the word, with the *patah* under the second last consonant, has been much discussed, and is the only occurrence of this form used to refer to men rather than God in the Hebrew Scriptures.\(^{193}\)

*Scene Two (vv. 4–9): The Surrounding of Lot’s House*

4. But before they lay down,

the men of the city, the men of Sodom,

they placed themselves around the house,

from young lads to elders,

all the people from the region.

5. And they called to Lot

and they said to him,

‘Where are the men

who came to you tonight?

Bring them out to us

and let us know them.’

6. And Lot went out to them through the doorway

and he shut the door behind him.

7. And he said, ‘Please, my brothers,

do not be so evil.

8. Behold, please, I have two daughters, who have not known a man.

Please let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them whatever is good in your eyes.

Only to these men do nothing for they have come under the shadow of my roof.’

9. And they said, ‘Come closer,’ and they said ‘The one who came to sojourn is indeed judging!’

Now we will do worse to you than to them.’ And they pushed against the man, against Lot greatly and they drew near to break down the door.

Notes on Scene Two

Verse 4

Ephraim Speiser writes: ‘Literally “placed themselves around.”’ He goes on to say that the Niphal, when used with the preposition על, ‘can describe hostile moves.’

Verse 5

(literally, ‘and let us know them’) The reiteration of the verb ידוע in verse 8 makes its meaning clear. Wenham suggests, ‘[S]ince ידוע “to know” is frequently used in Genesis of sexual intercourse, this seems the likeliest meaning here (cf. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16).’

Verse 8

This clause recalls the conclusion to the book of Judges—‘In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes’ (Judges 21:25). It also echoes Abram’s speech to Sarai when he turns Hagar over to her to suffer ill-treatment at her hands in Genesis 16:6.

בַּלָּא Of this less common form of the demonstrative pronoun, Gesenius writes, ‘The form בלא occurs only in the Pentateuch (but not in the Samaritan text) … (8 times), always with the article … and in 1 Ch 20:8 without the article.’

Verse 9

In this phrase, the verb נפש means ‘to draw near’ while the adverb בלאתא is generally translated as ‘out there, outwards, further’. This contradiction has generally been resolved in favour of the adverb, yielding a translation that orders Lot to stand back or go further away. Gunn, however, translates the phrase in favour of the
verb. He renders it: “Come on, get closer!” they mock (the Hebrew means not “draw back out of the way” as most translations have it but “get close and then some more!”).\textsuperscript{200} H. C. Leupold\textsuperscript{201} and Wenham\textsuperscript{202} support this rendering. In view of the speech by the men of Sodom later in the same verse, where they express the intention of doing worse to Lot than they had intended to do to the messengers, this translation appears preferable.

This use of the verb נבה (‘to draw near’) to describe the aggression of the men of Sodom contrasts with the usage in Genesis 18:23, where, David Cotter observes, ‘Abraham steps forth and musters all his resources, gentle and hard, love and fear, mildness and boldness, to wage a prayerful war for the reconciliation of YHWH and the people of Sodom.’\textsuperscript{203}

וַיִּשְׁפֹּט שָׁפוֹט (‘and he will indeed judge’) Alter states, ‘“Judge,” emphatically repeated in an infinitive absolute …, picks up the thematic words of judge and just from God’s monologue and His dialogue with Abraham in chapter 18.’\textsuperscript{204}

\textit{Scene Three (vv. 10–11): Lot’s Deliverance}

10. And the men stretched out their hands

and brought Lot into the house to them,

and shut the door.


\textsuperscript{200} Gunn, ‘Narrative Criticism,’ 216.
\textsuperscript{202} Wenham, \textit{Genesis}, 35.
\textsuperscript{203} David Cotter, \textit{Genesis} (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 121.
\textsuperscript{204} Alter, \textit{Genesis}, 86 FN 9.
11. And the men who were at the doorway of the house they struck with blindness, from the smallest to the largest, and they were not able to find the doorway.

Notes on Scene Three

Verse 11

סַנְוֵרִים ('blindness/ blinding light') The only other occurrence of this word is in 2 Kings 6:18 where it is found in a similar context. Sarna claims, ‘The Aramaic Targums understand it to mean a dazzling brightness. The people of Sodom did not suffer the usual kind of sightlessness … but a sudden, immobilizing, blazing flash of light.’

Here the word carries the generic article because it describes a quality or state and demonstrates a plural of abstraction ‘which aims at the various concrete manifestations of a quality or state’.

Speiser writes:

Heb. sanwerim is a loanword based on Akk. Sunwurum, an adjectival form with superlative or ‘elative’ force: ‘having extraordinary brightness’ … For ordinary blindness, Heb. employs native terms (stem ‘wr), cf. Lev xxii 22; Deut xxviii 28; Zech xii 4. But these would not be suitable for the present instance, since what is involved is not the common affliction, not just ‘total blindness,’ as the word before us is commonly rendered, but a sudden stroke. And that is just what the term suggests: a blinding

205 Sarna, Genesis, 136.
206 Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 246.
flash emanating from the angels— who thereby abandon their human
disguise—which would induce immediate, if temporary, loss of sight,
much like desert or snow blindness… Thus the very word evokes a
numinous image. It is a matter of magic as opposed to myopia.  

וַיִּלְא֖וּ לִמְצֹ֥א הַפָּֽתַח

(‘and they were unable to find the doorway’) Speiser suggests that
this expression should not read ‘they wearied themselves’ but ‘they were unable.’ He
claims, ‘In Exodus 7:18 the Niphal form describes a condition of helplessness, as is
proved by the parallel ‘they could not’ later on (v. 24).’ He suggests that this should also
be pointed as a Niphal. Hamilton, however, believes that this change is unnecessary,
‘[s]ince Exodus 7:18 illustrates that the Niphal of this root may carry the same meaning
and syntax as the Qal.’ Sarna states, ‘The stem l- ‘-h essentially means “not to be
able.”’

Rhetorical–Narrative Analysis

Scene One (vv. 1–3)

Although the story begins gently with a demonstration of laudable hospitality, readers
are not fully reassured, since they have not come to the story with a neutral mindset. As
early as Genesis 13:10, when Lot chooses to go to Sodom, the text has revealed that
‘this was before YHWH destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.’ Michael Cardin comments:
‘Lot’s opting for Sodom has introduced a sense of ominous dread to the narrative.’
Then, at the end of Chapter 18, from verses 23 to 32, readers have witnessed the
bargaining between YHWH and Abraham over the fate of the city. At the beginning of

208 Speiser, Genesis, 139–140.
209 Speiser, Genesis, 140.
210 Hamilton, Genesis, 30.
211 Sarna, Genesis, 136.
Chapter 19, their principal concern is the fate of Lot if Sodom is to be destroyed. Thus, from the outset, the writer employs suspense.

The story begins as two of the messengers who visited Abraham in the previous chapter arrive in Sodom on the evening of the same day. Lot is sitting in the gateway of the city. Sarna explains:

The gate of a large city usually comprised towers and guardrooms and a large area where people could sit… The gate area in an ancient Near Eastern city served as a civic center where the affairs of the community would be conducted in full view of, and with full participation of, the citizens.213

It is surprising that, during daylight hours, Lot should be alone in the gate. Perhaps others are present who are not mentioned. Hamilton assumes that ‘he is not the only one sitting by the gateway of Sodom, for what would he be doing there by himself?’214 Wenham points out:

[I]t is strange that no elders of Sodom are mentioned. It is characteristic of biblical story telling to focus on the main actors and to omit reference to other figures of less consequence who are present but passive. Nevertheless, one would have expected others to have greeted the angels, but nothing is said. Does this indicate a lack of hospitality among the Sodomites: only Lot the immigrant welcomes the visitors?215

Lot’s actions, expressed in a flurry of verbs—he saw, he rose, he bowed to the ground, he spoke to them—mirrors Abraham’s expansive hospitality in the previous chapter. He offers a place to wash and to stay for the night, and suggests that the messengers should ‘rise early and go on your way.’ Leupold states,
The same type of excellent courtesy observed in Abraham still marks the nephew. With urgency, (‘behold now’ – ‘turn aside, I pray’), he presses his invitation. With humility he designates himself as their ‘servant.’ With anxiety for their welfare—for he knows what men in the open must face—and, perhaps, consciously at no small risk to himself he makes his invitation as attractive as possible.216

The messengers’ response is brusque as they reject Lot’s hospitality, and express their firm resolve to stay in the square. Von Rad comments, ‘the men are proud and terse, for, of course, they had not come to visit Lot (in contrast to their visit in Hebron with Abraham), but regarding another matter.’217 Lot however is insistent; he, as Arnold suggests, ‘appears to understand the danger to their wellbeing, either in the square or in the home of other citizens of Sodom.’218 The messengers go with him to lodge for the night.

Several commentators, including Alter219 and Kass,220 speak disparagingly of the meal that Lot provides, contrasting it unfavourably with Abraham’s hospitality. The text does not support this view, for translated literally it says, ‘and he made for them a feast and unleavened bread he baked and they ate.’ This meal is a hastily devised evening meal, when time is limited, not a leisurely lunch such as Abraham offers. Unleavened bread is prepared because it is quick to make, requiring no time to rise. We are not told that Lot prepared a feast that consisted only of unleavened bread, but that in addition to unleavened bread, he prepared a feast. To decide that Lot’s hospitality is shabby and that it does not equal that of Abraham on the basis of this line is unwarranted. Wenham contends:

216 Leupold, Genesis, 556.
217 Von Rad, Genesis, 217.
218 Arnold, Genesis, 184.
219 Alter, Genesis, 85 FN 3.
The account of their arrival at Sodom is somewhat briefer than at Mamre, but this need not be taken to show Lot was less warm in his welcome than was Abraham. The narrator feels no need to repeat all the details; rather, he highlights the differences in the situation.\(^{221}\)

In fact, because it is evening, Lot is able to go further than Abraham, and to offer accommodation as well.

**Scene Two (vv. 4–9)**

Before they are able to retire for the night, the men of the city surround the house, and the earlier forebodings of the reader turn to active fear. The writer has abandoned the terseness and brevity that is characteristic of Hebrew narrative in an effort to demonstrate that every adult male in Sodom is involved. He writes:

\[
ָֽזָֽקֵן טֶרֶם יִשְׁכָּבוּ וְאַנְשֵׁי הָﬠִיר אַנְשֵׁי סְדֹם נָסַבּוּ ַל־הַבַּיִת מִנַּﬠַר  וְﬠַד מִקָּצֶֽה׃ כָּל־הָﬠָם
\]

Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, from young lads to elders, all the people from the region.

The reader is made aware that this is not simply a disorderly rabble. All the men of Sodom are united in their desire to ‘know’ the strangers. They demand sexual access to the two messengers.

Several commentators have attempted to make a case that the verb ידע (‘to know’) is not intended to describe sexual intercourse here. D. Sherwin Bailey rejects the sexual connotations of this verb in Genesis 19, on three grounds.\(^{222}\) In the first place, he points to the statistics—that the fifteen uses of the word in a sexual context are set

\(^{221}\) Wenham, *Genesis*, 53.

against nine hundred uses in its usual sense, which makes it much more likely from a statistical viewpoint that the word belongs to the latter category. In the second place, he appeals to psychology, claiming that sexual acts yielding personal knowledge depend ‘upon sexual differentiation and complementation, and not merely upon physical sexual experience as such.’ 223 Finally, he conjectures that the real sin of the men of Sodom concerns an attitude of suspicion toward sojourners, to which category they are prepared to relegate Lot when he invites the messengers into his home.224

In reply to Bailey, it should be noted that contextual usage and not statistics define the meaning of a word. As Kidner writes, if this were not the case, ‘the rarer sense of a word would never seem probable.’ 225 It is unlikely that Lot is telling the mob that his daughters have not yet engaged in a meaningful and self-revelatory relationship with a man (v. 8) and even less likely that, when the same word is used in Judges 19, the men of Gibeah pursue such a relationship with the Levite’s concubine. In these cases, mere ‘physical sexual experience’ can be expressed by the verb ‘to know.’ If the issue under discussion were a violation of civic protocol by a sojourner, it would make no sense for Lot to offer his daughters to the crowd.

Another who claims that a general misunderstanding of this word has obscured the meaning of the narrative is Scott Morschauser. He insists: ‘The Sodomites’ request “to know” (יָדַע) the patriarch’s guests is non-sexual in nature: they want to ascertain why the men have come to the city.’ 226 Of Morshauser’s reading of the intentions of the men of Sodom, Hamilton counters:

223 Bailey, Homosexuality, 3.
224 Bailey, Homosexuality, 4.
This interpretation can only be evaluated as wild and fanciful. For when Lot responds by offering his daughters ‘who have never known a man’ (v. 8), it becomes clear that the issue is intercourse and not friendship.227

If Morschauser’s reading were to be accepted, one would need to ask why the text does not employ a more specific verb, ‘to ask’ or ‘to interrogate’, or perhaps an expression to clarify the meaning of ‘to know’ such as ‘to know who the men were.’ In this first half of Genesis, ‘to know’ is sometimes used to refer to sexual intercourse. It is used this way three times in chapter 4, for example. The first verse begins:

ָוָתַהַרוְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת־חַוָּ

And Adam/the human knew Eve, his wife, and she conceived…

Later in chapter 4, in similar statements, ‘Cain knew his wife, and she conceived…’ (v. 17) and ‘Adam knew his wife again, and she conceived…’ (v. 25). In chapter 24, when Rachel comes to the well, the reader is told:

וְהַנַּﬠֲרָ טֹבַת מְאֹד בְּתוּלָה וְאִישׁ לֹא יְדָﬠָהּ

And the young woman was very fair to look upon, a virgin/of marriageable age and no man had known her… (v. 24:6)

To use the word ידע to mean ‘to interrogate,’ therefore, is to risk a failure to convey the narrator’s meaning. Furthermore, since the writer of Genesis 19 has, several verses later, used the same word in an undeniably sexual context, there can be little doubt that the mob is seeking to have sexual intercourse with the messengers.

In verse 8, Lot responds to the demands of the mob by going out of the house to them, and imploring them not to be so wicked. The verse which contains his plea

227 Hamilton, Genesis, 34.
reveals Lot’s anxious state of mind, for the word נָא (‘please’) is used three times, the hostile crowd is addressed as ‘my brothers’ and Lot’s virgin daughters are offered as substitute objects of the men of Sodom’s sexual aggression. In justification of this last and drastic attempt at placating the crowd, Lot refers to the obligations of hospitality. According to Robert Stein:

In Israel hospitality was encouraged. This was in part due to the command of Scripture (Lev. 19:33f.; Dt. 10:13f.; 24:17,19), and in part to Israel’s own experience of being aliens in Egypt (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33f.; Dt. 10:19) and later in Babylon. It was not merely a courtesy but an obligation to care for strangers… [I]n general, there existed throughout the Levant an emphasis on entertaining strangers, and a man’s worth and piety was readily seen by his hospitality. 228

Failure to provide hospitality was a serious matter which incurred punishment by God (Dt. 23:2–4) and man (1 Sa. 25:2–38; Jdg. 8:5–17). Thomas Bolin perceives the obligation to offer hospitality as a part of the general system of exchange that operated in religion in the Mediterranean and the Near East ‘spanning in time from the third millennium BCE to the legalization of Christianity.’229 According to Bolin:

Hospitality was the creation of a temporary patronage relationship with the host as patron, and the guest as client. The motivation behind offering hospitality to a stranger lay in the increased honor one had in assimilating a potential threat into the community by asserting one’s superiority over the newcomer. Guests played their role in this arrangement by acceptance of the offered hospitality. … Reciprocity was essential to the arrangement’s success. Hosts honoured guests by extending favour and protection in order to increase their own honor. Guests accepted the honor of the host and, in doing so, added to the host’s honor as patron. 230

---

Some commentators in earlier times tendered sympathetic responses to Lot’s offer of his daughters to the crowd, claiming that the obligations of hospitality left him no choice. A number of scholars consider that the narrator shows sympathy for Lot. Bruce Vawter, for example, suggests:

[T]he spectacle of a father offering his virgin daughters to the will and pleasure of a mob that was seeking to despoil his household would not have seemed as shocking to the ancient sense of proprieties as it may seem to us … Really there is no need to make excuses for him, as far as the biblical perspective is concerned. In all the stories about him the soundness of Lot’s judgement is never the point at issue.231

John Skinner also seeks to show the narrator’s positive attitude to Lot, claiming:

Lot’s readiness to sacrifice the honour of his daughters, though abhorrent to Hebrew morality … shows him as a courageous champion of the obligations hospitality in a situation of extreme embarrassment, and is recorded to his credit.232

Mark Brett counters this view when he argues:

Even in the Hebrew Bible, the social standing of daughters was not so negligible that they could be disposed of as mere chattels; the honour of a virgin daughter had considerable significance within the social framework of the patriarchal family (as is made plain by the case of Dinah, in Genesis 34).233

Ronald Hendel, Chana Kronfeld and Ilana Pardes concur: ‘One of the hallmarks of the system of honor is the obligation of males of the household to protect the virginity of daughters and sisters.’ 234

Vawter and Skinner’s view can be countered by the observation that it is characteristic of Hebrew storytelling that the narrator does not pass judgement on the characters directly, but obliquely, through the medium of the story. Alter acknowledges this when he makes the astute observation:

Lot’s shocking offer, about which the narrator, characteristically, makes no explicit judgment, is too patly explained as the reflex of an ancient Near Eastern code in which the sacredness of the host/guest bond took precedence over all other obligations. Lot surely is inciting the lust of the would-be rapists in using the same verb of sexual ‘knowledge’ they had applied to the visitors in order to proffer the virginity of his daughters for their pleasure. The concluding episode of this chapter, in which the drunken Lot unwittingly takes the virginity of both his daughters, suggests measure-for-measure justice meted out for his rash offer.235

Kass has a similar interpretation:

Offering his own daughters to his ‘brothers’ is, symbolically, an invitation to commit incest, a deed that his daughters will later—in a deed of fitting payback—perform upon him.236

What happens next is frequently obscured by translation. Heard writes:

Most English Bible translations render גֶּשֶׁת הָלְאָה in Gen. 19:9 with some variant of ‘Stand back!’ However, a very few interpreters recommend a

235 Alter, Genesis, 85, FN 8.
translation along the lines of ‘Come closer!’ more in keeping with the typical gloss on נגשׁ.’237

Heard analyses usages of both words. He concludes that ‘the direction of the motion implied in נגשׁ is usually specified by a phrase explicitly stating the destination or purpose of the act of “approaching”,’ and that هلלאה does not suggest a fixed position, but rather ‘continued movement along a trajectory defined by collocated words and phrases.’ He claims that ‘those few interpreters who regard הגֶּש־הָלְאָה in Gen. 19:9 not as “Stand back!” but rather as “Come here!” do stand on solid syntactical and semantic ground.’238

Although Lot has been sitting in the gate at the beginning of the story, and can therefore be regarded as an elder in good standing in the city, the men of Sodom are quick to forget his current status and to taunt him as the sojourner he once was: ‘This one came to sojourn and he is indeed judging!’ So they threaten to treat Lot more roughly than they wish to treat the messengers. By siding with the two ‘outsiders’, Lot has violated his ‘insider’ status among the men of Sodom. Sarna states:

Lot had, by stages, integrated himself into Sodom’s society. First he merely ‘pitched his tents near Sodom’ (13:12). Then ‘he had settled in Sodom’ (14:12). It was solely on his account that the city had earlier been saved by Abraham (14:14). Now he lives in a house there and ‘sits in the gate’ where the city elders gather. His daughters are about to intermarry with local men. Yet despite his best efforts, he cannot fully assimilate into Sodom’s society, and when it comes to the test, he finds he is an outsider after all.239

238 Heard, ‘What Does the MobWant?’, 103.
239 Sarna, Genesis, 136.
Scene Three (v. 10–11)

In verse 10, we see an instance of deliberate ambiguity, employed to heighten tension, when the narrator tells us: וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֶת־יָדָם וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־לוֹט אֲלֵיהֶם (‘and the men stretched out their hand and brought Lot to them’). We assume the worst—that Lot has been grabbed by the mob—until we read הביתה (‘into the house’) and realise that ‘the men’ refers to the messengers.

The narrator makes much of the business of opening and closing the door, using the words הַדֶּלֶת (‘the door’) and הַפָּתַח (‘the doorway’) three times each. Gunn writes, ‘A glance at the imagery of locking and unlocking, opening, latches and doors in the Song of Songs is enough to suggest a perverse double entendre here.’ The door when it is opened functions as a metaphor for sexual vulnerability and when it is closed, for sexual security. The men of Sodom, threatening Lot with rape, ‘drew near to break down the door.’ When the messengers bring Lot back to the safety of the house, ‘they shut the door,’ indicating that Lot is no longer sexually vulnerable. Thus the door and the doorway function both literally and metaphorically in the story.

This episode comes to a close as the messengers strike the men of Sodom blind, so that they are unable to find the door. For a moment, the tension of the story is lowered. Behind the closed door of the house, Lot and his daughters are safe from sexual abuse.

240 Gunn, ‘Narrative Criticism’, 216.
Biblical Context

The account of the surrounding of Lot’s house does not stand alone within the Hebrew Scriptures. To perceive its full range of meaning, it is necessary to look briefly at its context within the book of Genesis.

This narrative follows Genesis 18, when the three messengers partake of Abraham’s hospitality at Mamre, and announce that in the following year, Abraham and Sarah will have a son (18:1–16). The two episodes are linked by the presence in each of the messengers. Between them lies a remarkable theological reflection (18:17–32).

Walter Brueggemann writes:

Though the stories had no original connection, the ‘men/messengers’ device is employed for placing them back to back with the theological reflection of 18:16–32 between them. As it stands, then, there is a parallel presentation of (a) the visitation of the messengers to Sarah and Abraham (18:1–15) and (b) the disaster of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:1–25). Both are presented as strange intrusions by God.241

Brueggemann claims that Genesis 19 ‘revolves around indictment and judgment’242 and that it expresses a commonly held view of the work of God in the world, that of God as the one who punishes sinners. He cites the study of Hartmut Gese243 who demonstrates, in Brueggemann’s words, that ‘Israel has largely taken over a retribution scheme that is taught all over the ancient Near East.’244 Brueggemann regards 18:16-32 as the possibility of the intervention of God’s grace into Israel’s scheme of indictment and punishment. He claims:

242 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 166.
244 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 168.
That graceful wedge (18:22–33) is asserted as criticism of the *quid pro quo* of retribution (19:1–28). Much is at stake theologically in this issue, for we must decide if there is good news, even for Sodom.\footnote{Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 168.}

J. Gerald Janzen asserts, ‘It is clear from a comparison of 19:1–3 with 18:1–8 that the test of Sodom turns on the question of hospitality.’\footnote{J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 61.} However, while they are united by this common concern with the exercise of hospitality, there are many contrasts set up by the juxtaposing of Genesis 18 and Genesis 19. Janzen points out that the opening of each of these chapters builds to a question, ‘Where …?’ After this initial similarity, they diverge.\footnote{Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families*, 61.} The messengers in chapter 18 are content to address Sarah through the closed aperture of the tent. In chapter 19, the men of Sodom are prepared to break down the door to gain access to the messengers.\footnote{Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families*, 61.} In chapter 18, Sarah who was once barren is told that she will become fruitful. In chapter 19, the Jordan plains, which were once ‘well-watered everywhere like the garden of YHWH’, become a desolate wasteland.\footnote{Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families*, 64–65.} In chapter 18, Abraham is concerned that the city be spared, should a faithful remnant be found. In chapter 19, YHWH is prepared to destroy the city because no faithful persons can be found—all the men of Sodom are present in the mob at Lot’s door. The word ידע, used in both chapters, highlights their difference, as Janzen states:

> When YHWH ‘goes down’ to ‘know’ (18:21) the city’s moral condition as reflected in how it receives the two visitors, the city responds by pursuing a quite different sort of knowing (19:5).\footnote{Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families*, 61.}

Perhaps the most telling contrast between the chapters is the disparity between the conduct and character of Abraham and Lot. Cotter suggests that in the book of
Genesis, characters are paired as doubles or ‘mirror images’ ‘in order to make the
details of a characterization more readily apparent by the resulting contrasts’. This
technique is in evidence here. Abraham is unselfishly prepared to haggle with YHWH to
save the righteous few in Sodom and through them, the whole wicked population. Lot,
on the other hand, is selfishly prepared to buy his reputation as a host with the well-
being of his daughters. Cotter comments:

Energy as opposed to passivity, weightiness in God’s view as opposed to
silliness in human view, intercession as opposed to self-concern—all
these characterize Abraham. Lot, in particular, has served as an other, a
foil for the narrator of these chapters, with which to highlight the
strengths of Abraham. Abraham will continue to develop while Lot,
having served his narrative purpose and given birth to the enemies of
Israel, will fade from view.252

The story narrated in Genesis 19 is tied by strong intertextual echoes to other
parts of the book of Genesis. David Carr observes that two allusions prior to chapter 19
create links with the primeval history. The first concerns the link between the
description of Sodom as the ‘garden of YHWH’ (Gen. 13:10), and the information in
Genesis 2:8 that ‘YHWH Elohim planted a garden in the east.’ The second, Carr
suggests, concerns:

the similarity between God’s decision to ‘descend’ and ‘see’ what is
going on in Sodom (18:20–21) and the previous description of God’s
‘descent’ to see what was going on in Babel (11:5; cf. also the divine

251 Cotter, Genesis, 127.
252 Cotter, Genesis, 128.
253 David Carr, Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches (Louisville:
Carr also points out the significant parallels between chapter 19 and the flood narrative. Both stories include incidents of sexual misconduct (Gen. 19:4–11 and 6:4). Both involve, in Lot and Noah, one man who ‘finds favour’ with YHWH (19:19 and 6:8), and who is saved with his family, while the wicked community around him perishes. Both these men are warned in advance of the impending disaster and told to prepare to save themselves and their families (19:12–30 and 7:1–4). Both succeed in escaping while destruction ‘rains’ down upon the community. One might also add that at the conclusion of each story, a child, or children, of the man who has found favour with YHWH performs a prohibited action with his or their father while he is drunk (19:31–37; 9:22).

These intertextual links tie the story of the surrounding of Lot’s house firmly into the world of Genesis.

Elements of Narrative

This thesis will now analyse the most prominent components of the story, using the elements of narrative outlined in Chapter Three. Only those elements which particularly shed light on this story will be explored.

Plot

There is little in the way of preamble to this story, since the reader is already familiar with the main characters, Lot and the messengers, and the situation with regard to YHWH’s intentions for Sodom. The narrative begins, in verse 1, with Lot welcoming the messengers at the city gate. Immediately the tension level is raised, when the reader sees Lot residing in the city destined for destruction. But as the first three verses unfold,

254 Carr, Reading the Fractures of Genesis, 190.
it is almost possible to forget the sentence hanging over the city as the story appears to slip into a recount of traditional hospitality, with only the messengers’ curt refusal marring the flow of the story. Verse 4 abruptly tears us away from notions of desert hospitality and places us squarely in the midst of city depravity, bringing the setting of the story vividly to mind again. This is Sodom, the city whose inhabitants are so wicked that they are under a sentence of death.

The events of Scene Two build the tension levels ever higher. The men of Sodom, all the men of Sodom, who have surrounded the house, ask Lot to bring the messengers out so that they can have sexual intercourse with them. Lot tries persuasion and bargaining, offering his daughters instead of his guests. He points to the binding claim of hospitality as his reason for being prepared to sacrifice his daughters’ virginity and perhaps their lives. The reader’s fears for Lot, his visitors and his daughters climax as the crowd moves in to grab him and break down the doors of the house.

As abruptly as it escalated in verse 4, the tension of the story drops in scene three, as the messengers reach out and draw Lot into the safety of the house and shut the door upon the mob. As they strike the men of Sodom blind, so that they cannot find the door, the energy of the text declines to a position a little above that of verse 1. For now we know that there are not ten righteous men among the people of Sodom and that Abraham’s intervention on behalf of the city has been in vain.

Although the reader is not explicitly told what Lot and the crowd are feeling, their speeches give clear insight into their inner lives. Lot’s three uses of the word ‘please,’ his futile effort to win over the predatory mob by calling them ‘my brothers,’ and his impulsive offer of his two daughters to appease the men, attest to the depth of his concern for the safety of his two guests. His anxiety is sufficient to cause him to
forget his own well-being, as he recklessly closes the door behind him, cutting off his own route to safety. The mob, one entity with a single voice and a single purpose, demonstrates its feelings powerfully as it demands access to the messengers, taunts Lot with his sojourner status, and threatens to attack him. Only the two messengers remain opaque. Are they content to work with YHWH to destroy the people of Sodom or does the task dismay them? Do they wish to save Lot and his family from destruction or are they merely acting in obedience to YHWH’s commands? Neither their speech nor their actions gives access to their emotions.

**Character**

**Lot**

Earlier depictions of Lot in Genesis place him very much in the shadow of his uncle Abraham. He migrates with Abraham from Ur to Haran (11.31), and from Haran to Canaan (12.5). He sojourns in Egypt with him (13:1) and leaves with large flocks and herds. Very little is seen of him as an individual, however, until uncle and nephew return to Bethel, and strife among their servants causes them to decide to separate (13:5–9). Abraham offers Lot the choice of where he will settle with his herds and flocks and for the first time the reader witnesses independent action from Lot as he chooses the lush and fertile area of the plains. The Hebrew text hints at a selfish side to his character in 13:10–11 by three times using the word כל (‘all’) in the two verses. In verse 13:10 we read:

חָרָה אָחָל עַל מַשְׁקֶה הָיוֹרָם כִּי כֻלָּה כָּלָה מַשְׁקֶה

‘and he saw that all the plain of the Jordan was all well-watered’
and in verse 11:

וַיִּבְחַר־לוֹ ל֗וֹת אֵת כָּל־כִּכַּר הַיַּרְדֵּן

‘and Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan.’

The inclusion of the word לוֹ (‘for himself’) adds to this impression. Sharon Jeansonne sums this up:

Abram’s suggestion is recorded in direct speech; he generously and unselfishly offers the first selection of the best land. The text does not record Lot’s response to Abram. However, the description of his view of the land is indicative of his selfishness in selecting his portion. Observing that ‘the entire plain of the Jordan – all of it – was well watered like the garden of YHWH, like the land of Egypt’ (13:10), he chooses ‘the entire plain of the Jordan’ for himself (13:11). The narrator indicates that Lot is concerned more with procuring the best land than in coming to an amicable settlement with Abram.255

In Genesis 14:12, Lot is captured and abducted by the army of the coalition of kings under Kedorlaomer and has to be rescued and brought home by Abraham. By this time, he has moved into the city of Sodom. The incident of the surrounding of Lot’s house and its sequel (ch. 19) is the last account of his participation in Hebrew history. When the messengers seek to rescue him, he becomes incoherent with fear and, concerned only with his own well-being, he does not seek to protect his family. When we last see him, he is living in a cave in the hills, drinking too much and being raped by the same two daughters that he offered to the mob. His parting contribution to Israel is the begetting of the progenitors of Israel’s great enemies, Moab and Ammon.

Lot is never represented as a strong character, but is consistently overshadowed by Abraham. In choosing all of the best land for himself, he reveals his own selfishness. In the battle with the armies under Kedorlaomer, he is demonstrably unable to defend himself and must be rescued and brought back by his uncle. The fact that he has chosen to become a member in good standing of the sinful city of Sodom reflects only discredit upon him. What does Genesis 19:1–11 add to this portrait?

Lot begins well. Having brought the desert traditions of hospitality into an inhospitable city, he welcomes the messengers to Sodom and provides for their needs. This exercise of hospitality still echoes that of Abraham in the previous chapter, just as for much of Lot’s earlier life he has followed in Abraham’s shadow. Nonetheless, the fact that Lot offers such hospitality in a city where the notions of how to treat strangers is barbaric in the extreme reflects well upon him. That he is prepared to honour the obligations of hospitality at the expense of his own good standing in the city and ultimately, of his own physical well-being, must stand to his credit. That he is prepared to sacrifice his two virgin daughters to the predatory crowd does not. He does not offer himself to save his visitors but declares himself willing to hand over his daughters, whose sole protector he is, so that the men of Sodom can do to them whatever is good in their eyes (v. 8). G. Coats claims:

The proposition is, to put it mildly, disgusting…. Two young women, captive to their father’s will, dragged from what they may have supposed was the security of their home, in exchange for two grown men who arrive uninvited, of their own accord, at night in a strange city.256

---

The requirements of hospitality may be sacrosanct but so are the bonds of family and the obligations upon a man in a patriarchal society to preserve the safety and chastity of his women folk. Indignity overtakes Lot when, in verse 11, he has to be rescued by the two visitors he has sought to protect.

This scene carries a number of implications concerning Lot’s character. Because he has spent so much time in the company of Abraham, he has learnt how to present a good appearance. But when the situation becomes difficult, Lot’s speech and actions demonstrate his fearfulness and his unwise judgement.

Two things that are not present in the text also reflect badly upon him. In the first place, in the days of Abraham’s childlessness, Lot is never considered as a suitable person to be his heir. Brett comments, ‘It does seem that Lot is quietly excluded from the divine promise concerning Abram’s seed in 13:14–17’.257 In the second place, Lot is never shown as having any relationship with YHWH. Although he is travelling with Abraham, we are not told that he is present or a participant when Abraham builds altars at Shechem (12:7) and at Bethel (12:8) to worship YHWH. YHWH never speaks to Lot, nor Lot to YHWH, in all of the Biblical account. He chooses to become a citizen of a city of great wickedness against YHWH (13:13). In the end, the narrator makes explicit the fact that Lot is only saved for Abraham’s sake, when he writes, ‘and God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow’ (19:29).

Cotter declares:

Lot has always done the wrong thing, when he managed to act at all. First he chose the Jordan plain and its superficial attractions, despite the presence of Sodom. He offered his daughters to a predatory crowd. He had to be carried away from his own destruction and was not even satisfied then. … Lot continues on the move but ends up drunk in a cave.

257 Brett, Genesis, 53.
There he incestuously begets sons. Like Abraham, he says nothing when sons for him are discussed. Unlike Abraham, he cannot, for he is drunk and unconscious. The contrast could neither be more powerful, nor more damning.  

The Messengers

Because the narrator shows them from Lot’s point of view, the reader is never told in this episode (19:1–11) that the messengers are agents of YHWH. There is irony here: because one of the messengers has shown himself to be YHWH in Chapter 18, the reader is aware of their angelic status, yet Lot continues to regard them as mortal men. Not until verse 13 is Lot told that the two ‘men’ have been sent by YHWH to destroy Sodom. Even their supernatural ability to strike the Sodomites blind may not have been apparent to Lot, since he has already been pulled into the house and the door has been closed.

The messengers do not have characters that can be discerned; they are simply agents of YHWH and no glimpse is afforded the reader of their inner lives.

The Men of Sodom

The reputation of the Sodomite men goes before them in Genesis. In 13:13 they are thus described:

מְאֹד׃ וְאַנְשֵׁי סְדֹם רָﬠִים וְחַטָּאִים לַיהוָה

‘And the men of Sodom were wicked, and great sinners against YHWH’

In 18:20, the reader is informed:

258 Cotter, Genesis, 123.
And YHWH said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is grave.’

When they are encountered in Chapter 19, the men of Sodom come in the darkness to surround Lot’s house. As has already been noted, the mob is made up of every adult male person of the city and it expresses one desire with one voice.

Why do the men of Sodom want to have sexual intercourse with Lot’s visitors?

Throughout the ages, many commentators have understood the men of Sodom to be homosexual or bisexual. Leupold, for example, claims, ‘The expression “men of Sodom” … seems to have been a proverbial designation for outstanding exponents of the vice of sodomy’. He goes on to state:

The horrible proportions to which the vice had grown is indicated, first, by the fact that ‘young men and old’ (Hebrew: ‘from young to old’), put in their appearance. The fires of unnatural lust burned unabated even in the aged. 259

Davidson suggests:

It must be assumed that the two messengers appear young and physically attractive. The men of the city … gather around Lot’s house demanding that his guests be made available for homosexual relationships. 260

---

259 Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 558.
Cardin studies this question in some depth, analysing the notion of male-male rape in patriarchal societies. He cites David Greenberg’s survey of male same-sex eroticism in the ancient Middle East. Cardin writes:

Throughout his survey it becomes clear that in the ancient Mediterranean world, the act of penetrating other males did not stigmatise the penetrator and that male-male anal sex was considered an act of aggression by which the penetrated male is feminised by the penetrator. … He also notes that male rape was employed as a form of punishment.

Cardin concludes, therefore, that it is incorrect to see the attempted rape of the messengers as an evidence of homosexuality on the part of the men of Sodom. He argues:

Rather than reading the attempted rape of the angels as an instance of homosexual violence … I believe it should be more accurately read as an instance of homophobic and xenophobic violence. It is a symptom not of a homosexual or bisexual regime in Sodom, but rather one of patriarchal and compulsory heterosexuality.

In support of Cardin’s case, it is noteworthy that in all of the passages in the Hebrew Scriptures where the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are deplored, there is no mention of homosexuality. Several passages suggest other vices. Isaiah, in a passage (1.9–17) that compares the people of Israel to Sodom, suggests that violence (v. 15), and lack of care for the marginalised (v. 17) are their sins. Jeremiah 23:14 mentions adultery, dishonesty and evildoing, while Ezekiel 16:49–50, 56 identifies pride, haughtiness and a lack of care for the poor and needy as Sodom’s sins. As Miguel de la Torre observes:

---

260 Davidson, Genesis, 72.
262 Cardin, Sodomy, 31.
263 Cardin, Sodomy, 36.
According to every passage found throughout the biblical text in which Sodom’s wickedness is mentioned, homosexuality is never listed as the cause for God’s wrath. Such an interpretation came centuries later. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, according to the Bible, was a lack of justice done in the name of the society’s dispossessed. God’s anger consumes Sodom and Gomorrah because of the dominant culture’s refusal to show hospitality to those residing on their margins.  

Brett concurs with Cardin and de la Torre’s reading. Regarding Genesis 19 and Judges 19, he declares:

Both narratives are about power and social status, rather than lust, and this is indicated by the fact that the gender of the victim is almost irrelevant. In both chapters, the crowd is determined to humiliate a stranger.

Cotter states: ‘The sin of Sodom is not easily, if at all, to be identified with homosexuality. That is too facile and does not account for all the biblical evidence.’  

Brueggemann also rejects a simple correspondence of the sin of Sodom with homosexuality. He writes, ‘the turbulent mood of the narrative suggests gang-rape rather than a private act of either ‘sodomy’ or any specific homosexual act.’  

William Loader, who has studied the attitudes toward sexuality that may be found in early Jewish (and Christian) literature, also agrees with Cardin. Loader describes the story of Genesis 19 not as an example of homosexual lust, but as ‘a prime example of inhospitality.’  

He states, ‘The hostility of Lot’s fellow citizens expresses itself in a plan for male rape.’

---

266 Cotter, *Genesis*, 120, FN.
267 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 164.
269 Loader, *Making Sense of Sex*, 120.
In summary, the outstanding characteristics of the men of Sodom are violent sexual aggression and xenophobia. This interpretation is grounded securely in the text of the narrative. The men of Sodom have bound themselves together in the violent unanimity of the lynch mob. They have no individuality, no dissenters. In verse 5, their peremptory demand that Lot’s visitors be brought out ‘so that we may know them’ implies that they desire non-consensual sexual access to the messengers. In verse 8, Lot’s fears for the safety of the two men at the hands of the mob drives him to the extreme measure of offering them his two virgin daughters. In verse 9, the men of Sodom threaten to rape and mistreat Lot also. They mock him for his sojourner status, then attempt to force an entry into his house. Because Lot does not have full ‘insider’ status in Sodom, he is to be shamed and dishonoured through the sexual abuse of his ‘outsider’ guests.

Lot’s Daughters

The two daughters of Lot are nameless throughout this episode, and function only as victims—victims of their father’s patriarchal priorities and potential victims of the men of Sodom. The reader is forced to evaluate them from a patriarchal perspective, since the only information given about them is that they are the daughters of Lot, and virgins.

At the end of the sequel to this episode, 19:30–38, the daughters finally gain personhood. Up to this point they have existed only through the words of Lot. In the final scene, where they make their father drunk and then seduce him, they develop voices, and begin to speak, interact, plan and act. Stripped of the support of the patriarchal culture to which he has belonged, Lot is powerless, while his daughters gain self-determination. They take the initiative to ensure the continuation of their line, and produce the two men who will found the nations of Ammon and Moab.
**Dialogue**

Scene Two of this narrative illustrates Alter’s case for the use of the ‘technique of contrastive dialogue’ in Hebrew narrative (see chapter 3). In the verbal interchange outside Lot’s house, although both parties (Lot and the townsmen who speak as one) use normative Hebrew, it is never difficult to understand who is speaking. From the first utterance of the men of Sodom, their aggression is evident and their first speech to Lot could not be blunter or more uncompromising. ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us and let us know them.’ Lot’s reply, in complete contrast, is gentle and placating, and as the situation unfolds, completely ineffectual. He asks the men of Sodom, referred to hopefully as ‘my brothers,’ not to be so evil. Then he offers them what he deems to be an acceptable alternative—his two virgin daughters. He expresses his willingness to deliver the women into the hands of the mob himself and gives them permission to use them as they please. He finishes by pleading for the welfare of his visitors, who are the recipients of his hospitality. In this somewhat breathless speech, Lot reiterates the word ‘please’ three times. The men reply simply and directly ‘Come closer!’ Then a note of mockery enters their words. ‘The one who came to sojourn is indeed judging!’ The dialogue ends with their last threat. ‘Now we will do worse to you than to them.’ This section of dialogue illustrates with clarity the very different characters of its participants.

**Time and Space**

The two messengers arrive in Sodom in the evening while it is still daylight, and they remain unmolested until after night has fallen, when they are preparing to go to bed. Fittingly, it is under the cover of darkness that the men of Sodom put into action their
plan to commit dark deeds. The pace of the narration slows down, from three verses to cover several hours to eight verses to cover a few minutes as the story reaches its climax.

In this narrative, the use of space is significant. Particular interest centres on the notions of the container (as put forward by Mark Johnson, see chapter 3) and the portal (as explored by Hilary Dannenberg, see chapter 3). The two adjacent containers—Lot’s house and the town square—present radically different environments. Lot’s house is a secure place that is never, throughout the story, violated. The messengers are pressed to remain there by Lot because he perceives rightly that his house to be safer than the square. Inside the house, they are secure and the men of Sodom acknowledge this by demanding that they be brought out to the square so that they can rape them. For his two daughters, the house is a place of safety and it is only by Lot’s willingness to bring them out of that secure container and put them into the town square that they will be endangered. Lot’s own well-being is not challenged until he leaves the safety of his home to enter the perilous space of the square. He compounds his own vulnerability by closing the door behind him, thus cutting off his access to safety.

The doorway is the portal that links these two opposing domains – the place of safety and the place of danger. It functions therefore as a boundary. Lyn Bechtel observes: ‘Boundaries are powerful because they protect the group, but dangerous because they can be violated, threatening the existence of the group.’ The word הַדֶּלֶת (‘the door’) and the word, הַפָּתַח (‘the doorway’/‘the opening’) occur six times in the last six verses of the story, underlining the importance of this concept of the door/doorway in defining the transitional space where danger replaces safety. Lot is, in

---

the first half of the story, portrayed as the one who is master of this portal. In fact, as Hendel, Kronfeld and Pardes note, he functions as the keeper of the city gate also. They write:

There are two movements in [the] first scene – the strangers’ entry into Sodom and their entry into Lot’s house. This sets up a parallel between city and house and between their respective thresholds: gate and door. As an adult male ‘sitting at the gate’ (an image typical of a city elder, a privileged male) and as the head of his own household, Lot is the guardian of both thresholds. As the keeper of these boundaries, he offers the vulnerable strangers hospitality and protection.271

Lot, as master of the doorway of his house, has the authority to protect those within. The men of Sodom acknowledge this when they stand outside the door and order Lot to bring out the guests to them. Lot refuses to do so, and it is not until he himself abdicates this role of protector of those inside by offering to bring his daughters from the safety of the house to the danger of the square, that the men of Sodom threaten to rape him also and to break down the portal which Lot has verbally breached already. Lot also functions symbolically himself as the portal that grants sexual access to his two daughters and denies sexual access to his two visitors.

In this narrative, there are in fact three significant types of portals: the city gate, the door of Lot’s house, and the barriers to sexual penetration of the male and female bodies of the messengers, Lot’s daughters and finally, Lot himself. These portals are all the sites of entry or proposed entry. As portals, they all have the potential to link different containers and they are all boundaries which can be used to express hospitality or threatened as places of vulnerability.

271 Hendel, Kronfeld and Pardes, ‘Gender and Sexuality,’ 78.
In Scene 1 (v. 3) we read וַיִּפְצַר־בָּם מְאֹד (‘and he pressed them strongly’) when Lot urges the messengers to cross the threshold into his house. In scene 2 (v. 9), we find a repetition of this expression in the clause וַיִּפְצְר֙וּ בָאִ֤יש  בְּלוֹט֙ מְאֹ֔ד. Hendel, Kronfeld and Pardes observe:

This repetition of ‘pressed … greatly’ sets up a resonance between the two scenes, which mingles foreshadowing and dramatic irony. Lot’s ‘pressing’ the strangers to stay at his house is a gesture of hospitality, portraying Lot as a righteous man …. However, Lot’s hospitality also stands in proleptic contrast to the wickedness of the men of Sodom, who ‘press’ Lot and nearly break the door in order to sexually penetrate the strangers. The intention to violently rape is the antithesis of hospitality—it turns guests into victims and strips them of honor and humanity. It graphically depicts the social and moral disintegration of Sodom.272

Thus, in this narrative, hospitality and rape stand in opposition to each other. In the exercise of hospitality—the willing opening of the portal—people from outside are invited into a space. In rape—the violation of the portal—people from outside force their way into a space. In the exercise of hospitality, the host has agency and power. In rape, sexual power and agency reside with the penetrator, not with the victim.

Therefore, in patriarchal societies, even though the home may be considered the domain of women, it is the men who extend hospitality. In rape, since men are the penetrators, anyone who is penetrated is ‘feminized’, and deprived of power. Hendel, Kronfeld and Pardes conclude:

In hospitality, the receiver is open to that which is not himself. … Rape, as the most extreme—and socially abhorrent—violent appropriation of

---

power is thus the symmetrical opposite of the willing receptivity of hospitality. 273

The portal is then very significant. In the offering of hospitality, guests are brought in through the doorway. In the threat of rape, victims are requested to be brought out through the doorway, for, as Yael Shemesh points out, in the Hebrew Scriptures rape is always conducted in the domain of the rapist(s), rather than that of the victim. 274 The portal of the human body mirrors the vulnerability of the doorway to the house, since it cannot be successfully defended against the unscrupulous and is therefore a site of vulnerability.

It is surely significant that in the episode that follows this one when Lot finally escapes the catastrophe that destroys Sodom, he finds shelter only in a cave, a container that has a permanently opened entrance with no door to represent safety. This ‘house’ can never be made secure and within it, he is raped by his daughters while he is drunk. Hendel, Kronfeld and Pardes claim:

A cave is a home for wild animals … where cultural norms do not apply. It is, at the same time, a body double, a house without a door, a symbolic female body vulnerable to penetration. 275

With no door to cover his threshold, Lot is vulnerable indeed.

Gaps and Ambiguities

The most obvious gaps in the story concern the motivation for the unwarranted aggression on behalf of the men of Sodom, particularly in light of the fact that they have

apparently accepted the sojourner Lot into the town, since he is sitting in the gate when
we first see him. We are never told the reason for such unprovoked violence. Nor are we
told why every man in the city is a part of the mob. Apart from these matters, the plot
unfolds with clarity and simplicity, and although, characteristically, the narrator does not
tell us how the characters are feeling at any point, their feelings are revealed through
their speech and actions. The messengers appear throughout this scene to be
emotionally detached agents of YHWH. Even in the first scene, the reader glimpses
Lot’s anxiety as he presses the messengers to lodge with him instead of sleeping in the
square and suggests that they might leave early in the morning. In Scene 2, this anxiety
grows to fear, as he pleads with the men of Sodom to spare his guests. The mob reveals
a growing level of aggression throughout Scene Two. Thus both the outward events and
the inner lives of the characters are laid before us.

Key Words, Motifs and Theme

Scene One is dominated by language pertaining to hospitality. The word קרה (‘to
greet’) and the expression יישתהו אפגים ארצה (‘and he bowed down with his face to
the ground’) introduce the hospitality motif in verse 1. This is followed in verse 2 by
Lot’s invitation – סורה נא אליבית עבדכם (‘please turn aside to the house of your
servant’). Lot trumps Abraham’s hospitality when he says וְלִינוּ וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם (‘and
lodge and wash your feet’) (v.2). The word לין (‘to lodge’) is repeated in the
messengers’ refusal of Lot’s hospitality (v. 2). In verse 3, Lot’s offer in verse 2 is
fulfilled in the words, וַיָּסֻרוּ אֵלָיו וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ (‘and
they turned aside to him and
they came to his house’). The conclusion of verse 3 completes the picture of Lot’s
hospitality with the clause, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַפַּיִם אָרְצָה (‘and he bowed down
with his face to
the ground’).
them a feast and unleavened bread he baked and they ate’). This expansive hospitality is summed up in his use of the word אֲדֹנַי (‘my lords’) and his designation of himself as עַבְדְכֶם (‘your servant’) in verse 2.

In verse 4 the motif of abuse of hospitality radically opposes the hospitality motif of the previous scene. The verb סבב (‘to surround’) is the first indication of the predatory intention of the men of Sodom (v. 4), followed in verse 5 by קרא (‘to call out’). This is the same word as was used of Lot, employing an alternative meaning, and it highlights the opposing attitudes of Lot and the mob. Lot ‘greets’ but the men of Sodom ‘call out’. The hiphil form of the word יצא (‘to bring out’) is also used twice in situations where it highlights oppositions (vv. 5, 8) as the men of Sodom request Lot to bring out his guests (so that they can ‘know them’ sexually) and as Lot offers to ‘bring out’ his daughters (in order to protect the messengers). There is an ironic twist in the usage of this word: Lot reveals how much he shares in the attitude of the men of Sodom when his efforts to protect the messengers involves a willingness to bring out his virgin daughters so that the mob can ‘know’ them sexually. Another telling contrast which reveals the influence of Sodom on Lot occurs in verse 8 between the phrase לָהֶ  וַﬠֲשׂוּ כַּטּוֹב בְּﬠֵינֵיכֶם (‘and do to them what is good in your eyes’) and אל־לָאֲנָשִׁ֤ים הָאֵל תַּﬠֲשׂ֣וּ דָבָר (‘to these men do not do anything’).

The men of Sodom further demonstrate their hostility with the juxtaposed clauses גֶּשׁ־הָלְאָה (‘Come closer!’) and מֵהֶם now we will do worse to you than them’) (v. 9). Their assault upon Lot ends with the words וַיִּפְצְרוּ בָאִישׁ בְּלוֹט מְאֹד (‘and they pushed against the man, against Lot greatly’) and וַיִּגְּשׁוּ לִשְׁבֹּר הַדָּלֶת (‘and they drew near to break down the door’). In this phrase the second use of the verb
‘to draw near’) occurs; both usages (v. 9) are employed by the men of Sodom as they demonstrate mob aggression toward Lot.

The desire of the men of Sodom to harm the messengers spills over into an attitude of mockery toward Lot. In verse 9, they ridicule Lot by saying גור הגאלה והשפלה (‘this one came to sojourn and he is indeed judging!’). This single use of the verb גור (‘to sojourn’) is poignant. Lot, who was once offered hospitality by the men of Sodom, is now in danger from them, for offering hospitality to others. There is one solitary echo of the hospitality motif in Scene Two, when Lot implores the men of Sodom not to harm his guests כרייעים כ𝑧א בצל קרוב (‘for they have come under the shadow of my roof’) (v. 8).

The third scene contains a rescue motif, which amounts to the offering back to Lot of hospitality by the messengers. The use of the expression והשלימה אתידים (‘and they stretched out their hands’) is evocative of the occasions when YHWH has saved Israel with an outstretched hand (for example, Deut. 4:34, 7:19, 9:29, 11:2, 2 Chron. 6:32, Ps. 136:12, and Jer. 32:21). Then the messengers strike the men of Sodom בסנורים (‘with blindness’), thus ensuring that the hospitality of Lot’s house cannot be further abused.

This theme of this narrative can be said to focus on the notion of hospitality, highlighting the difference between righteous hospitality and unrighteous violation of hospitality, and demonstrating, through the actions of his two messengers, YHWH’s commitment to interpersonal hospitality and non-exploitative interaction.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter this study has brought some aspects of the rhetorical/narrative method to bear on the narrative of Genesis 19:1–11. In the next chapter, Judges 19 will be
scrutinised, and in Chapter Six, these two texts will be studied with regard to their intertextuality, and will be brought into dialogue with the Girardian paradigm.

A number of questions remain unanswered from this story. Why do the men of Sodom, who have accepted Lot as a sojourner, turn so violently and quickly against the messengers? Why is the writer/redactor of this story so emphatic about the fact that all the men of Sodom are in the crowd outside Lot’s door? Why do they refuse to accept Lot’s offer of his two daughters in place of the messengers? I will look to Girard’s theory for answers to these questions.
Chapter Five: The Levite’s Concubine

(Judges 19)

Introduction

In this chapter, the narrative of the rape and murder of the Levite’s concubine (Judg. 19) will be explored through a combination of rhetorical and narrative critical methods. The text will be presented alongside a translation that reflects the Hebrew closely, and textual difficulties will be addressed in the notes that follow. A scene-by-scene rhetorical/narrative reading will then be done, working closely on the text, and paying particular attention to matters that are opaque or difficult. The story will be placed into its context within the book of Judges. The narrator’s use of some of the elements of narrative will then be analysed. In Chapter Six it will be placed beside the narrative of the surrounding of Lot’s house and both stories will enter into dialogue with Girard’s theory.

I have divided this narrative into six scenes. Scene One (vv. 1–2) introduces the two main characters, the Levite and his concubine, and outlines the situation before the action of the story proper begins. Scene Two (vv. 3–9) introduces a new character, the concubine’s father, and dwells on his hospitality in some detail. This scene demonstrates unity of place and character. Scene Three (vv. 10–14) shows us the journey from Bethlehem to Gibeah, and thus has unity of direction, as well as unity of character and mood. Scene Four (vv. 15–26), which contains the crisis of the story in verse 26, has unity of place and time. Scene Five (vv. 27–28), depicting the journey back to Ephraim, again displays unity of direction, characters and mood. Scene Six (vv. 29–30) functions
to conclude this story with a panoramic overview in which the people of Israel pass
judgement on the events at Gibeah.

Translation

Scene One (vv. 1–2): Introduction

1. And it was in those days

and there was no king in Israel

and there was a man, a Levite,

sojourning on the side

of the mountain of Ephraim.

2. And he took for himself

a woman/wife, a concubine

from Bethlehem of Judah.

And his concubine was unfaithful to him

and she went from with him

to the house of her father

at Bethlehem of Judah

and she was there the days of four months.

Notes on Scene One

Verse 1

לֵוִי (‘a Levite’) The Levites were a tribe set apart from the rest of Israel as a landless
priestly class. James Kyung-Jin Lee writes,

By placing landlessness at the centre of cultic worship, the Hebrew
canon … positions the Levite as a symbolic figure par excellence of the
monotheistic impulse, for the Levite owns nothing but YHWH’s call and thus yearns for nothing but to serve YHWH.276

A Levite, being called to serve YHWH, is one who generates expectations that he will be a man of godly and holy life. Brad Embry observes: ‘As an extension of the cultic authority, … the priesthood becomes a tangible reminder of the sovereignty of God.’277

לֶגֶשׁפִי (‘a concubine’) Of the position of a concubine, Victor Hamilton declares:

Normally the concubine is an auxiliary wife … She is subordinated to the issa and is a substitute birth-mother at the disposal of her mistress. On the other hand, neither is the concubine a slave, and that ranks her above an ama or sipha.278

K. Engelken explains:

It would seem that the OT gave little thought to the legal and social position of a pileges. The texts in question deal with the concubines of patriarchs, kings, a Levite, one of the ‘major judges,’ and a tribal ancestor. Among all these passages, the early narrative in Jgs. 19-20, incorporated into the Deuteronomistic History, constitutes an exception. Only here are several terms from the realm of family law—laqah lo issa (take to wife), hoten (father-in-law), hatan (son-in-law)—used in conjunction with pileges, suggesting a marriage-like relationship that does not correspond to the picture painted in other texts.279

Verse 2

וַתִּזְנֶה (‘and she committed fornication’/‘and she practised prostitution’) This word, in this construction, has launched much controversy. The verb וננה (‘to commit fornication’/‘practise prostitution’) is normally construed with ממתת, מאמור, מעלי

277 Brad Embry, ‘Narrative Loss, the (Important) Role of Women, and Community in Judges 19’ in Joshua and Judges, eds Athalya Brenner and Gale Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 266.
278 Victor Hamilton, פִילֶ֔גֶשׁ in NIDOTTE Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 618.
and, in one instance, with גוהם, but here it appears with the preposition על. In addition, some Judges scholars find difficulty with the notion that the woman has been sexually unfaithful to the Levite and substitute the LXXA alternative, ‘she became angry with him.’

Barry Webb writes:

The MT is admittedly suspect, since no exact parallel to the construction הנָה על is attested. However, ὄργυσθη ‘became angry [with]’ of LXXA, favoured by most commentators, is regularly rendered by חרה אף in Judges (2.14, 20; 3.8; 6.39; 9.30; 10.7; 14.19) and it is difficult to see how the MT of 19.2 could be a corruption of this. The επορευθη απ’ αυτου (‘she deserted him’) of LXXB appears to be an interpretation of the MT rather than a translation of an alternative text. See rhetorical-narrative analysis for further discussion.

Scene Two (vv. 3–9): Hospitality in Bethlehem

3. And her husband got up and went after her, and she brought him into her father’s house and the girl’s father saw him and he rejoiced to meet him.

4. And he prevailed upon him, And his lad was with him, and a pair of donkeys.

See rhetorical-narrative analysis for further discussion.

---

his father-in-law, the father of the girl,
and he stayed with him for three days.
And they ate and they drank and they lodged there.

5. And it was on the fourth day
and they arose early in the morning
and he got up to go,
and the father of the girl said to his son-in-law,
‘Sustain your heart [with] a morsel of bread,
and afterwards you can go.’

6. And they sat and they ate,
the two of them together,
and they drank.
And the father of the girl said to the man,
‘Please agree and stay the night,
and gladden your heart.’

7. And the man got up to go,
and his father-in-law urged him,
and he stayed and lodged there.
8. And he arose early in the morning [of] the fifth day
to go
and the father of the girl said
‘Please sustain your heart’
and they lingered until the decline of the day,
and they ate, the two of them.

9. And the man got up to go, he, his concubine and his lad, and said to him his father-in-law, the father of the girl, ‘Please behold! The day sinks to evening. Please lodge. Behold, the day declines! Lodge here and gladden your heart, and you can arise early tomorrow on your way and go to your tent.’

Notes on Scene Two

Verses 3, 5, 6, 8 and 9

These verses all contain the word לב or לֵב (‘heart’). The first usage refers to the heart of the concubine, as the Levite intends to persuade her to return by ‘speaking upon her heart.’ The other four are all directed at the heart of the Levite, as his host begs him to ‘sustain’ his heart (vv. 5 and 8) and to ‘gladden’ his heart (vv. 6 and 9).
Verses 4, 5, 7 and 9

The word שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו is pointed with different vowels to indicate the relationship of ‘father-in-law’ and ‘son-in-law.’

Verse 6

Pamela Tamarkin Reis argues that the structure of 6a, where the eating is separated from the drinking by the phrase שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו, implies an emphasis on the drinking of the Levite and his father-in-law. She writes, ‘The biblical author gives the pair’s drinking lexical prominence.’ See rhetorical-narrative analysis for a fuller discussion.

Scene Three (vv.10–14): The Journey to Gibeah

10. And the man was not willing to lodge, וְלֹֽא־אָבָ֤ה הָאִישׁ לָל֔וּ and he got up and he went and he came until he was opposite Jebus, (that is Jerusalem).
And with him were a pair of saddled donkeys, וְﬠִמּ֗וֹ צֶ֤מֶד חֲמוֹרִים֙ חֲבוּשִׁ֔ים and his concubine was with him.

11. They were by Jebus וְﬠִמּ֗וֹ צֶ֤מֶד חֲמוֹרִים֙ חֲבוּשִׁ֔ים and the day (=sun) had gone down, וְהַיּ֖וֹם רַ֣ד מְאֹ֑ד and the lad said to his lord, ‘Come, please and let us turn aside וַיֹּ֙אמֶר הַנַּ֜ﬠַר אֶל־אֲדֹנָ֗יו לְכָה־נָ֛א וְנָס֛וּרָה to this town of the Jebusites אֶל־ﬠִֽיר־הַיְבוּסִ֥י הַזֹּ֖את

and lodge in it.’

12. And his lord said to him,
‘We will not turn aside to a town of foreigners
who are not from the sons of Israel.
Behold, we will pass on to Gibeah.’

13. And he said to his lad
‘Come and let us draw near
to one of the places,
and we will lodge in Gibeah or in Ramah.’

14. And they passed on, and they went
and the sun went down on them near Gibeah
which belongs to Benjamin.

Scene Four (vv. 15–26): Hospitality in Gibeah

15. And they turned aside there
to go to lodge in Gibeah.
And he came and he sat
in the square of the town
and there was no man to conduct them
to the house to lodge.

16. And behold, an old man was coming
from his work, from the field,
in the evening.
And the man was from the mountain of Ephraim
and he was sojourning in Gibeah
and the men of the place were Benjaminites.

17. And he lifted his eyes
and he saw the man, the traveller,
in the square of the town
And the old man said,
‘Where are you going
and where have you come from?’
18. And he said to him,
‘We are passing
from Bethlehem in Judah
to the side of the mountain of Ephraim.
I am from there.
And I went to Bethlehem in Judah
and I am going to the house of YHWH
and no man is conducting me
to his house.

19. And there is even straw and fodder
for our donkeys,
and there is even bread and wine for me
and for your maidservant
and for the lad with your servant.
There is no need of anything.
20. And the old man said,

‘Peace be to you.

Only let all your needs be upon me,

but you must not lodge in the square.’

21. And he brought him into his house

And he mixed food for the donkeys.

And they washed their feet,

and they ate and they drank.

22. They were gladdening their hearts

and behold! The men of the town,

the men of the sons of worthlessness,

surrounded the house,

pounding upon the door.

and they said to the man,

the old master of the house

saying ‘Bring out the man

who came to your house

and let us know him.’

23. And he came out to them,

the man, the master of the house,

and he said to them,

‘No, my brothers, do not be so wicked, please;

after that this man has come
to my house,
do not do this disgraceful act.

24. Behold, [here is] my virgin daughter
and his concubine!

Please let me bring them out
and you may humble them
and do to them the good in your eyes.

And to this man
do not do
this disgraceful thing.’

25. And the men were not willing to listen to him
and the man grabbed his concubine
and put her outside to them.

And they knew her and abused her
all the night until the morning,
and they sent her away
as the dawn broke.

26. And the woman came at the turn of the morning
and she fell down
in the doorway of the man’s house
where her lord was
until it was light.
Notes on Scene Four

Verse 22

בְָלִיַּﬠַל Benedikt Otzen states:

[M]ost modern scholars think it is a combination of beli + some form of the root ya’al, which means ‘to profit, to benefit’. Thus … beliya’al is thought to mean ‘uselessness,’ ‘negative actions,’ ‘nothingness,’ etc.284

Scene Five (vv. 27-28): The Journey to Ephraim

27. And her lord got up in the morning

Vokey: Adonayah b’kever

and he opened the doors of the house

Vaypected leloteh bevit

and he went out to go on his way,

Vane leloteh lurca

and behold! The woman, his concubine,

Hene haasha pelshew

was lying in the doorway of the house,

Nelotah pereth bevit

and her hands were upon the threshold.

Vordah yelihke:

28. And he said to her, ‘Get up and let us go!’

Vayomer aleha kemiy enleh

and there was no answer.

Voni eneh

And he took her onto the donkey

Vikhalah yeltehmevo

and the man got up and went to his place.

Vokem ha’esi yeldeh lemkevo:

Scene Six (vv. 29–30): Conclusion

29. And he came into his house,

Vebah aleribun

and he took the knife

Vokha arekhamevel

and he grabbed his concubine

Vothikh bemelewo

and dismembered her according to her bones

into twelve pieces.

And he sent her

throughout all the territory of Israel.

30. And it came about that all who saw her said,

‘Such [a thing] as this has not been done

and has not been seen,

from the days when the Israelites came up

from the land of Egypt until this day!

Place it for yourselves upon her, take counsel

and speak!’

Notes on Scene Six

Verse 29

וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת (‘and he took the knife’) This phrase replicates the phrase used in Gen. 22:10, when Abraham takes the knife to sacrifice his son, and is the only other place in the Hebrew Scriptures where the word מַאֲכֶלֶת (‘knife’) is used with the definite article.

The account of the dismembering of the Levite’s concubine by the men of Gibeah foreshadows Saul’s dismemberment of his oxen in 1 Samuel 11:7. In both instances, the dismembered body parts are circulated throughout Israel as a call to arms. Robert Polzin
claims: ‘Literary allusions and narrative reworking of key details make the ideological esthetic connections between the two passages deliberate and extensive.’

Rhetorical-Narrative Analysis

Scene One (vv. 1–2): Introduction

The story begins with the refrain, ‘In those days there was no king in Israel,’ which appears also in 17:6, 18:1 and 21:25, thus suggesting that this narrative is going to concern an example of lawlessness, of everyone doing ‘what was good in their own eyes’ (17:6, 21:25). This refrain suggests that the community of Israel has been split by the self-centred concerns of its members, and is now given over to individualistic rather than social priorities. Tammi Schneider writes: ‘The sentence describes what happens in Israel when, lacking the authority of a king, each man does what seems right to him.’ Thus with the first clause, the plot complication is foreshadowed. The reader is then introduced to the two protagonists, as we read that a certain Levite dwelling in the outlying parts of the hill-country of Ephraim takes a concubine from Bethlehem as his wife. Right from the outset, we notice that in this story none of the characters are named. Don Michael Hudson claims that this dearth of names is a ‘major literary technique to display the loss of familial, tribal and national wholeness.’ This lack of formal names is offset by the variety of shifting titles and designations by which the leading characters are known and through which the ambiguity of their relationships is suggested. The deterioration in morality of the people of Israel under inadequate

286 Tammi Schneider, Judges (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2000), 246.
leadership brings about the degeneration in relationships throughout Judges. Schneider states:

The present episode reveals how complicated relationships became. The greatest contrast is with the Achsah narrative [Judg. 1:12-15] where all the parties are named and their status and relationship to each other was consistent and clearly defined. … By the time of the pileges none of the protagonists have names, each is referred to by changing definitions of who they were, thereby confusing, for the reader, all their relationships to each other.  

Hudson suggests that this lack of formal naming and its corresponding abundance of epithets serves also to generalise this story, so that does not only apply to one set of individuals, but to many within Israel. He asks:

What better way to portray that every Levite, every father-in-law, every host, every single man within that society committed such barbaric atrocities ‘from Dan to Beersheba’ (20.1) than by allowing every perpetrator in the narrative to exist nameless?  

Both the designations, לֵוִי (‘a Levite’) and פִילֶגֶשׁ (‘a concubine’), are loaded terms. Heidi Szpek suggests, ‘Levite as male protagonist … leads us complacently into a false sense of security. A Levite as a member of the priestly line should be above reproach.’ Reis highlights the dubious nature of this particular Levite’s standing when she declares:

We immediately distrust … a Levite sojourning in Ephraim. Why is he not living in one of the cities allotted to Levites? How does he support himself away from his appropriate milieu? Is he perhaps another such scoundrel as the anonymous itinerant Levite sojourning in Ephraim in

---

288 Schneider, Judges, 256.
the preceding chapter (18:20) whose ‘heart is glad’ to play the priest, for
a price, before graven and molten images?291

The term ‘concubine’ is also ambiguous. Although there are other references to
concubines in the Hebrew Scriptures, they are few, making it, as Schneider explains,
‘difficult to determine their status in Israel and the degree of power they had in their
relationships with other people in their lives.’292 Mieke Bal writes that the term
concubine ‘is normally defined by the fact that she is not legally married but lives with
a man in either—depending on one’s ideology—“free love” or “sin.”’293 Susan
Ackerman, in her study of women in Judges, suggests that two different roles are
assigned to concubines in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first type of concubine ‘is a part
of a man’s harem, but is not one of his actual wives,’ and is ‘unmarried but in a
mistress-type relationship with a man.’294 Concubines of this sort, Ackerman writes, are
often shown ‘as assuming a considerable amount of autonomy and authority.’295 She
cites the account of the ten concubines in 2 Samuel 15:16, who are left behind in charge
of the palace when King David and the rest of his household flee from Jerusalem.

The second type of concubine described by Ackerman is ‘a woman who is
married to a man as a secondary wife.’296 From the designation of the Levite as ‘her
husband’ (v. 3), and of her father as the Levite’s ‘father-in-law’ (vv. 4, 7, 9), it would
appear that this woman belongs to the second type of concubine. Ackerman states:

In a narrative like Judges 19 … where the concubine is depicted as a
wife, and even more so as a wife of secondary rank, we would expect her
to be described … as a woman subject to her husband’s control and as

291 Reis, ‘The Levite’s Concubine,’ 127.
292 Schneider, Judges, 248.
293 Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges (Chicago:
294 Susan Ackerman, Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 236.
295 Ackerman, Warrior, Dancer, 236.
296 Ackerman, Warrior, Dancer, 236.
answerable to his directives. And, in fact, indications of the concubine’s subservient status are found throughout the Judges text.297

The terms ‘Levite’ and ‘concubine’ thus indicate the inequity of power that exists between these two people. The Levite is, in the first place, a man and therefore has ‘ownership’ of his woman, and is, in the second, one who might be expected to be a leader, at least in religious matters. The woman is subservient both by virtue of her gender and by the secondary rank of her position in relation to the Levite. J. A. Soggin, one should note, misses the point of this distribution of power when he writes, ‘The fact that the young man is a Levite is unimportant for the purpose of the narrative, so much so that K. Budde, 1897 and others following him suggest deleting it.’298

The second verse contains a word that has been much discussed. וַתִּזְנֶה (‘and she was unfaithful’/‘prostituted herself’) is understood by scholars in a number of different ways. Three schools of thought prevail. Some scholars insist that translations that suggest that the concubine was sexually unfaithful, either by fornication or prostitution, perpetuate a textual error (see Notes for Scene One). This school includes Younger, Burney, Soggin, Boling, Brensinger, Matthews, McKenzie, and Hoppe. 299 Soggin claims ‘In no way can this be zanah. “practise prostitution”, in the sense of “betrayed him”’ but gives no reason to support this assertion. Boling also rejects the use of זנה.

297 Ackerman, Warrior, Dancer, 236.
300 Soggin, Judges, 284.
301 Boling, Judges, 273.
in its usual sense claiming that ‘it is strange that the woman would become a prostitute and then run home.’ In support of this view, Victor Matthews claims:

a woman who has played the harlot would hardly be welcomed back to her father’s house. Such a woman, in Deut 22:11–21, would be stoned at her father’s door, or would go to live, as Hosea’s wife Gomer did, with her lovers (Hos 2:5).

The second school of thought, more prevalent among commentators writing in the last thirty years, appears to be willing to accept the text as it stands, but solely in a metaphorical sense. Webb, for example, suggests that the concubine’s unfaithfulness should be taken metaphorically rather than literally. He suggests, ‘The concubine “plays the harlot” by walking out on her husband.’ Susan Niditch concurs with this view:

A literal reading of the woman’s ‘playing the harlot’ (19:2) would suggest marital infidelity or acting as a ‘loose woman,’ as in Gen 38:24 and Deut 22:21. The term, however, can also be used metaphorically to describe other acts of unfaithfulness (e.g., Hos 2) … The departure could be regarded either as a kind of ‘harlotry,’ viewed as disloyalty, or as a protest against a situation of abuse.

Gale Yee also takes צנה על to mean ‘to be unfaithful to’ in a metaphorical sense, when she suggests: ‘A stronger case can be made for considering her act figuratively.’ She claims that interpretations of this phrase that suggest that the concubine was sexually active with another man, or men, present difficulties. She asks:

Why would her father accept such a shameless daughter and allow her to remain with him for four months? Why would her husband expend the

---

302 Webb, Judges: An Integrated Reading, 188.
303 Susan Niditch, Judges (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 191-192
time and effort to bring her back? Under the law she must be put to death (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).³⁰⁶

The third school (with which this study concurs) accepts the word נזר at face value, as meaning simply ‘to be unfaithful’/‘practise prostitution.’ Yee, and those scholars who agree with her that the word cannot mean literally what it says, overlook the context of this story. In these later chapters of Judges, Israelite society is depicted as disordered and corrupted away from YHWH’s intention for it. Under such conditions, it would not be surprising that the concubine’s father ignores the law in regard to the treatment of unfaithful daughters or that the Levite wants his concubine back because he finds her sexually pleasing in spite of her previous behaviour. These two men are merely demonstrating another aspect of the decline of proper adherence to the law as it is presented in Deuteronomy. Lillian Klein claims:

The reliable narrator tells us that the concubine was tizneh, ‘unfaithful to, like a harlot’ to her husband, but the Levite does not punish his wife’s infidelity according to the precepts of Deut. 22.21. A woman who behaves like a harlot should be stoned to death, but this would leave the Levite without a woman for whatever purposes he had acquired her. The narrative leads one to believe that the Levite’s needs are more important to him than Yahweh’s moral strictures.³⁰⁷

There is irony in the fact that many scholars cannot accept a literal reading of this word, נזר, for those who cannot accept that an Israelite woman would be unfaithful to her husband are willing to credit Israelite men with rape and murder, and a Levite with pushing his concubine out to a ravening crowd and later dismembering her. Schneider rightly remarks, ‘Most scholars simply cannot believe that an Israelite

³⁰⁶ Yee, ‘Ideological Criticism’, 162.
woman would do things that they do not expect her to do, in this case that a Judite woman would prostitute herself.  

Reis has presented a different translation of the expression וַתִּזְנֶה ﬠָלָיו. She renders this phrase as ‘whored for him,’ so that the clause reads ‘And his concubine whored for him’ translating the preposition as ‘for him,’ ‘on account of him,’ because of him,’ ‘on his behalf,’ or ‘for his sake.’ This reading, as Reis says, solves many problems:

My translation enables the reader to understand why the concubine leaves her husband, why her father receives her, and why the Levite waits four months before trying to win her back. With this understanding, the qere need no longer supplant the ketiv [19:3], and the Bible can be read as it was written. … [W]ith my ordinary usages of זנה and על and straightforward understanding of the text, there is no illogic in supposing that a father would receive a wronged daughter and a husband would want to recover his meal ticket.

Although Reis’s handling of qere and ketiv is open to question, this translation nonetheless has much to recommend it. It does, however, raise the question of why the woman’s father would welcome so enthusiastically a man who has forced his daughter into prostitution.

Webb highlights the irony inherent in the concubine’s unfaithfulness when he points out:

At the beginning of the episode the concubine ‘plays the harlot’ (זנה); at the end she becomes the common property of the men of Gibeah (19:2, 25). The grim irony suggests that from the narrator’s point of view there is an element of justice in the concubine’s fate. We are reminded of Samson who did what was right in his own eyes and ended up by having

308 Schneider, Judges, 250.
309 Reis, ‘The Levite’s Concubine,’ 129.
his eyes put out (14:3; 16:21), or of Abimelech who killed his brothers on a stone and was killed himself by having a stone dropped on his head (9:5, 53). Such censure of the concubine does not of course imply moral approval of those responsible for her fate.310

Scene Two (vv. 3–9): Hospitality in Bethlehem

After this period of four months, the Levite sets out to reclaim his wife. Several explanations have been tendered to account for the lapse of four months. Fewell and Gunn suggest either that the Levite’s pride prevents him from following her immediately, or that her status as a concubine rather than a wife means that he does not perceive her as meriting an immediate response.311 A better explanation has been offered by Schneider:

Four months is an unusual number for the biblical text. Common lengths of time are in the form of three days, seven days, a month, a year, or a number of years … If the woman had sexual relations with another man, four months would be the amount of time to determine for certain, at least for those without modern medicine, whether the woman was pregnant.312

He journeys to the house of her father to ‘speak upon her heart,’ an expression which BDB renders as ‘speak kindly, comfort.’313 Trible also suggests that the words ‘connote reassurance, comfort, loyalty, and love.’314 Soggin claims, however, that the phrase should be rendered as ‘reasonably’ because the heart, ‘in the metaphorical usage of the context in the Semitic languages is the seat of the reason and not the emotions.’315

310 Webb, Judges: An Integrated Reading, 188.
311 Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn, Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 133.
312 Schneider, Judges, 252–253.
313 BDB, 2002, 182.
315 Soggin, Judges, 285.
Boling concurs with this interpretation. This study suggests that in other phrases in this story, such as לְבַעַר עֲבֵד (vv. 5 and 8) and יִשְׁעַ עֲבֵד (vv. 6 and 9), ‘heart’ is the more natural translation for לָבָע and לְבַעַר עֲבֵד.

The Levite takes with him two male donkeys and his נַﬠַר (‘lad’), a term that can refer to either a young male from infancy to adulthood, or as in this narrative, to a servant. The concubine acts for the only time in Scene Two when she brings the Levite into her father’s house. As they enter the house, she disappears entirely from view. Her father now replaces her in the action of the story, as he sees his son-in-law and greets him joyfully. He prevails upon him to stay and they eat and drink together. The Levite partakes of his father-in-law’s hospitality for three days and on the fourth he prepares to leave, but again the concubine’s father persuades him to stay and enjoy himself further. The Levite stays a fourth night. On the fifth day, he rises early to leave, but once more his father-in-law persuades him to stay. Quite late in the day, when the sun is beginning to decline, the Levite gets up, and with his entourage, takes his leave, and turns toward home. In the last two verses (vv. 8 and 9), we are told no less than three times that the day is ending. Because in Jewish understanding, the old day ends at nightfall, and the new day begins, we are being strongly reminded that this is now the sixth day.

This scene revolves around the exercise of male-to-male hospitality, and Trible declares, ‘Truly, this version of oriental hospitality is an exercise in male bonding.’ Koala Jones-Warsaw rightly rejects Trible’s reading. She contends:

Such a polemical statement functions to anger the reader toward the men, but the context simply does not support her assumption that the young woman should have been entitled to hospitality. Hospitality is something extended to guests, whose presence is brief. The young woman who had

---

316 Boling, Judges, 110.
317 Trible, Texts of Terror, 68.
been living with her father for four months was, therefore, not a guest and was not entitled to hospitality in that situation.318

Although Jones-Warsaw is correct about the woman’s status as ‘family’ rather than as guest, there is no doubt that the writer has laid particular stress on the growing closeness that develops between the two men, as described in the phrase, שניהם יחזו (‘the two of them together’) (v. 6) and simply שניהם (‘the two of them’) (v. 8). The activities of eating and drinking are foregrounded: Karla Bohmbach writes, ‘The text thus seems extraordinarily taken with the meal times of these two men.’319 Perhaps this is because the men do nothing else but carouse for five days: no necessity for other activities such as work interrupts the father-in-law’s social schedule here. Bohmbach goes on to say:

Just where is the woman while this dizzying round of dinner parties is going on? She seems to have vanished. The camaraderie that occurs around the dinner table in the privacy of a home is here narrated in such a way that it acknowledges only the presence of men—the woman is excluded.320

Barry Webb rejects the notion that male bonding of the kind that excludes women has a part to play in the father of the concubine’s desire to retain the Levite’s company. He observes: ‘he seems to want to give the relationship between his daughter and the Levite a better chance of success in the long term by building a stronger personal relationship with his guest.’321 He subsequently changes this view and suggests that the father may wish to keep the Levite because ‘a family connection with a Levite

320 Bohmbach, ‘Conventions, Contraventions’, 93.
may well have had some superstitious value and been regarded as socially advantageous.\(^{322}\)

I believe that both of these explanations are incorrect and that they miss the point that the writer is making. One of the indicators that the men of Israel have ceased to serve and honour YHWH is their increasingly cold attitude to women. No longer obedient to the vision of woman as נְזֵר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (‘a counterpart,’ Gen. 2:18), the men of Israel seek companionship only with each other and exclude women. As the book of Judges progresses, the treatment of women deteriorates. Dennis Olson states:

[T]he changing power relationships, independence, and treatment of the many women characters in the book function as benchmarks for the health and faithfulness of God’s people. … As the period of the judges began its long decline, women became objects of men’s foolish vows (Jephthah’s daughter, 11:20–40), the objects of men’s desire (14:1–3; 16:1), and the purchased instruments for schemes of male vengeance (16:5). This general decline from women as the subject of independent action to women as the objects of men’s actions and desires in the book of Judges coincides with the gradual decline in the health of Israel’s social and religious life during the judges era.\(^{323}\)

That the father and the Levite exclude the concubine from their conviviality thus foreshadows the old man’s willingness to give his daughter to the mob in scene 4, and the Levite’s callous unconcern for his wife.

Webb suggests that the reiteration of the word לֵב (‘heart’) (first used by the narrator in verse 3) by the concubine’s father (vv. 5, 6, 8 and 9) serves as a reminder to the Levite that his mission has not yet been fulfilled, and that reconciliation has not been achieved.\(^{324}\) The weakness in this argument is that, like the Levite, the father

\(^{322}\) Webb, Judges, 459.
\(^{324}\) Webb, Judges, 458, 460.
shows neither interest in nor concern for his daughter and actually impedes the restoration of the relationship by occupying his son-in-law with endless bouts of eating and drinking. The repetition of the word ‘heart’ serves to show where the Levite’s real affections lie. Although he sets out to ‘speak upon’ his wife’s heart, with some encouragement from his father-in-law, he ends up communing only with his own.

Reis suggests that the author’s treatment of the men’s eating and drinking together implies the consumption of excessive quantities of alcohol. She claims:

In the entire Bible there are only four instances in which an extraneous word or phrase separates eat from drink and the verb drink also occupies the end of the sentence or clause, a position of emphasis in Hebrew syntax. Each of the four occurrences displaying these two linguistic elements bears a suggestion of alcoholic excess.325

She points to the other three usages of this construction – Jacob plying the blind Isaac with alcohol before deceiving him (Gen. 27:25), Boaz drinking until ‘his heart was merry’ (Ruth 3:7), and Hannah drinking at Shiloh before praying to YHWH (1 Sam. 1:9) – and argues that in each of these cases the ‘syntactical flag’ of the separation of drinking from eating, and the relegation of drinking to the end of the clause, suggest alcoholic over-indulgence. She goes on to say:

In Judg 19,6 drink is separated from the verb for eat by the cozy ‘two of them together’ and is also placed at the end of the sentence, ושתיו כות ושותו. To reproduce this effect in English, one would need italics: ‘And they sat and they ate, two of them together, and they drank.’ The author cues by vocabulary (‘two of them together’), distinguishes by rarity, and reinforces by syntax, so that the reader suspects drinking to excess.326

325 Reis, ‘The Levite’s Concubine,’ 134.
326 Reis, ‘The Levite’s Concubine,’ 134.
Although Reis’s case is based upon a small number of examples, her theory that the two men are drinking to excess is plausible and is supported by subsequent events. It explains why the Levite chooses unwisely to leave so late in the day and to stop overnight on the way. He has surely not failed to perceive that he is living in troubled times and the fact that he has overindulged in alcohol would explain his perilous decision. The father-in-law also shows evidence of drunkenness in his rambling speech in verse 9, where in contrast to the normal compact and frugal usage of Hebrew, he ‘says “behold” twice, twice refers to the closing of the day and twice suggests that the Levite stay the night.’

Although the Levite has made this journey on account of his concubine, we have not heard of her since the beginning of the scene (v. 3). Here at last in verse 9 she is mentioned, not as an autonomous individual but as a part of the Levite’s entourage, grouped with the servant and the donkeys.

In this verse (v. 9), the father-in-law refers to the Levite’s home as אֹהָלֶ (‘your tent’). Because the narrator refers to the Levite’s dwelling as ‘his house’ (v. 29), some regard this as an idiomatic expression meaning ‘home.’ However, it seems just as feasible that the Levite lives in a tent, and that the word בֵּיתוֹ in verse 29 is used to mean ‘home’ rather than ‘house.’ Boling supports this reading: ‘At last the Levite’s circumstances become clear. When he leaves this lavish setting it will be to return to a tent, not a house.’ When read in this way, אֹהָלֶ has implications for the Levite’s social standing and his way of life. It demonstrates that he has embraced, by choice or by economic necessity, an itinerant life style and raises again the question of how this Levite makes his living.

---

328 Boling, Judges, 275.
Scene Three (vv. 10–14): The Journey to Gibeah

At the end of five days of partying, the Levite ceases to listen to the importunities of his host and finally, in verse 10, he departs on his journey home. He takes with him his pair of saddled donkeys and we are told, as though in an afterthought, that ‘his concubine was with him.’ The concubine’s viewpoint is never revealed, and it is not clear whether she wishes to return with the Levite. Would she have preferred to remain in her father’s house, or is she willing to return to the Levite? Or is she simply resigned to conforming to the wills of the men around her? The alliance that the two men have made leaves her nowhere else to go. If her father endorses the Levite’s right to take her, then she has little choice in the matter.

When they arrive outside Jebus, which is home to the non-Israelite Jebusites, the day is almost spent, and the lad suggests to his master that they turn aside and stay the night in the city (v. 11). But the Levite replies that they will not turn aside to a city of foreigners, ‘who are not of the sons of Israel,’ but will continue on either to Gibeah or Ramah. His distrust of ‘foreigners’ and his confidence in ‘the sons of Israel’ will bring his concubine to her death. Niditch remarks:

The Levite’s refusal to accept the lad’s suggestion to stop among non-Israelites and his insistence upon reaching an Israeliite town set up tremendous irony in the light of the vicious treatment he and his wife receive among those who are supposedly members of his own group.329

In the three verses that are spent in discussing their destination (vv. 11, 12, 13), the woman’s voice is never heard. The lad might have presumed to enter into conversation

---

329 Niditch, Judges, 192.
with his lord, but the concubine’s opinion is neither sought nor offered. She is with the donkeys like the silent and inert burden that she will soon become.

Scene Four (vv. 15–26): Hospitality in Gibeah

So the party enters Jebus, where they sit in the town square and wait in the gathering dusk for someone to offer them hospitality (v. 15). None of the natives of Gibeah, who are from the tribe of Benjamin, offer to take them into their homes, but when darkness is finally upon them, an old man, a sojourner who is also from the mountain of Ephraim, stops and speaks to the Levite (vv. 16 and 17). Although there are two other people with the Levite, the old man speaks in singular verbs addressed to the Levite alone. In an expression that calls to mind the questions posed by the angel of YHWH to Abraham’s secondary wife, Hagar (Gen. 16:8), he asks, ‘Where are you going and where have you come from?’ Thus, the Levite is called in this classic expression to give account of himself. But here it is not YHWH who asks, because this is the end of the period of the Judges, when the voice of YHWH is no longer heard among his people. The reader is reminded that although YHWH intervened to save Lot and his daughters in the Genesis 19 narrative, he has not been active among the people of Israel since his implicit empowering of Samson near the end of Chapter 16 of Judges. The old man’s question (‘Where are you going?’ v. 17) is identical to the question posed by Micah in Judges 17:9 to another unscrupulous Levite. In these latter chapters of Judges, we are reminded that the place of God in Israel has been usurped by people as they do ‘the good in their own eyes.’

The Levite replies that they are returning from Bethlehem in Judah to his home in the remote parts of the hills of Ephraim and adds something that is new information
for us: he is on his way to ‘the house of YHWH’ (v. 18). Because this information is imparted, not by the all-knowing narrator, but by the Levite, who will demonstrate a lack of commitment to the truth in the next chapter (20:5), we are at liberty to ask whether or not it is true. The narrator has not told us that the Levite is going to go straight home and the old man may simply be assuming that he is travelling directly back to his tent (v. 9). Schneider suggests:

The reference to the house of the deity was not a mistake but certainly presents the man, a Levite, in a more religious and righteous light than has been the case in the earlier part of the story. His statement was not necessarily a lie. The text never notes where the Levite was taking the pileges or what his intentions were when they arrived at their destination. The reader knows that the Levite could be stating the truth but leaves open the possibility that the man was grandstanding.330

The Levite hastens to enhance his appeal as a guest by explaining that he carries sufficient provisions for the donkeys and the people of his party and that they lack nothing. The old man, now reassured by the standing of the Levite, wishes him peace and says that he will take care of all their needs. ‘Only do not,’ he adds nervously, ‘lodge in the square’ (v. 20). He takes the entourage into his house and feeds the donkeys, and they wash their feet, eat and drink (v. 21). Because the verbs וַיִּרְחֲצוּ, וַיֹּאכְלוּ and וַיִּשְׁתּוּ (‘and they washed,’ ‘and they ate’ and ‘and they drank’) are in the masculine plural, it is not possible to say whether the woman is included or whether the verbs refer to the men only. The fact that the old man has addressed only the Levite in the square might suggest the latter.

In verse 22 the reader’s expectations of witnessing a second round of hospitality are abruptly subverted, when some worthless men of the town surround the house and

---

330 Schneider, Judges, 259.
pound upon the door. They demand that the old man bring out the man who is visiting him, so that they may ‘know’ him. For the reader who interprets Judges 19 in the light of the Genesis 19 story, there can be few doubts about the nature of the access to the Levite that they demand. ‘Does this mean that all these men of Gibeah are homosexuals? ‘J. Cheryl Exum asks. ‘Hardly. Rape is a crime of violence not of passion; homosexual rape forces the male victim into a passive role, into the woman’s position.’

The old man responds by going out of the house to speak to the men. He addresses them as ‘my brothers’ and implores them not to do so wicked a thing to the guest within his house (v. 23). Then he offers his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine in exchange for the safety of his male visitor. Trible, comparing this story with Genesis 19, writes, ‘These two stories show that rules of hospitality in Israel protect only males.’ This comment, however, overlooks the fact that in this story, this androcentric view of hospitality is condemned, for it shows the whole people of Israel being plunged into civil war.

Anne Michele Tapp writes:

Seeking to appease the townsmen, the old man offers a compromise – a virgin and a concubine in lieu of the Levite. Like Lot before him, the old man attempts to establish a power-base for his compromise by alluding to his position as a community member (‘my brethren’), the ethic of hospitality (‘seeing this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing’), and his authority as the house master and father to offer his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine as sexual substitutes. The old

man changes the terms of the townsmen’s request and presents them with a seemingly attractive sexual alternative.332

Stuart Lasine draws a comparison between the behaviour of Lot and of the host in this story. He comments: ‘The old host goes beyond Lot by explicitly telling the “base fellows” to “ravish” or “rape” the women (Judg. 19.24).’333

The men of Gibeah are not interested in the old man’s offer (v. 25). The Levite demonstrates that he is a good man in a crisis by grabbing his concubine and pushing her out to the crowd. In one brief sentence, the concubine’s night of terror is described: ‘And they knew her and they abused her all night until the morning’ (v. 25). Then, at daybreak, they let her go and she makes her way back to the old man’s house. Here she falls outside the door, with her hands stretched out to the threshold of the house, as though she still believes in the illusion of safety that it represented to her earlier in that long night. The domestic sphere, after all, is supposed to represent a safe place for women. M. O’Connor writes, ‘Women [in Judges] are typically of the inside, the domestic sphere, while men are of the outside, the common sphere.’334 Bohmbach, in her study of the concept of ‘public’ and ‘private’ and how they relate to gender, writes:

In going out, even if against her will, this woman seemingly violates socio-cultural norms about women in public places; she is thereby punished. This episode thus confirms typical assumptions about the public as a proscribed place for women.335

335 Bohmbach, ‘Conventions, Contraventions’, 87.
Scene Five (vv.27–28): The Journey to Ephraim

It is full daylight when the Levite emerges (v. 27). The reader is told that בַּבֹּקֶר ... וַיָּקָם, (‘and he got up … in the morning’), thus indicating that he has gone to bed after pushing his woman out to the crowd. His title has changed now; twice he is referred to as דֹנֶיהָ אֲ (‘her lord’) (vv. 26, 27). He sees the broken body of the woman lying in the entrance to the house. ‘Get up!’ he orders her. ‘Let us go.’ Far from ‘speaking upon her heart,’ these are the only words we hear him speak to the woman in the entire story. The woman does not respond. Readers are left to wonder if she is dead, or whether, with loving care, she could perhaps still be revived. The Levite does not stop to consider the matter, but puts her onto the back of one of the donkeys, and with his lad, he sets off for home (v. 28).

Scene Six (vv. 29–30): Conclusion

Back inside his dwelling, the Levite takes a knife and dismembers ‘his woman,’ according to her bones, and sends the parts into all the territory of Israel (v. 20). If the private or inside world is the realm of women, as Bohmbach and O’Connor have suggested, the final irony of the story is that the concubine is dismembered inside the Levite’s home. Bohmbach states:

The reported activity of the Levite is preceded by the information that ‘he entered his house’ (v. 29). Hence, the location of the dismemberment was inside, in a space not only normally associated with women, but also one with assumed connotations of safety and security for them. In this episode, however, such meanings are sharply reversed: the house becomes the setting for the most violent abuse inflicted upon her. Indeed, since the text is never forthcoming about the time of her death, her dying may well be coeval with her dismemberment. Thus, the place that is expected to serve as the secure centre of a woman’s life ... becomes for
this woman, the site where her husband finally and most horribly destroys her.  

The cutting up of the concubine’s body, Peggy Kamuf suggests, ‘repeats in a calculated fashion the brutal frenzied mutilation of the same body by the Benjaminites.’ Reis correctly observes:

Most commentators say that the woman’s bones are ‘scattered’ throughout Israel, a piece to each tribe. If the Levite meant to send one piece to each tribe, however, he need have chopped his wife into only eleven parts, for he would hardly attempt to rally the tribe of Benjamin to war against itself. As for the other tribes, the receipt of a single piece of a woman would be puzzling indeed, for a lone body part is not a metaphor for the rending and disunion of the twelve tribes of Israel. Only the twelve chopped parts seen together would symbolize the dismemberment of Israel’s twelve tribes.

This observation is an important one. The Levite’s message to Israel is indeed misunderstood if the reader imagines each tribe receiving one portion of the concubine. The imagery contained in the second-last verse of this story brings the narrator’s purpose sharply into focus. The raped, tortured and dismembered body of the concubine graphically demonstrates to the people of Israel the disintegration of the covenantal bonds that hold them together. This narrative in Judges 19 does not concern only a local tragedy, a crime against one woman and the slighting of the honour of one man. As Alice Keefe claims:

[T]he meaning of community emerges and is defined in terms of the generative power of life that is carried within the female body. Thus, within the symbolic formations indigenous to ancient Israel, two basic

336 Bohmbach, ‘Conventions, Contraventions,’ 96.
338 Reis, ‘The Levite’s Concubine,’ 142–143.
modalities of existence converge: the female body as the site of the 
power of life, and the Israelite community as that in which life is 
sustained and encompassed. 339

Thus, in destroying the body of the woman, the men of Gibeah and the Levite have graphically demonstrated the destruction of the Israelite community. The sacred and symbolic significance of both the life-generating female body and the life-sustaining community are together annihilated. Only the sending around of the twelve broken body parts together can convey this message to broken Israel.

In the last verse of the story, verse 30, the response of the people of Israel is heard. Ironically, Israel now, in the midst of her breakdown as community, speaks as one to condemn the rape, murder and dismemberment of the woman. With one voice all who see the dismembered body remember their shared history and from one heart they speak out.

In this story, the narrator has set out not only to arouse the indignation of the people of Israel, but to engage their hearts, their minds and their voices. The story of the Levite’s concubine, coming as it does in the final section of Judges, portrays the people of Israel as locked into an ever-increasing downward spiral of chaos and of social and religious disintegration, from which their leaders, the judges, can no longer rescue them. Because of their wickedness and their rejection of his rule, YHWH is no longer active in their midst to bring deliverance as in Genesis 19. Because the people of Israel have become predators who prey upon the weak and powerless among them, they are breaking the bonds of community that have held them together. Because those who are raping the body of the woman Israel are themselves Israelites, they alone can, by turning again to God, bring about change and restoration.

The last verse of the story ends with a cry from the people that calls them first to identify with the fate of this murdered concubine. But this tale does not call only for individual or individualistic responses. It calls for the people to come together, to own their wickedness corporately as they ‘take counsel.’ Then, in the prophetic voice of the people of YHWH, they must ‘speak.’

**Biblical Context**

John Collins writes, ‘The last four chapters of the book of Judges are framed by statements that ‘in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.’ These chapters together form the conclusion to the book, which contains ‘two main episodes.’ Brueggemann sums up:

> These two narratives speak in turn of religious idolatry that flourishes even in Israel, and a brutalizing narrative of tribal wars and a brutalizing mistreatment of a concubine. The narratives in sequence bespeak Israel’s religious compromise and Israel’s social barbarism and, of course, in Israel’s horizon these two dimensions of distorted reality are characteristically intimately connected to each other.

This chapter begins the second part of this conclusion to Judges. It also gives rise to all that follows after, in the final two chapters. Alice Keefe claims:

> In Judges 19, a woman is both raped and dismembered; the division of her body serves as a prelude to and a symbol for a civil war between the twelve tribes of Israel.

---

As a result of her rape and death, Israel engages in, to quote Keefe, ‘a senseless civil war, with astronomically high death tolls, culminating in the near eradication of the tribe of Benjamin.’³⁴⁴ To prevent the tribe of Benjamin from total extermination, the Israelites obtain wives for the surviving Benjaminites by a further bout of slaughter and rape.

**Elements of Narrative**

*Plot*

The story begins in typical biblical style by introducing characters, naming the setting and presenting a central relationship. The first two verses set the scene for the narrative that is to come. In this introduction we meet the Levite and the concubine, read of their dwelling in the remote hills of Ephraim, and learn of the events that, having taken place before the story actually begins, launch the action of the story.

At this point, the tension within the story is low, produced mainly by our curiosity about the relationship between the Levite and his concubine, and by whether or not they will be reconciled. Scene Two, beginning with the arrival of the Levite and his entourage in Bethlehem (v. 3) and rapidly becoming an account of an extended period of hospitality offered by the concubine’s father to the Levite (vv. 4-9), drops the interest level still further. The only tension in the story now derives from our impatience with the carousing of the two men and our desire for the Levite to leave. At last, as Scene Three opens, he takes his servant, donkeys and concubine and sets out so late in the day that an overnight stay on the way home becomes necessary (v. 10). During this journey, which is punctuated by a short dialogue between the lad and the Levite

demonstrates that the relationship between the servant and his master is open and pleasant, we again wonder about the Levite’s relationship with his concubine, who remains silent and is not addressed.

In Scene Four, the Levite and his party stop to lodge in Gibeah and the early part of this scene shows a repeat of the motif of male-to-male hospitality (vv. 15-21).

Suddenly the tension levels of the story rise dramatically as the crisis approaches, with the pounding on the door that heralds the men of Gibeah and their ugly demand (v. 22). Suspense mounts as the old man attempts to negotiate with the mob. The tension in the story climaxes in verse 25, as the woman is sacrificed in an ugly act of betrayal by the Levite, and pack-raped and abused by the men of Gibeah. In one terse sentence (v.25b) the dark heart of the story – the night-long agony of the Levite’s concubine – is recounted. The tension has already begun to abate as the woman staggers back to the door of the old man’s house (v. 26).

Scene Five brings the gradual decline of tension, as the Levite puts his concubine on one of the donkeys, and the party travels back to Ephraim (v. 28). Any curiosity that the shocked reader now feels concerns the woman’s condition. Is she perhaps still alive and will she recover from the traumas she has experienced? On this journey, there is no dialogue. The final scene, Scene Six, brings resolution to the story, as the Levite dismembers the woman, thus annihilating our hopes for her, and sends her body throughout Israel (v. 29). As readers, the only satisfaction we have now is to stand with the people of Israel as they pass judgement on the episode in the last verse.

The plot forms a pattern that can be summarised like this:

Scene One (vv. 1–2): Introduction; the existing state of affairs

Scene Two (vv. 3–9): Hospitality (1)
Scene Three (vv. 10–14): Journey (1)

Scene Four (vv. 15–27): Hospitality (2)

Scene Five (vv. 27–28): Journey (2)

Scene Six (vv. 29–30): Conclusion; a new state of affairs

The motif of hospitality and the motif of the journey are both played out twice.

Repetition in Hebrew narrative is always significant, and highlights the differences between the repeated elements. Alter writes: ‘The Bible … constantly insists on parallels of situation and reiterations of motif that provide moral and psychological commentary on each other.’345 He claims that variations on similar scenes ‘serve the purposes of commentary, analysis, foreshadowing, thematic assertion, with a wonderful combination of subtle understatement and dramatic force.’346 In this narrative, the first hospitality scene and the first journey scene foreshadow the second.

In the first hospitality scene, the men demonstrate indifference to the woman (and any other women who may be in the house) by carousing ‘the two of them together’ for five days. Although the Levite has made the journey specifically to retrieve his concubine by ‘speaking upon her heart,’ he does not do so. This, as we have noted, demonstrates one of the aspects of the ‘social barbarism’347 that afflicts Israel in these latter days of the Judges. When the men of Israel become misogynists, they begin to shun the mutuality and interdependence with women which made them community under God. This motif is dramatically developed in the second hospitality scene where, first, the old man offers the concubine and his daughter as potential victims, and second, the Levite demonstrates his willingness to protect himself at the expense of his concubine. Finally, the logical corollary of this attitude of male solidarity combined

345 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 91.
346 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 91.
with indifference toward women and their welfare is exhibited as the men of Gibeah band together to rape and abuse the woman. This pack rape demonstrates the nadir of male-to-male relationship at the expense of women. Thus the first hospitality scene builds toward the second.

The accounts of the first and second journeys also speak to each other. On the first, there is dialogue as the lad and the Levite communicate about where they should spend the night. The lad asks a question; the Levite replies in the negative, but explains his reasons. The concubine, who is not included in the dialogue, walks quietly with the party. The second journey is accomplished in silence. Perhaps, after the events of the night, the Levite is angry so that the lad does not wish to risk speaking; whatever his purpose in going to bring his concubine back, his journey has been in vain. Or perhaps there is nothing left to say. The concubine is still silent; her battered body, slung over the back of the donkey is either dead or approaching death. The desolation of the second journey is heightened by contrast with the first.

Character

The Levite

The instability of the times is reflected in the namelessness of the male protagonist and the changing terms used to denote him. He is only referred to as a Levite once in the story, in verse 1. Then he becomes, in turn, ‘her [the concubine’s] husband’ (v. 3), ‘his [the concubine’s father’s] son-in-law’ (v. 5), ‘the man’ (vv. 6, 7, 9, 10, 22, 25 and 28x2), ‘his [the servant’s] lord’ (vv. 11 and 12), ‘the wandering man’ (v. 17), one member of ‘your [the old man’s] servants’ (v. 19), ‘this man’ (vv. 23 and 24), and finally, ‘her [the concubine’s] lord’ (vv. 26 and 27).
Whatever term is used to denote him, this Levite is a disappointment. He begins the story in high romantic style, going on a journey to win back his woman by ‘speaking upon her heart’ (v. 3). By the time he has frittered away five days drinking with his father-in-law and paying no attention to his concubine, the readers of this story are beginning to doubt that his journey has been motivated by love. Any hopes we may cherish that he will redeem himself later in the narrative are banished forever when he takes the woman and pushes her out the door to the predatory crowd in order to save himself. After this callous act, he goes to bed. He does not spend the night waiting for her to come back, or suffering from remorse. He goes to bed, and when he gets up in the morning, he is prepared to go without her, and without news of her fate. He seems to be devoid both of a sense of guilt and any kind of compassion. His subsequent actions must be viewed, not as a response to an outrage committed against the woman, but as a response to an assault upon his honour. Ken Stone explains:

A sexual misconduct committed against a woman is … an attack upon the man under whose authority she falls. Thus, although the men of Gibeah did not dishonour the Levite directly by raping him as if he were a woman, they nevertheless challenge his honor in another way: through his woman.348

The picture of the Levite is completed when he appears before the sons of Israel to give an account of the outrage at Gibeah. He exaggerates the danger to himself and fails to mention the part he has played by pushing his concubine out into the crowd (20:4–6).

The Concubine

Like the Levite, the female protagonist bears different titles at various points in the narrative. She begins by being אִשָּׁה פִילֶגֶשׁ (‘a woman/wife, a concubine’) (v. 1). By v. 3, when she is dwelling under her father’s roof, she has become הַנַּﬠֲרָה (‘the girl’). After her night of terror with the men of Gibeah, she is no longer described as a girl but as אִשָּׁה (‘the woman’). Schneider explains:

Each term carries with it different connotations making it difficult to determine who she was. This is intentional on the part of the writer, since with anarchy comes confusion of status and people’s roles in society.349

The behaviours of this woman, like the labels she is given, are contradictory. In verse 2, the reader encounters her as a woman of strength, the subject of two verbs, proactive and resourceful. The entire action of the narrative is set in train by her actions. In an unacceptable exploit for a woman of her time and place, she is unfaithful to her man, then leaves him and makes the journey home to her father’s house. As is revealed later in the story, the world outside the domestic sphere can be hazardous for women, even when they have a male to ‘protect’ them. To make the journey alone and perhaps without money or material resources is a remarkable feat.

After this assertive beginning, however, the woman changes. In all of the rest of the story she is the subject of only three verbs, והָבָה (‘and she brought him’) (v. 3), וַתָּבֹא (‘and she came’) and וַתִּפֹּל (‘and she fell down’) (v. 26). Twice, (vv. 4–9, and vv. 11–18) she vanishes from the story altogether, and when she reappears, it is in the guise of a hapless and helpless victim. After her man has pushed her to the foreground of the story, she is raped, abused, released, transported and dismembered. She does not even

349 Schneider, Judges, 254.
have a voice to denounce, plead or cry out. But her hands, stretched out upon the
threshold, in the liminal zone between the man inside who has betrayed her and the men
outside who have injured her, speak her last word to the reader.

The Concubine’s Father

In spite of his considerable participation in the early section of the story, very little is
disclosed about the father of the concubine. The reader does not even discover whether
he has any sort of work, and if he has, what it consists of. His key characteristic would
appear to be his delight in the acquisition of a suitable drinking companion. To the
Levite he is endlessly hospitable. His feelings for his daughter are never divulged and
readers are left to wonder whether he is glad or sorry to lose her.

The Old Man

When the Levite and his retinue meet the old man, he is returning to his home after
working in the fields. He demonstrates a proper desire to extend hospitality to travellers,
but his caution, as he interrogates the Levite about his identity and his purpose, shows
how much of the ethos of his adopted city he has taken on. The reader might wonder,
given the Gibeahite attitude to strangers and outsiders, why he has chosen to dwell here
instead of his native Ephraim. He demonstrates that he has no illusions about the safety
of the city for strangers when he says, רָע בְּרֹאשׁ אֲלִימָהוּ (‘only in the square you must
not lodge,’ v. 20). When the safety of his principal guest is threatened, his behaviour is
similar to that of Lot, but reflects even less credit upon him than Lot’s conduct does
upon Lot. He goes out to speak to the men, as Lot does, but he does not shut the door to
protect the inmates of the house. He also offers two women to the crowd, but the
concubine, even by the mores of the time, is not his to offer. Not only does he try to
substitute them for the Levite, but he tells the men that ‘and you may humble them and do to them the good in your eyes,’ v. 24).

Following his final admonition to the mob to spare the Levite, the old man disappears from the story.

The Old Man’s Daughter

The reader does not know that the old man has a daughter until she is plucked out of obscurity to be used as bait to lure the men of Gibeah away from the Levite. She functions in the story simply as a potential victim, and the only thing disclosed about her is that she is a virgin.

The Men of Gibeah

Unlike the writer of Genesis 19, the narrator does not emphasise the involvement of all the male population of Gibeah, but he suggests it when he says ‘the men of the city, the men of the sons of worthlessness’ v. 22). The reader is not told what motivates them, or why they mobilise so quickly at the old man’s house, only that they wish to ‘know’ the Levite. No other information is forthcoming about these men, who never appear as individuals, but simply as a pack.

The Lad

In the early part of the story the lad is without a voice, just as the concubine is. In Scene Three, however, he gains personhood when he speaks to his master (v. 11). As the day draws on toward evening, he requests that they turn aside to the town of Jebus for the night. The Levite takes the request seriously, and not only answers him but gives an explanation for his intention of going on to Gibeah or Ramah. From this we can infer
that the lad has a higher status in the Levite’s eyes than the concubine, to whom he does not speak until she is either unconscious or dead. Apart from this incident, the lad is only mentioned with either the concubine or the donkeys as a member of the Levite’s entourage.

**Narrator**

The story is narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator, as are most stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. This narrator however steps out from behind his characters three times in order to supply the reader with historical/geographical information which he feels is necessary for comprehension of the story. In verse 10 when the Levite and his entourage reach Jebus, he appends the information that Jebus is Jerusalem. In verse 14, he further explains that the town of Gibeah belongs to the tribe of Benjamin. Several verses later, the narrator elaborates on this statement by explaining that the inhabitants of Gibeah are Benjaminites.

**Time and Space**

The temporal dimension is of particular importance in this narrative. The narrator begins by using time indeterminately, but by the second verse has become explicit. From that point onward, the action takes place over a period of six days. The Levite travels to the home of his father-in-law on Day One, and remains there for Days Two and Three. On Day Four, he gets up early to leave, but is persuaded to stay another night. Late in the afternoon of Day Five, he and his retinue depart for home. At sunset, the new day, Day Six begins. Had the Levite chosen to travel on the Sabbath, it would surely have occasioned comment from the narrator and since the Sabbath has not been observed during the days of the story, it is fair to assume the story ends on the sixth day.
of the week. There is irony in this timing. The reader has waited with impatience for the
Levite to leave his father-in-law’s house, but now it becomes apparent that had the
Levite stayed drinking for one more day, the Sabbath would have prevented his
entourage from leaving when they did and the altered circumstances of the journey may
have precluded the rape of the concubine.

The pace of the story varies. Time begins by moving quickly, with verse two
describing a period of at least four months, but gradually slows down, so that by the
time the crisis of the story is reached, it takes seventeen and a half verses to describe a
single day. After this point time speeds up and in the last verse, again becomes
indeterminate. Yairah Amit points to the concentration of chronological markers
between verses 25b and 27a; כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה ַד־הַבֹּקֶר
(‘all the night until the morning’),
כַּﬠֲלוֹת הַשָּֽׁחַר
(‘at the rising of the dawn’),
הַבֹּקֶר לִפְנוֹת
(‘at the turning of the
morning’), ַד־הָאוֹר
(‘until the light’), and
בַּבֹּקֶר
(‘in the morning’). She states:

The reader is made aware of how long [the concubine] lay at the entrance
of the house, before the locked doors, with no-one hearing her. Were the
people inside sleeping all that time? ... Here the markers can hardly be
unintentional; they serve to emphasize the horror and the prolonged
abuse by the people of Gibeah.350

In its temporal structure, this narrative demonstrates similarities with the first
Genesis creation story (Gen. 1–2:3). Here, just as in Genesis 1, the reader senses that
Days One to Five are leading up to something. In the Genesis story, on Day Six the
creation process culminates in the making of all the animals of the earth and of God’s
ultimate creation – humankind; man and woman. In Judges 19, we see the horrible irony
of Day 6; that it has become the day of the ‘decreation’ of the woman – and at the hands

350 Amit, Reading Biblical Narratives, 108
of the man. This represents the absolute perversion of the intention of God for humanity, the casting of a dark shadow across the image of God embodied in humanity. Looking to the second Genesis creation story (Gen. 2:4–22), the reader is reminded that when God created man and woman it was to live together as ‘one flesh’ in a community of love and mutuality. How far from God’s intentions for her has Israel strayed when the cry of ‘This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!’ becomes the ugly obscenities of the rapists and the silent calculation of the Levite with his knife, as he cuts up his woman ‘according to her bones.’

Shimon Bar-Efrat declares: ‘[P]laces in the narratives are not merely geographical facts, but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is embodied.’ In this story, all the characters remain nameless, but the places – Ephraim, Bethlehem, Gibeah, Ramah and Jebus – are named. Bethlehem, in which the code of hospitality is lavishly observed, is contrasted with Gibeah, where it is shockingly violated.

As in Genesis 19, the notions of container and portal are important in this narrative. In Gibeah, as in Sodom, the town square and the host’s house are two adjacent containers, linked by a portal. Here too one container, the square, is a place of danger and the other, the old man’s house, is a place of safety, where the old man has authority. He is referred to as ‘the/an old man’ (vv. 7, 8 and 11) and ‘the man’ (v. 8) until he crosses the threshold into the house, when he becomes ‘the master of the house’ (vv. 13 and 14). Like Lot, the old man leaves the safety of his house, the place where he is master, through the portal to go out and remonstrate with the townsmen, but with a more active sense of self-preservation, he does not close the door behind him. As at Sodom,

---

the mob does not enter the house, but calls upon the host to bring the Levite out. It is the
Levite who takes his concubine from the safety of the house and casts her out into the
perilous zone of the square. It is no accident then that at the end of the night, the
wounded concubine staggers back toward the closed door of the old man’s house, where
she collapses, with her hands stretched out onto its threshold.

Johnson’s notion of *path* (as introduced in Chapter Three) is also very significant
in this narrative. The path taken by the Levite and his concubine joins different
containers, and each of these containers is a house. They move from the Levite’s house
to the concubine’s father’s house, then on to the old man’s house, and finally back to the
Levite’s house. The arrival back where they began serves to highlight the deterioration
in the circumstances surrounding the protagonists. At the beginning of the story, the
Levite and his concubine are estranged but the Levite’s intention to ‘speak upon her
heart’ demonstrates his hope of reconciliation and the restoration of the marital
relationship between them. At the end of the story, the concubine is dead and the Levite,
in pushing her out to the men of Gibeah, has become complicit in her death. The
downhill path of this story, therefore, mirrors the relentless descent of the people of
Israel in a land without a king.

*Point of View*

The narrative begins with a brief overview, or non-focalization in Jahn’s terminology
(see Chapter 3), as the narrator tells us that there was no king in Israel in the days when
the story is set. The point of view then changes to external focalization, with the
viewpoint being that of the Levite, until the end of verse 15. In verse 16, cued by the
word הִנֵּה, the viewpoint is internalised, as, looking through the Levite’s eyes, we watch
the approach of the old man. In verse 17b, however, we find ourselves inside the old man, seeing ‘the man, the wanderer’ standing in the town square. For the next five and a half verses we continue to receive the story from the Levite’s external viewpoint, until the moment when the men of Sodom begin to bang upon the door. Then, signalled again by הִנֵּה, the perspective is internalized, as we also witness what the Levite experiences. As the old man remonstrates with the mob, we return to an external perception from the Levite’s point of view.

As the Levite pushes his concubine outside, the action of the story moves from the doorway of the old man’s house into the square, and the Levite is briefly excluded from it. For one and a half verses (25b and 26), external focalization from the concubine’s point of view prevails. Then, in verse 27, as the Levite leaves the old man’s house in the morning, our attention is claimed by the sight that greets him, and, again cued by the word הִנֵּה, we perceive through his eyes the woman lying at the door of the house, with her hands stretched out upon the threshold. The final section of the narrative is related from the Levite’s external perspective, until the last verse, when the story ends as it began with a panoramic overview of the people of Israel, which serves at the ideological level to critique the behaviour of the men of Sodom.

**Gaps and Ambiguities**

The story contains a number of gaps and ambiguities. They include how the Levite supports himself in the far hills of Ephraim; whether he lives in a tent or a house; why he takes a concubine instead of a primary wife; why his concubine leaves him; why he waits four months before going after her; what motivates him to try to win her back; whether he intends to visit the ‘house of YHWH’ before going home; why the men of
Gibeah, within so brief a time of his arrival, gather to rape him; and why the narrator has employed and emphasised the six day structure of the plot. Perhaps the most significant gap concerns whether the concubine is dead when the Levite finds her on the doorstep, whether she dies on the way home, or whether the Levite kills her when he dismembers her. I will now review my answers, introduced earlier in this chapter, to these questions raised in Judges 19.

The gaps that occur in the background to the story concern the Levite’s life before the action of the narrative begins. These are difficult to fill because no information relevant to them is given. The Levite emerges as a man of mystery, and quite probably (especially in the light of the Levite in the previous chapter, Chapter 18) a disreputable man. Both the question of whether the Levite lives in a house or a tent (v. 19), and the query over whether or not he is bound for the house of YHWH (v. 18) are difficult to resolve, given the paucity of information, but both serve the function in the text of casting a shadow over the Levite’s background and intentions. Reis’s suggestion that the expression [טִזְנֶה ﬠָלָיו] should be translated ‘and she whored for him’ does serve to answer some of the questions raised by the first two verses. We begin to understand how the Levite can afford to live so far from any shrine and why he regards his woman as a secondary rather than primary wife, since her principal role is to make money for him, not to bear his children. This translation also explains why he wants his concubine back and why he waits for four months, for as Schneider suggests, that would be the minimum length of time necessary to be sure that she is not pregnant. Adopting Reis’s translation, however, does raise the question of why the concubine’s father would so gladly accept into his house the son-in-law who has been prostituting his daughter.

Perhaps, in the misogynistic world of these latter days of the judges, when an old man...
offers to protect a stranger by offering his daughter to be raped by a violent mob and a priest pushes his secondary wife out to her death, it is quite feasible that a father would choose to honour a male guest who has wronged his daughter.

I have suggested that the six-day timeframe of this story serves to highlight the sinful abandonment of the divinely ordained relationship between man and woman, by contrasting Day Six of this narrative with Day Six of the creation, when humanity was created to live in a community of mutual love and respect. This sets up a powerful contrast between the Genesis day of creation, and the Judges day of destruction for the concubine.

One other gap may also be filled by the issue of the declining status of women in Israel at this time. That the narrator does not tell us when the woman dies may reflect the indifference of the Levite to her plight. Whether she dies or recovers, he has a major grievance against the mob from Gilead. In the act of raping his secondary wife, they have dishonoured him. The only value she has for him now is as a symbol of the betrayal by the tribe of Benjamin of the loyalties that have bound the twelve tribes into one people. Dead or alive, he dismembers his concubine to avenge his honour.

**Keywords, Motifs and Theme**

Of the four motifs prominent in this story, the motifs of hospitality, journeying, father/daughter relationships and violence, two dominate the narrative: hospitality and journeying. The hospitality motif is made up of fourteen uses of the key word יִבְנָה (‘house’), ten uses of the verb לָיִל (‘to lodge’), four uses of the verb אֲכָל (‘to eat’) and three uses of the verb שָתי (‘to drink’). The phrase לָבֶּךָ (‘to sustain the heart’) is used twice, and the phrase יִשְׂכָּב (‘to gladden the heart’) is used three times.
The journey motif comprises eighteen uses of the word חלץ (‘to go’), twelve uses of the word בוא (‘to come’), two uses of עבר (‘to pass’/ ‘pass over’), and one use of the word קרב (‘to approach/draw near’). The phrase ויקם והלך (‘and he got up and went’) appears repeatedly in various forms: וַיָּקָם אִישָׁהּ וַיֵּלֶ (‘and her husband got up and went,’ v. 3), וַיָּקָם אִישׁ לָלֶכֶת (‘and the man got up to go,’ vv. 5, 7 and 9), וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶ (‘and he got up and went,’ v. 10), and וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶ (‘and he got up and went,’ v. 10), and קומיקִי ונֵלֶכָה (‘Get up and let us go!’ v. 28). There are also three uses of the word שָׁכַן (‘to arise/break camp early,’ vv. 5, 8 and 9), and a single use of the word קום (‘to get up’) by itself (v.27). These words and phrases continually underline the narrative importance of journeying.

The third motif concerns family, but relates solely to one type of familial connection. Both of the two blood relationships that are introduced in this narrative are father/daughter relationships - the concubine and her father, and the old man and his daughter. In Scene Two, the first hospitality scene, the relationship between the concubine and her father is given great emphasis by the narrator. Words and phrases that refer to this blood tie are employed six times in the seven verses of the scene. In verses 3, 5, 6 and 8 the expression אֲבִי הַנַּﬠֲרָה (‘the father of the girl’) is used, and in verses 4 and 9 the fuller phrase חותנו אֲבִי הַנַּﬠֲרָה (‘his father-in-law, the father of the girl’) is employed. This latter phrase highlights the fact that the two men are connected only through the concubine, who has disappeared completely from their presence as they begin to eat and drink together. In two other instances, in verses 5 and 7, the word חתן is used, pointed in one case to express the meaning of ‘son-in-law’ and in the other, ‘father-in-law.’ These two men, who associate only with each other for five days, are not related by blood and are never referred to as friends or companions but only through
their different connections with the concubine. In the second hospitality scene, the father/daughter relationship echoes and parodies that of the first. Here again the host is the father of a daughter who is invisible while her father and his guest(s) eat and drink. This woman is also silent, without a voice. When the hospitality in each scene comes to an end, the father of each girl will stand in solidarity with his male guest, rather than his daughter. The father of the concubine will allow the Levite to take her back, without reference to her wishes. The father of the virgin will offer her to the men of Gibeah in order to protect the Levite. The old man’s model of fatherhood thus acts as a comment upon that of the concubine’s father. The phrase בֵּית אָבִיהָ (‘her father’s house’) is used in verses 2 and 3. The concubine’s return to her father’s house suggests that she perceives it as a place of refuge and asylum. In spite of the fact that its portal is never breached, for neither the concubine nor the old man’s daughter does בֵּית אָבִיהָ prove to be a safe place, and in both cases, the father is willing to sacrifice his daughter in favour of other men.

The motif of violence is confined to Scenes 4 and 6. It is made up of a number of key words: סבב (‘to surround’) and רפק (‘to pound/beat violently’) which are both used once in verse 22; two uses of the wordידע (‘to know’, but in this context the word implies ‘to have non-consensual intercourse with,’ vv. 22 and 25); a single use ofрудע (‘to be evil,’ v. 23); two uses of הזק (‘to grab/seize,’ vv. 25 and 29); and one use each ofעלל (‘to abuse,’ v. 25), נתה (‘to cut in pieces’/’dismember,’ v. 29) andהַמַּאֲכֶלֶת (‘the knife,’ v. 29).

Two key words ענה (‘to humble’/ ‘to afflict,’ v. 24) and נבלת (‘senseless disgrace,’ vv. 23 and 24) link this story to the two other major rape scenes of the Hebrew Scriptures; the rapes of Dinah (Gen. 34) and Tamar (2 Sam. 13). Keefe suggests
that נבלה in the Piel, as it is in Judges 19, ‘refers to illicit and often violent sex’ ‘when the verb takes a woman as its object.’ Lyn Bechtel makes a case against this reading in her article ‘What if Dinah Is Not Raped?’ A number of lectionaries however state or suggest violent sexual behaviour in their definitions. BDB translates the verb as ‘1. humble, mishandle, afflict; 2. humble a woman by cohabitation; 3. afflict; 4. humble, weaken.’ Gesenius translates the verb as ‘to weaken a woman through rape.’ Erhard Gerstenberger, cited in Susan Scholtz, also translates the verb as ‘to rape.’

Of the word נבלה, Keefe states:

While folly or senselessness is the common translation of nebalah, this rendering misses the full significance of its meaning. One scholar suggests that nebalah is that which constitutes a sacrilege and a ‘breach of a sacred covenantal relationship’ (Roth: 406), and another concludes that the term was reserved for ‘extreme acts of disorder or unruliness’ (Phillips: 238) which not only rendered the perpetrators outcast, but resulted in a dangerous breakdown in the order of social relationships.

However, as Phillips points out, the term does not only occur in texts about sexual violence, but also in Joshua 17, where Achan is stoned to death for stealing goods devoted to God. He claims:

Nebalah [is] not a term reserved for sexual offenses of a particularly abhorrent kind. Rather, Nebalah is a general expression for serious disorderly and unruly action resulting in the break up of an existing relationship whether between tribes, within the family, in a business

---

354 BDB, 776.
arrangement, in marriage or with God. This shows its extreme gravity and perhaps explains why the word is so rarely used. It indicates the end of an existing order consequent upon breach of rules which maintained that order.358

Running through the story, and tying together these motifs is the notion of misogyny. In the hospitality scenes, we see male-to-male social relationships privileged above male-to-female relationships. In the journeying scenes, speech and agency belong to the males alone. In the scenes that depict father-daughter relationships, we see a disregard for the welfare of vulnerable daughters and an abdication of the obligation to protect them. In the scene of violence, we see a graphic enactment of the consequences of the extremes of male bonding and callousness toward women in the pack rape and abuse of a woman. It is evident that this issue lies at the heart of the story.

The four motifs of hospitality, journeying, father/daughter relationships and violence, linked under the banner of misogyny, combine to build the theme of the story of the Levite’s concubine. Together they chart the disastrous course of a people who have abandoned their deity in order to do what is good in their own eyes. Hospitality, once the sacred duty of the children of Israel, has become, in Scene Two, a means to gratify the host rather than to succour the traveller, and in Scene Four, a violent travesty of itself. Journeying, which transforms citizens into sojourners, no longer provides Israelites with an opportunity to ‘love the sojourner as yourself, for you were sojourners in Egypt’ (Lev. 19:34), but has become perilous even among their own countrymen. Misogyny tears at the bonds between men and women. Fathers no longer value and protect their daughters, and women are threatened, raped and dismembered. In the Israel of Judges 19, the strong prey upon the weak, the sacred bonds of covenant no longer

hold, and YHWH the God of Israel neither speaks nor acts. Even in the face of the silence of YHWH, the narrator calls the people of Israel to speak.

**Conclusion**

Through the use of rhetorical–narrative method, a coherent reading of Judges 19 has been sought in this chapter.

In the next chapter, Chapter Six, this reading will be studied alongside the reading of the narrative concerning the surrounding of Lot’s house, and Girard’s theory will be brought into conversation with the two passages. In this chapter I will answer some of the questions that remain, particularly the important questions that surround the climactic scene of the story. Why do the men of Gibeah mobilise so quickly against the Levite? Like Lot, the old man exists within the city as a resident alien, so why does the arrival of another sojourner call forth so violent a response? Why do the men of Gibeah accept the concubine as a substitute? In the next chapter Girard’s theory with regard to the lynch murder will be employed to confront these issues.
Chapter Six: Genesis 19 and Judges 19 as Lynch Murders

Introduction

In this chapter, the similarities and differences between Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19 will be explored before the two texts are brought into conversation with Girard’s theory. They will be analysed as examples of Girard’s lynch murder. The similarities between the two texts are sufficiently numerous and obvious to make the hypothesis of some sort of relationship reasonable. Cardin writes, ‘It is not difficult to establish an intertextual relationship for Genesis 19 because there is a remarkably similar story to that of Sodom in the Bible, the outrage at Gibeah recounted in Judges 19–21.’\(^{359}\) The two stories, however, also contain significant differences and cannot simply be conflated.

Similarities between Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19

The central events of the two stories are very similar. Each story concerns a man who is living in a town in Israel as a resident alien; Lot in Sodom, and the old man in Gibeah. To both of these men, visitors who are previously unknown to them arrive in the evening. Lot’s guests are two messengers or angels who have come from Abraham’s encampment by the oaks of Mamre. The old man’s guests are a Levite, and his concubine and servant who are on their way from Bethlehem to Ephraim. In both stories there is a suggestion that the town square is not a safe place to spend the night. Lot does not directly mention the square himself, but when the messengers say that they intend to spend the night in the square, he urges them strongly (the text says literally יִפְצַר־בָּם מְאֹד ‘he pressed them very much’) to stay with him instead. Going one step further, the

\(^{359}\) Cardin, Sodomy, 7.
old man explicitly declares, ‘Do not spend the night in the square.’ Both Lot and the old man take the guests to their homes and provide food and drink for them.

In both stories, hostility breaks into a scene of tranquil hospitality. The men of the town surround the house and demand that the male visitors, the messengers and the Levite, be brought out so that they can sexually abuse them. Both Lot and the old man go outside to the crowd and remonstrate with them, reminding them of the imperatives of the claims of hospitality. In both texts, when the townsfolk refuse to listen to their pleas, the hosts offer to give two women to the mob in exchange for the safety of the men. Lot offers his two virgin daughters and the old man offers his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine. In both instances the host gives permission for the mob to do as they wish with the women. In neither case are the townsfolk prepared to accept the women in exchange for the men. At this point the two stories diverge, with Lot being rescued from the hostile crowd by the messengers and the Levite resolving the situation by pushing his concubine out to the men.

In character, there is not a great deal of difference between Lot and the old man. Both offer hospitality to their guests, although Lot does so more readily than the old man, who is slower to invite the guests into his home. Both supply their visitors’ needs. Both react very similarly to the threat of violence directed toward the men sojourning with them. Both endanger themselves by going out to the crowd, whom they address as אחים (‘my brothers’), and both combine solicitude for the safety of their male guests with total disregard for the well-being of the young women. In neither narrative do the women have a voice at all, to plead or to protest. The three virgin daughters exist in the stories solely as potential victims, to be used to protect the male visitors from harm, with their lives if necessary. The concubine is different from the others only in that she
shows initiative at the beginning of the story in running away from her husband.

Otherwise she shares the mute vulnerability and expendability of the daughters.

The townspeople from Sodom behave in the same way as the men of Gibeah. Their demand to Lot and the old man is almost the same, with the same two verbs, the hiphil of אָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־לֹא (‘to bring out’) and the qal of ידיע (‘to know’) being employed in each. Neither group of men explains why they are demanding to abuse the male guests or why they are uninterested in abusing the women instead. In character, the two mobs are almost interchangeable.

The fate of the two inhospitable cities is similarly conclusive. Sodom is destroyed, along with its neighbouring cities of the plain, by YHWH, who rains ‘sulphur and fire’ upon them. Gibeah is ruined, with all the cities of Benjamin, by the army of Israel, which defeats the men of Gibeah in battle and puts them to the sword, comprehensively destroying both people and animals. Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, in their book Hebrew Myths: the Book of Genesis, claim that cities ‘divinely destroyed in punishment of ungenerous behavior toward strangers are a commonplace of myth.’

The two stories also share a good deal of language. In Genesis 19:2, the clause סוּרוּ נָא אֵלׁיְךָ (‘Please turn aside’) is very similar to לְכָה־נָא וְנָסוּרָה (‘Come, please, let us turn aside’) (Judg. 19:11). In Genesis 19:2, we find the clause אֵלָי לֹא יִבְהַר עַל אֶפְרָי (‘No, in the square we shall lodge’) which echoes the expression אֲנִישׁ נַפְרוֹעַ לָעָל בַּיָּהָה (‘only do not lodge in the square’) (Judg. 19:20). The statement אנִישׁוֹן בַּשָּׁם נָסַבְוּ אֶת־הַבַּיָּה (‘the men of Sodom surrounded the house’) (Gen. 19:4) resembles אנִישׁוֹנָה בַּשָּׁם נָסַבְוּ אֶת־הַבַּיָּה (‘worthless men surrounded the house’) (Judg. 19:22). The expression הוֹצִיאֵם אֵלָיָהוּ וְנֵדְﬠָה אֹתָם (‘Bring them out to us and we will know them’) (Gen. 19:5) recalls

---

Bring out the man ... and we will know him’) (Judg. 19:22). The Genesis clause ‘Do not, please, my brothers, do evil’) (Gen 19:7) is echoed by the Judges clause ‘Do not, my brothers, do not do evil please’) (Judg. 19:23). Genesis reads ‘Behold please, I have two daughters ... and do to them as is good in your eyes’) (Gen. 19:8) which closely resembles the Judges 19:24 text ‘Behold my virgin daughter and his concubine ... and do to them the good in your eyes’).

These similarities are too numerous and too detailed to be the result of coincidence. The common elements include the visit of strangers to a city, the offer of hospitality by resident aliens, the implication that the square is not a safe place to lodge, the exercise of hospitality toward the travellers, the sudden knocking upon the doors, the single-minded mobs, the demand to ‘know’ the visitors, the confronting of the mob by the hosts, the attempts to claim relationship with them, the offer by the hosts of the women in place of the men and the refusal of the mobs to accept the exchange. Seen side by side, these resemblances demonstrate, not just a similarity of story line, but, arising in two separate stories, the recurring pattern that Girard calls the lynch murder.

**Differences between Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19**

One noticeable difference between the two stories is that the Judges narrative is a longer, fuller account which has both a lengthy preamble and an extended conclusion. The characters of this particular old man and this Levite and his concubine are only introduced in this story, and have not been part of a larger narrative in the way Lot and the messengers have.
The men who are the focus of the animosity of the townsmen are different in the two stories. The character of the Levite is veiled in mystery at his first entrance into the story. The reader wonders why a Levite would be living far from any temple or shrine and how he manages to support himself and his concubine. Throughout the story the reader comes to know him better. Through verses 4–8, he is revealed as a man who enjoys eating and drinking in male company and who finds it difficult to refuse such hospitality. In verse 10, he demonstrates a lack of judgement in choosing to set out on the journey in the late afternoon. This unwise decision will cost his concubine her life. In verses 11 and 12, he demonstrates his distrust of people who are not Israelites and his faith in his own people. Again, this will prove costly for his wife. In verse 25, he is revealed as a man of quick wits, able to act decisively in a crisis, as he pushes the woman out to the mob to save himself. The reader is left to wonder at the callousness of a man who can give his wife to an angry mob, then go to bed for the night (vv. 25–27). His single-minded self-regard is demonstrated as he throws the broken body of his wife onto a donkey, takes her home and dismembers her, then sends her body parts out to all Israel as a protest against the violation of his honour (vv. 28 and 29). Chapter 20 affords the reader one last look at the Levite. In verses 4 and 5, when he bears witness before the army of Israel, he lies in saying that the mob threatened to kill him and he fails to mention that his wife died because he pushed her out to the townsmen.

The Levite’s character displays no redeeming feature. He is cowardly, self-seeking, callous and dishonest. If his character has been thus portrayed to demonstrate how low the men of Israel fall in a land without a king, then it has been very successful. The Levite is altogether human and altogether despicable.
The two messengers, or angels, potential victims of the men of Sodom, are very different from the Levite. In 19:1 they are called הַמַּלְאָכִים (‘the messengers’ or ‘the angels’). The use of the definite article here connects them with the three men of Genesis 18. Chapter 18 begins with the statement, ‘And YHWH appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre and he was sitting in the opening of the tent in the heat of the day.’ The text, however, then goes on to describe, in verse 2, how Abraham lifts his eyes, and sees, not YHWH, but the three men, whom he nonetheless refers to in verse 3 in the singular as אֲדֹנָי (‘my Lord’). For the rest of the time the messengers remain with Abraham they are referred to in the plural, that is, as the men not as YHWH. Chapter 18 therefore can be seen to display ambiguity about the identity of messengers or angels of YHWH who at times appear to dissolve into the person of YHWH himself. This ambiguity continues on into chapter 19. John Sailhamer writes:

The narrative of the arrival of the three men at Abraham’s tent is complicated by several uncertainties within the text. First, the relationship between the three men and the appearance of the Lord … is not explicitly explained. Second, there appears to be a conscious shift in the verbal forms between verse 3 and verses 4–9. In verse 3 the verbs and pronouns are all masculine singular, whereas in verses 4–9 the forms are masculine plural (e.g. v. 4).

Finally, there is the question of the nature of the relationship between the uncertainties just raised in chapter 18 and their apparent counterparts in chapter 19, where, for example, the relationship between the ‘two angels’ (or ‘messengers,’ 19:1) and the Lord remains unexplained (e.g. the two ‘men’ [19:12] tell Lot that they will destroy Sodom [v. 13] but the text states that ‘the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah’ [v. 24]).

---

In chapter 19, Lot and the narrator use masculine plural verbs and pronouns to refer to the messengers until verse 18, when Lot addresses them using אֲדֹנָי, the singular version that is commonly used when addressing God and reverts thereafter to using singular verbs and pronouns to refer to them. In verse 21, the narrator also uses the masculine singular pronoun to refer to them.

It is evident then that the two messengers who are threatened with abuse by the men of Sodom are both emissaries of YHWH and are also at times YHWH himself. James Kugel analyses the presence of angels in a number of stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, including Joshua 5:13–15, Judges 13:2–24, Genesis 18:1–14, Judges 6:11–23, Numbers 22:22–31, Exodus 3:1–7 and Genesis 32:24–30, recognising in each a ‘moment of confusion’ when the identity of the angel shifts. He suggests:

Here, then, is the most important point about the angel in all of these texts. He is not so much an emissary, or a messenger, of God as God Himself in human form … [R]eformulating the angel in these texts as really God in human form accounts for several things. It explains not only the easy transition from the angel identity to God Himself, but it also nuances further the issue with which we began, namely, the moment of confusion. This moment is required because the angel is essentially an illusion, a piece of the supernatural that poses as ordinary reality for a time. The angel, in other words, is not some lesser order of divine being; it is God Himself, but God unrecognised, God intruding into ordinary reality. … The angel looks like an ordinary human being for a while, but only for a while; then comes the moment of recognition, when it turns out that, oh yes, that was God and no ordinary human.362

Benjamin Sommers describes this phenomenon as a manifestation of ‘the fluidity of divine selfhood.’ He points out:

At first glance, the relationship between YHWH and angels in these passages can be readily understood as examples of the fluidity of divine selfhood so common in the ancient Near East. YHWH could be present in a body (or perhaps several bodies) resembling that of a human, but this was not YHWH’s only body. Angels, in some biblical passages, were part of God, though not all of God. But to some degree, they also overlapped with God and could even be referred to as YHWH.

Kugel’s and Sommer’s explanations account for the fact that the angels/messengers do not in this text have personalities, attributes or idiosyncrasies of their own. They are concerned only with doing the will of YHWH. They do not appear as individuals but as an undifferentiated pair, because they are a type of composite appearance of God.

It would be difficult, then, to find a greater contrast than between the Levite and the messengers. The Levite’s self-absorption contrasts with the self-effacement of the two messengers, just as his very human nature contrasts with their underlying divine nature. The Levite’s desire to serve only himself contrasts with the messengers’ commitment to serving only YHWH. There is irony in the fact that the two lookalike mobs demand such radically different persons for the same purpose and irony too that the Levite and the messengers are all alike referred to by the townspeople as ‘men’ (Gen 19:5, Judg. 19:22).

The contrast between the messengers and the Levite is heightened by the fact that the Levite, who is no ordinary man but may be regarded as God’s representative in

---

the community, fails to act to save those who are threatened. Embry elaborates this point:

It has been noted by a number of commentators that there is no angelic figure in Judges 19 to rescue anyone. But is this perhaps not entirely the case. Could not the priest function as a surrogate for the angelic messengers? … [T]he priesthood in Israel was to be representative of God’s presence on earth, which is a role occupied elsewhere by angelic figures.365

The contrast with the messengers that is presented by the Levite’s failure to enact salvation for the women is thus intensified by his own priestly status. Not only does he fail to rescue anyone, he crowns this failure by his act of sacrificing his woman to save himself. Embry writes: ‘In Judges 19 there is no … rescue; the female figure is not protected. Instead, in Judges 19, the Levite is “protected” by the concubine’s suffering and death.’366

As has already been noted, the two hosts, Lot and the old man, are very similar. The major difference between them is their reaction to the appearance of guests. Lot’s eagerness to provide hospitality mirrors Abraham’s in Genesis 18 but the old man needs to be reassured about the identity of the travellers before he is willing to offer hospitality. This may reflect a greater degree of distrust toward the residents of the town on the old man’s part, for he is also more explicitly outspoken about the dangers inherent in staying the night in the square.

The two crowds of men are interchangeable in all but two regards. In the first, the Genesis text names every man in Sodom as being present outside Lot’s house, ‘the men of the town, the men of Sodom … from lads to old men, all the people of the

365 Embry, ‘Narrative Loss,’ 263.
366 Embry, ‘Narrative Loss,’ 263.
region’ (Gen. 19:4). The men of Gibeah are simply described as ‘the men of the town, the men [who were] the sons of worthlessness’ (Judg. 19:22). In both cases, the text implies the presence of all the townsmen, but the Lot narrative is more explicit. The second difference between the depictions of these two groups of men who behave in so similar a way is the epithet ‘sons of worthlessness’ which is applied to the men of Gibeah. No parallel phrase is used of the men of Sodom.

The most obvious and crucial difference between the two stories concerns their conclusion. At the end of the townsmen’s confrontation in Genesis 19, divine intervention saves the day for Lot and his guests. The messengers reach out, draw Lot into the safety of the house, and strike the men of Sodom with blindness so that they cannot find the door. In the Judges story, the Levite, in an action that is totally contrary to that of the messengers both in direction and intent, pushes his concubine to the mob. In that action, we see a resemblance not to the messengers, but to the men of Sodom. For here the Levite appears to share their blindness, at least where the worth of his concubine is concerned. He pushes her outside into danger, while the messengers pull Lot inside into safety. The Levite acts to save himself at the expense of his concubine, while the messengers act to save Lot, on account of God’s remembrance of Abraham, as we discover in verse 29. For the cities of Sodom and Gibeah, however, both interventions result in disaster.

The Judges story alone ends with a distinctive coda, provided by verse 30. Although the narrator in Hebrew stories is seldom overtly didactic, in Judges 19:30, he allows the people of Israel to condemn the violence done to the concubine and to urge Israel to take counsel and speak against it. This, combined with his description of the
men of Gibeah as ‘sons of worthlessness,’ amounts to a critique of the behaviour of the townsmen that is absent in the Genesis story.

The differences between the two narratives are important in this study. They establish that although the central events of Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19 may be analogous, the stories relate different occurrences in different settings to different people. This is not a single storyworld re-presented in a light disguise, but two storyworlds which both contain an example of a lynch sacrifice. Seeing this lynch event twice within the restricted corpus of the Hebrew Scriptures adds emphasis, and begins to establish a pattern.

Engaging with Girard’s Theory

Because both of these passages involve violent mob behaviour, either actual or proposed, this study will analyse them from the perspective of the Girardian notion of the lynch murder, in which a victim, or a group of victims, is exposed to the violence of a mob. Robert Zangrando thus defines lynching:

Lynching is the practice whereby a mob – usually several dozen or several hundred persons – takes the law into its own hands in order to injure and kill a person accused of some wrongdoing. The alleged offense can range from a serious crime like theft or murder to a mere violation of local customs and sensibilities. The issue of the victim's guilt is usually secondary, since the mob serves as prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner. Due process yields to momentary passions and expedient objectives.367

Girard refers to such acts as ‘collective persecutions.’ He states, ‘By collective persecutions I mean acts of violence committed directly by a mob of murderers.’368

---

attack on the Levite’s concubine fits into this category and the potential exists in the
case of the surrounding of Lot’s house for a similar outcome, either for the two
messengers or for the two daughters.

Girard’s ‘Stereotypes of Persecution’

This study will now examine these two texts in the light of Girard’s stereotypes of
persecution as introduced in Chapter Two of this study.

The First Stereotype: The Crisis

The first stereotype concerns the crisis which forms the context for the scapegoat
murder. Girard contends that mob violence against a victim arises from a situation
where people experience ‘an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the
disappearance of the rules and “differences” that define cultural divisions.’369 Within
any community, people are not independent but interdependent. With the adoption of
different roles and professions that together provide all the essentials for sustaining life
comes the necessary system of differences. As a society grows more complex, so does
its structure of roles and hierarchies. James Williams suggests, ‘Every culture is a
differential system, which means it coheres as a unitary complex of differences or
distinctions.’370

When this system of differences is seriously compromised, either by external
causes like flood, famine or epidemic, or by internal causes like religious clashes or
political conflicts, the need for a scapegoat is experienced so that the danger of all-
against-all violence may be diverted into all-against-one scapegoating. In examining the
communities of Sodom and Gibeah, it is necessary to look for the signs of

369 Girard, the Scapegoat, 12.
370 James Williams, Introduction to Chapter 8, Girard Reader (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 107.
undifferentiation which invariably distinguish the society in crisis and to examine relevant texts for hints of social disruption.

The Crisis at Sodom

In the Book of Genesis, the crisis at Sodom is neither attributed to a cause nor explained, but its symptoms are evident. We are first introduced to the city of Sodom in 10:19, as one of four cities – Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim – which are among those founded by descendants of Canaan, son of Ham. In Genesis 9:25, Noah has said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.’ Thus, we learn that the inhabitants of Sodom, along with those of the other cities of Canaan, lie under a curse. The second reference to Sodom, in Genesis is 13:13, reads, ‘Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.’ The third reference to Sodom is contained in 18:20 – ‘And YHWH said, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so heavy!”’ The word translated here as ‘outcry’ is נזק. Kugel explains:

[W]hat God is said to hear in the Bible is almost exclusively a cry of distress, or what is called in Hebrew a se’aqah (or sometimes the similar za’aqah). These words almost never refer to an ordinary yell or to the hubbub of many voices. Indeed, it may well be that even in the passage [Gen. 18:20–21] … concerning Sodom, the cry that one hears is not one of revelry at all, but of alarm or suffering.371

Other references to Sodom in the Hebrew Scriptures shed light on the nature of the crisis. Isaiah Chapter 1 carries an implication that the crisis in Sodom is linked to social injustice. The people of Judah are likened to the rulers of Sodom who offer

371Kugel, God of Old, 116.
sacrifices and observe festivals but whose 'hands are full of blood' (1:15b). Verses 16 and 17 propose this remedy for their condition:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean, take away the evil of your deeds from before my eyes, stop doing evil. Learn to do good, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

The reader is not told, however, whether this disregard for the vulnerable is the cause of Sodom's 'outcry', or whether it is the result of another factor, such as a crisis brought about by natural catastrophe or by political turmoil.

In Chapter 3 Isaiah again likens Israel to Sodom when he writes

The look on their faces testifies against them, and they declare their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. (3:9a)

Earlier in this chapter, Isaiah has described just such a state of social disintegration through lack of differentiation as Girard has identified as characteristic of the crisis that calls for violent resolution. Verses 4 and 5 read:

And I will make boys their leaders, and capricious babies shall rule over them. The people will be oppressed, each by another and each by his friend, the lad will storm against the elder, and the base against the honourable.
These verses identify a crisis in which all social structure has disappeared, but do not specify the cause of the crisis.

Jeremiah says in Chapter 23:14:

And in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies. And they strengthen the hands of the evildoers, so that no one turns back from their evil. All of them have become like Sodom to me, and the inhabitants like Gomorrah.

This verse links the sin of Sodom with the perversion of personal morality, and tolerance toward wickedness within the community. It also suggests again a state of undifferentiation, where the prophets are indistinguishable from ‘evildoers.’

Ezekiel explicitly identifies the sin of Sodom as selfish love of comfort and lack of concern for the vulnerable:

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease were to her and her daughters but hand of the poor and needy she did not strengthen. They were proud, and did abominable things before me; therefore I took them away when I saw it.’ (16:49-50)

These references to Sodom suggest that the city was uncaring about the plight of the vulnerable, and that the wealthy of the city were self-indulgent and immoral.

Whether these factors were the cause of the situation of crisis within the city, or whether
they were the result of other factors, these passages provide plentiful evidence of a situation of crisis.

The Crisis at Gibeah

Apart from several brief mentions (which may denote different villages that also went by the same name), Gibeah is principally referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures in connection with two things – the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 and as the birthplace of Saul in 1 and 2 Samuel and Isaiah 10:29. Neither association reflects credit on the city. In regard to Judges 19, Amit declares:

> The reference to place is so significant that it may even be the leading figure in the story. The characters in the story of the concubine in Gibeah (Judges 19-21) are all anonymous, thus highlighting the place-names, notably Gibeah itself, which lies not far from Jebus (Judges 19:11-12) and Ramah (v. 13). We do not know the names of the Levite, his concubine, or their host in Mount Ephraim, but we know where the events took place. We know that the Levite and his concubine were received very decently in Bethlehem, in utter contrast to the frightful reception at Gibeah. Knowing that David came from Bethlehem and Saul from Gibeah reveals how the latter became pejorative by association in the case of Saul of Gibeah, and the former positive by association in the case of David of Bethlehem. It implies that a person reflects his or her birthplace, so what can you expect of a king who was born in Gibeah?

The only other negative reference to the city may be found in Hosea 9:9a, where the people of Israel are thus described: נַעֲמֵי הָעִיר יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּימֵי גִּבְﬠָה (‘they have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah,’) and in Hosea 10:9, where the reader is told:

---

Since the days of Gibeah you have sinned, O Israel. There they have stood. Did not war overtake in Gibeah the sons of iniquity?

These two mentions of Gibeah may refer to the story of the Levite's concubine, or to the reign of Saul, or perhaps to both.

In addition to these references to the city of Gibeah, there are two indications that in these latter days of the judges, much of Israel is in crisis. In the first place, the whole of the book of Judges depicts the descent of Israel into lawlessness and instability in a land where no king reigns. The refrain in verses 17:6, 18:1, 19:1 and 21:25 continually keeps before the reader the lack of stable leadership in the land and the addition in 17:6 and 21:25 links this lack of leadership to rampant individualism and breakdown in community. In the storyworlds of Judges, many of the cities and towns of Israel are in a state of turmoil. In the second place, the lack of names and stable designations for the characters of the story demonstrates the erasure of identity and lack of social differentiation that Girard describes as the hallmarks of crisis.

As soon as the Levite and his entourage enter the town of Gibeah, its state of crisis becomes evident. The first suggestion that something is amiss is found in 19:15, where the reader is informed that the Levite and his retinue wait in the town square, but no one offers them accommodation for the night. Looking back to the Genesis 18 and 19 texts, the reader contrasts the ready hospitality offered by Abraham and Lot with the inhospitality of Gibeah. Such a notable disregard for the laws of hospitality implies that something is wrong in the town. The second suggestion that something is not right in Gibeah may be found in the old man's attitude. His subsequent actions in going out to
remonstrate with the mob and his offer of his own daughter demonstrate how seriously he takes the obligations of hospitality, yet he himself violates that code as he hesitates to offer lodging to the Levite and his retinue, and asks personal questions to verify the Levite’s credentials before opening his door to him. He then warns the Levite about the dangers of sleeping in the square. His attitude of wariness and suspicion hints at unacknowledged dangers within Gibeah.

In verse 22, the narrator speaks more directly about the city's problem. The men of the city who gather outside the house are described as 'the sons of worthlessness' and from the first occasion when the reader encounters them, they have formed a mob, and are threatening the safety of the Levite. Without compunction, they rape and ill-treat the concubine all night before abandoning her in the morning. This antisocial behaviour, strongly prohibited by the Torah, suggests that the men of Gibeah no longer honour the bonds that have held the twelve tribes together as a confederacy through the time of the judges. They regard with suspicion Israelite visitors to the city and they are not deterred by fears that retribution will follow their act of mob violence. In Chapter 20, we gain a further insight into the situation when we find that the whole tribe of Benjamin is prepared to stand by the men of Gibeah against the rest of Israel (20:12–13). It is the Benjaminites who initiate the war with Israel, as they gather at Gibeah and go out to battle against the Israelites (20:14). They no longer see themselves primarily as Israelites: the Benjaminites are prepared to stand alone.

As in the case of Sodom, the situation in Gibeah suggests a crisis without explicitly naming the cause. Here the crisis would appear to be political, as the men of Benjamin prepare to split from the other eleven tribes of Israel and to become autonomous. In Israel without the guidance of a king, unity and mutual responsibility is
demonstrated to be compromised. With the tribe of Benjamin pursuing independence, it is in a state of political change as new leaders seek to replace the authority of the tribal confederation. In times of change of leadership, communities are especially vulnerable to violent upheavals and crises, including the loss of social distinctions, as rivals vie for power.

Thus, both Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19 fulfil the Girardian requirement for a situation of communal crisis as a precipitating factor to mob violence and scapegoating.

The Second Stereotype: The Crime

When the crisis, whatever its cause, has reduced a society to a state of undifferentiated confusion, the advent of a potential victim will typically result in the formation of a mob. Girard explains:

> The crowd tends toward persecution since the natural causes of what troubles it and transforms it into a turba cannot interest it. The crowd by definition seeks action but cannot affect natural causes. It therefore looks for an accessible cause that will appease its appetite for violence. Those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors, for they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it, the traitors who undermine it. The crowd's act of becoming a crowd is the same as the obscure call to assemble or mobilize, in other words to become a mob. Actually this term comes from mobile, which is as distinct from the word crowd as the Latin turba is from vulgis. The word mobilization reminds us of a military operation, against an already identified enemy or one soon to be identified by the mobilization of the crowd.373

The act of accusing the crowd's chosen victim of a crime as an 'accessible cause' is therefore often a step in collective persecutions. This step both justifies the persecutors in the violent act of purging they propose to carry out and holds out to them the promise

---

373 Girard, The Scapegoat, 16.
that because this victim is indeed guilty, his or her elimination will resolve the crisis that confronts them.

In the two texts before us, there is no suggestion that either the Levite or the messengers are accused of committing a crime. It is perfectly possible that this step in the victimisation process has already happened by the time we meet these two mobs. Presumably there has been discussion among the men who make up the crowd about the need for action and the motivations for it. As readers, however, we are never made privy to this rationale. To permit us to see the crowd forming and preparing to act against the Levite and the messengers would deprive the narrator of one of his most prized tools – the ability to take his readers by surprise. Just as the proposed victims are to be jolted suddenly from their comfortable enjoyment of hospitality, so are the readers of the text to be suddenly confronted. They therefore do not witness the process of mob formation, nor do they hear the justifications for the acts of victimage which are proposed.

*The Third Stereotype: The Criteria*

Girard uses the term 'criteria' to denote his third 'stereotype of persecution', which concerns the means by which the victim, the surrogate, is selected. He writes:

> The crowd's choice of victims may be totally random; but it is not necessarily so ... sometimes the persecutors choose their victims because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution rather than because of the crimes they have committed.374

He later adds, 'There are ... universal signs for the selection of victims, and they constitute our third stereotype.'375

---

In the Genesis narrative, the two messengers are chosen as objects of the aggression of the mob, and in the Judges story, the Levite is chosen. The issue is more complicated in the Judges story, because the Levite escapes being attacked by the mob by pushing his concubine out to them. The mob accepts her since she is the Levite’s ‘property’ and is therefore quite unprotected if he perceives her to be expendable. More importantly, the urge to violence, once roused, is difficult to quell, and when access to the selected victim is blocked, can be redirected. Girard states:

Once roused, the urge to violence triggers certain physical changes that prepare men’s bodies for battle. This set toward violence lingers on; it should not be regarded as a simple reflex that ceases with the removal of the initial stimulus … When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand.376

It is the Levite against whom the mob is formed and mobilised. The concubine, seized by the Levite to take his place, ‘vulnerable’ because of his willingness to offer her to the men of Gibeah and undeniably ‘close at hand,’ is in the unenviable position of being a surrogate’s surrogate, a victim’s victim. This study will therefore analyse the situations of the messengers and the Levite to see if there are any identifiable criteria by which they have been chosen.

It is very significant that in both Genesis 19 and Judges 19 the proposed victims of the mob are visitors to the town who have no personal ties and have had no opportunity to form relationships there, since they have only just arrived. They have no social position, no kinship group to come to their defence and no recourse to justice within the town if the mob represents the entire male population of the place.

To make matters worse, the only champions they have, Lot and the old man, are themselves resident aliens in the town. In the Genesis story, although Lot appears to be well integrated into Sodom when we find him 'sitting in the gate,' the townsmen are quick to point out his status as an alien when he tries to protect his guests. Lot is referred to as having באת לגור (‘come to sojourn,’ 19:9) by the men of Sodom in response to his address to them as אחים (‘my brothers,’ 19:7). The old man is described as גר בגבעה (‘sojourning in Gibeah,’ 19:16) by the narrator. The verb גור is defined by BDB as ‘sojourn, dwell for a (definite or indef.) time, dwell as a newcomer … without original rights.’ As sojourners, Lot and the old man are vulnerable. D. J. Block writes:

Despite the typical oriental concern for hospitality to strangers … aliens were vulnerable in society, being frequently associated with other groups subject to exploitation: servants (Ex. 20:10; Lev. 25:6; Dt. 5:14), harelings (Lev. 25:6; Dt. 24:14), the needy (ani, Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Dt. 24:14; Ezk. 22:29), the poor (ebyon, DT. 24:14; Ezk. 22:29), orphans and widows (Dt. 10:18; 14:29; 24:17–21; 26:12f; 27:19; Ps. 19:6; 146:9; Jer. 7:6; 22:3). Repeatedly, Israel was reminded that their own attitude toward the gerim was to be tempered by the memory of their own experience in Egypt (Ex. 22:21 [MT 20]; 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Dt. 10:19; 23:7[8]; cf. Isa. 16:4). They were not to treat the outsider as they were treated.

The use of the word גור to describe Lot’s position presents no problem. Block remarks:

As sojourners in foreign lands the patriarchs represented the ger par excellence (1Ch. 16:19; Ps. 105:12). Canaan was called a land of sojournings (Heb. 'eres magur, Gen. 17:8; 28:4; 36:7; 37:1; Ex. 6:4). As sojourners they settled down (yasab) only with the permission of the

377 BDB, 157.
local rulers (Gen. 20:1; cf. v. 15) and had few if any rights (cf. 21:23f; 23:1–10).\textsuperscript{379}

The old man, on the other hand, ought not to be regarded as a sojourner by a community in Israel since he is a native of the hills of Ephraim. Ephraim was originally the name of the younger of the two sons that were born to Joseph and Asenath in Egypt (Gen. 41: 50–52). In Genesis 48, Jacob adopts the two boys, and puts Ephraim ahead of his older brother, Manasseh, saying that Ephraim’s offspring will become a multitude of nations. Although in the Blessing of Jacob (Gen 49), Ephraim and Manasseh are included together under the name of Joseph, they are both subsequently regarded as full tribes of Israel. The narrator flags the old man’s status in the eyes of the Gibeahites as that of a resident alien when he writes:

\begin{quote}

והאיש מהר אפרים וה רואה איניש המוקים בימי attività
\end{quote}

and the man was from the hill of Ephraim and he was a sojourner in Gibeah and the men of the place were Benjaminites.

That the men of Gibeah regard a native of Ephraim as an outsider is an indication of the growing rift between Benjamin and the other tribes.

It is evident only from their treatment of the Levite that the men of Benjamin regard him as an alien. He is never referred to as a גר since he has come simply to לון (‘to lodge’ or ‘to stay the night,’ 20:4). Nonetheless, their adversarial attitude to him is problematic. Although we do not see the Levite functioning in a levitical role, he remains a Levite, and as such, is a member in good standing of the assembly of Israel. In addition to his role as Levite, he is also an inhabitant of Ephraim. That the men of

\textsuperscript{379} Block, ‘Sojourner’, 561.
Gibeah regard him as a suitable victim is further evidence of the gulf that has developed between Benjamin and the other tribes; the Levite is an outsider not to the covenant community of Israel, but to the separate and distinct community of Benjamin. There is irony, then, in the Levite’s insistence that ‘We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah.’ (19:12).

There is irony of a different sort in the way that the men of Sodom perceive the two visitors to Lot as outsiders and wish to use them to deflect their interpersonal violence. These two are certainly outsiders: they do not come to Sodom as citizens of the cities of the plains and are not, in fact, even human. As messengers of YHWH, possibly an appearance of YHWH himself, they are alien indeed to the men of Sodom. It is little wonder that they have no support from any human institution or kinship group. As it transpires, as messengers of YHWH, or YHWH in human form, they do not need it.

Girard claims that victims are frequently chosen simply because they appear vulnerable and therefore accessible to their persecutors. He contends:

What we are dealing with … are exterior or marginal individuals, incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants. Their status as foreigners or enemies, their servile condition, or simply their age prevents these future victims from fully integrating themselves into the community.380

He goes on to add, ‘It is clearly legitimate to define the difference between sacrificeable and nonsacrificeable individuals in terms of their degree of integration, but such a definition is not yet sufficient.’381 He points out that in some societies, women

---

are not regarded as full members of the community and yet women are rarely used as sacrificial victims. This is because typically a woman will have ties to two different kinship groups – her birth family and her husband’s family – and to choose her as a victim would expose the persecutor to the possibility of vengeance from two separate quarters. However, the fact that the Levite is prepared to sacrifice his wife carries the implication that he does not fear retaliation from her birth family and does not expect to be answerable to them. The mob is thus reassured that although the victim that has been given to them is a woman, she is nonetheless expendable to both her husband and her birth family. It is doubtful whether they would in any case, in view of the political origins of the crisis that confronts them, consider the possibility of retaliation from those outside of the tribe of Benjamin an adequate deterrent in the face of their pressing need to re-establish unity at the expense of a scapegoat.

Girard explains:

All our sacrificial victims, whether chosen from one of the human categories … or, a fortiori, from the animal realm, are invariably distinguishable from the nonsacrificeable beings by one essential characteristic: between these victims and the community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance.

This underlines the suitability of the messengers and the Levite for the role of victims in these two acts of violence: they appear to be vulnerable due to the temporary nature of their stay, their status as outsiders, and their lack of support from members within the community. They are vulnerable because there is no-one who will enact revenge upon the mob, so that the unity within the communities of Sodom and Gibeah,

---

bought with the blood of these men, will not be compromised by reciprocal violence. This explains why the townspeople of Sodom and Gibeah react without loss of time – in their state of crisis, a victim is very necessary, but to choose one among themselves or their families will provoke the kind of all-against-all violence that they seek to avoid. In this situation, the arrival in town of men who are without links to the community is a gift. No sooner has the word gone around that there are strangers in the town than the mob has formed and presents itself outside of the house, united by the age-old unanimity of the lynch mob.

According to Girard, victims are chosen because they are different in some way (in the case of Genesis 19 and Judges 19, because they are outsiders). This would appear to contradict Girard’s principle that conflict is generated by the loss of differentiation between individuals. He claims, ‘it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos.’ He does, however, speak of ‘two types of difference’ and he draws an important distinction between ‘the difference within a system’ and ‘the difference outside a system.’ In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard relates the destruction of the Kaingang people of Brazil, as observed by Jules Henry. These people were able to regulate violence within their small communities, but when they were moved to a reservation by the Brazilian government, they began a series of destructive blood feuds. Girard explains:

> Within their group, there is a spirit of conciliation. The most inflammatory challenges pass unacknowledged; adultery, which provokes an instant and bloody reprisal among members of rival groups, is openly tolerated. As long as violence does not cross a certain threshold of intensity, it remains sacrificial and defines an inner circle of

---

nonviolence essential to the accomplishment of basic social functions – that is, to the survival of the society … As soon as they are installed on a reservation, members of a group tend to turn against one another. They can no longer polarise their aggressions against outside enemies, the ‘others,’ the ‘different men.’

In the stories of Sodom and Gibeah, the townsmen have been reduced to interpersonal violence by the crisis that has eliminated distinctions and differences from among them. Unanimity can only be restored by the scapegoat victimisation of outsiders, whose death will not plunge the community into reciprocal vengeance.

Both Genesis 19 and Judges 19 stand then as copybook examples of the Girardian concept of the special criteria by which victims are chosen. In these two cases, the victims stand totally outside the communities who wish to use them as victims and their only link to the community is through two men who are themselves regarded as resident aliens. They are therefore vulnerable, and suitable for selection as victims. The Levite manages, in a manner of speaking, to delegate or deflect this designation onto his concubine, who is abused in his place.

*The Fourth Stereotype: The Act of Violence*

Girard defines the fourth stereotype as ‘violence itself.’ The violence in these two stories conforms to the pattern, in history as well as in Girard’s theory, of the lynch mob. Here we see the same social upheaval which culminates in the formation of a mob that has no individuals and speaks with one voice. The unanimity of the mob is underlined in different ways in both the Genesis story and the Judges story. In Genesis, we are told that every single male person in Sodom has come together with one aim in

---

view – to commit an act of violence against the two messengers. In Judges, we are told that the men of Gibeah, all Benjaminites, are ‘sons of worthlessness.’ In other words, they are all the same in character, a mob made up of many similar men, who again gather with a shared intention of attacking the outsider.

In Chapter 2 of this study, Girard’s understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures as incomplete descriptions of the scapegoat process was introduced. Many biblical narratives function as myths to obscure the act of scapegoating, but some, Girard claims, actually reveal it. In neither of these two stories does the reader witness the concealment of the act of violence that characterises myth. Girard speaks of how myths typically pass over the act of scapegoat victimage. He claims that many myths contain identical elements which are arranged differently, but always gloss over the act of persecution. He states:

After shuffling his cards, the magician spreads them out again in a different order. At first we have the impression that they are all there, but is it true? If we look closer we shall see that there is actually always one missing, and it is always the same one, the representation of collective murder.389

In Genesis 19 and Judges 19 the intention of the mobs to commit acts of violence against the travellers is explicitly and brutally proclaimed. In the final verse of Judges 19 and in the chapter that follows, the men of Gibeah are denounced for carrying out a ruthless act of violence against the woman. In neither narrative is any justification offered for the behaviour of the mob. In both accounts, the proposed or actual violence is named. These stories have moved out of the realm of myth as they lay open before the reader the scapegoat mechanism.

389 Girard, The Scapegoat, 73.
Assessing the Stories by Means of the Stereotypes

Girard claims: ‘The juxtaposition of more than one stereotype within a single document indicates persecution. Not all the stereotypes must be present: three are enough and often even two.’\(^{390}\) In the Genesis 19 and Judges 19 stories, three of the stereotypes are present. Crisis, criteria and act of violence (enacted or aborted) are all recorded openly. The only stereotype that is absent from these texts is the crime of which the victims are accused. Girard himself makes this stereotype less than essential when he declares: ‘sometimes the persecutors choose their victims because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution rather than because of the crimes they have committed.’\(^{391}\) This seems to be the case in these two stories.

The identification of these two narratives as accounts of scapegoat victimage in the form of lynch murders answers some of the questions that have been raised by them. It explains the seemingly arbitrary selection of the victims. As has been observed in Chapter Four, some, in the tradition of Leupold and Davidson have considered the criterion used to select the victims to be their attractiveness to a sexually depraved and aggressive mob, who are motivated by homosexual lust. The application of Girard’s paradigm supports those, notably Cardin, who believe that sexuality plays little part in these narratives. It identifies the motivation of the mob as the need to restore harmony and unanimity to a fractured community through an act of collective scapegoating.

The application of Girard’s theory has also addressed the suddenness of the attacks, which appear in the stories to arise without provocation. The extreme danger to a community of all-against-all violence and anarchy makes the resolution of inner group

\(^{391}\) Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 17.
conflicts an urgent priority. The arrival in the towns of men who are suitably vulnerable and unsupported motivates the immediate formation of a mob.

**Conclusion**

The pairing of the two stories has highlighted those aspects of Girard’s theory that are common to both – the aggression of the townsmen, the unanimity of the mob, the powerlessness to intervene of the sojourner hosts. In the two narratives together, these aspects are seen, as it were, in stereo: they are made clearer and given focus by the fact that they can be isolated from two different stories. In placing the narratives side by side, the reader is able to observe the emergence of a pattern – the pattern that Girard calls ‘the scapegoat mechanism.’ This will be further discussed in Chapter Ten.
Chapter Seven: The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19)

Introduction

In this chapter and the next, the second pair of stories – Genesis 22:1–19 and Judges 11 – will be translated and analysed. These two narratives both centre upon the notion of a child or heir sacrifice to God. As with Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19, in this pair of stories the Genesis narrative ends with divine intervention bringing deliverance, while the Judges story ends with the death of the daughter of Jephthah. In Chapter Nine, the two stories will be seen side by side, and then analysed in terms of the Girardian concept of the false sacred.

I have divided this narrative into six scenes. Scene One (vv. 1–2) lays the foundation for the action of the story by allowing us to overhear the interchange between God and Abraham, permitting the reader to glimpse the intimacy of the relationship between them. It displays unity derived from its introductory function and from the fact that it is one dialogue between God and Abraham. Scene Two (vv. 3–8) reveals the information that Abraham has acquiesced silently to God’s extreme request. This scene demonstrates unity of direction and purpose, as Abraham first makes preparation and then, with his retinue, moves toward the place of sacrifice. Scene Three (vv. 9–14), displays unity of place, time and mood, as Abraham, at the site that God has chosen, prepares to sacrifice Isaac. Scene Four (vv. 11–14), although it continues to unfold in the same space as the previous scene, presents the reader with an abrupt change in mood and levels of tension, and introduces new participants into the story – the angel of YHWH and the ram. Scene Five (vv. 15–18) continues in the same space as the previous two scenes, but with a different purpose, as the angel of YHWH again calls from heaven, this time to deliver a blessing to Abraham for his response to God’s test.
Scene Six (v. 19) functions as a conclusion by sending Abraham and the lads to Beersheba. Only the absence of Isaac from the story prevents complete closure.

**Translation**

**Scene One (vv. 1–2): God’s Request to Abraham**

1. And it happened after these things
   and [the] God tested Abraham.
   And he said to him, ‘Abraham’
   and he said, ‘Behold, it is I.’

2. And he said,
   ‘Please take your son, your only one,
   whom you love, Isaac,
   and get yourself to the land of Moriah
   and offer him there as a burnt offering
   on one of the mountains
   which I will say to you.

**Notes on Scene One**

**Verse 1**

(‘the God’) Speiser considers that the use of the definite article before the word for God is for emphasis.³⁹² Both Gesenius and BDB claim that the use of the definite

---

³⁹² Speiser, *Genesis*, 162.
article implies that this אֲלָהִים does not refer to the gods of the nations, but is ‘the one true God’ and ‘the (true) God.’

Verse 2

נָא (‘please’ or ‘I pray’) The particle נָא is employed in this speech of God. BDB defines this particular use of נָא as a ‘particle of entreaty or exhortation, attached to the imperative, especially in colloquial style where it expresses an entreaty or admonition,’ and adds that it is rarely used in a command.

אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק אֶת־יְחִידָךְ אֶת־בִּנְךָ (‘your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac’) The verb ‘take’ is followed by three objects, all individually signalled by the definite object marker. Waltke and O’Connor write, ‘In the case of an independent subject pronoun after a finite verb, it is usual to speak of an emphatic, rather than appositional use.’ Joüon and Muraoka concur that this usage ‘is hardly a case of apposition.’

אָהַב (‘you love’) In the case of stative verbs, Joüon and Muraoka write, ‘the primary meaning is that of the present.’

לְוַּ (‘and go to/for you’) Gesenius writes that the pronoun with ל is used with many verbs ‘in order to give emphasis to the significance of the occurrence in question for a particular subject.’ He goes on to say, ‘By far the most frequent use of this ל is with the pronoun of the 2nd person after imperatives.’

---

394 BDB 43.
395 BDB 609.
400 Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 381.
אֶ֖רֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה (‘the land of Moriah’) The versions translate the word Moriah, rather than simply transliterating it. The LXX renders it as ‘the high land,’ Symmachus and the Vulgate as ‘[land of] the vision,’⁴⁰¹ and the Syriac Peshitta as ‘[land of] the Amorites.’⁴⁰² Second Chronicles 3:1 identifies the place where Solomon built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem as Mt Moriah, and this ‘land of Moriah’ may refer to the same place, that is, Mount Zion. For a fuller discussion, see under Time and Space in this chapter.

לְעֹלָה (‘for a whole burnt offering’) The עולה (‘whole burnt offering’) sacrifice was the commonest form of sacrifice, and the oldest, being mentioned a number of times in the patriarchal stories. It seems to have expressed two ideas: that the offerer was giving himself to God, through his identification with the victim, and that the victim’s death atoned for the sins of the offerer, after he had laid his hands upon it.⁴⁰³

Scene Two (vv. 3–8): The Journey

3. And Abraham arose early in the morning וַיַּשְׁכֵּ֙ם אַבְרָהָ֜ם בַּבֹּ֗קֶר and he saddled his donkey. וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת־חֲמֹר֔וֹ
And he took two of his lads with him, נְﬠָרָיו אִתּוֹ וַיִּקַּ֞ח אֶת־שְׁנֵ֤י
and Isaac his son, וְאֵ֖ת יִצְחָ֣ק בְּנ֑וֹ and he cut the wood for a burnt offering. וַיְבַקַּע֙ ﬠֲצֵ֣י עֹלָ֔ה
And he got up and he went to the place אֶל־הַמָּק֖וֹם וַיֵּ֔לֶк וַיָּ֣ קָם
that [the] God said to him. הִֽים אֲשֶׁר־אָֽמַר־ל֥וֹ הָאֱ
4. On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes בְיֵמָוֶֽהוּ אֲשֶׁר פָּרָאָֽנָה בְּאָֽרֶץ
389 אֶת־ﬠֵינָ֛יו בַּיּ֣וֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁ֗י וַיִּשָּׂ֙א יֶ֔הוֹוָ֖ה

⁴⁰¹ Wenham, Genesis, 98.
⁴⁰² Speiser, Genesis, 163.
⁴⁰³ Wenham, Genesis, 105.
and he saw the place from afar.

5. And Abraham said to his lads,

‘Stay for yourselves here with the donkey
and let I and the lad go up to there.
and let us worship,
and let us return to you.’

6. And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering
and he put it on Isaac, his son,
and he took in his hand the fire
and the knife.

And they went on, the two of them together.

7. And Isaac said to Abraham, his father,

and he said ‘My father,’
and he said ‘Behold, it is I, my son.’

And he said,

‘Behold the fire and the wood,
but where is the sheep for a burnt offering?’

8. And Abraham said,

‘God himself will provide the sheep
for a burnt offering, my son.’

And they went on, the two of them together.
Notes on Scene Two

Verse 3.

גְּנָרִים (‘his lads’) This term for males in a dependent position (either because of their youth or their station in life) is also used twice in regard to Isaac, once by Abraham (v. 5) and once by the angel (v. 12).

חֲמֹרו (‘his male donkey’) All the members of this expedition are male, even the donkey, because sacrifice is exclusively the domain of men. Kathryn McClymond claims: ‘Sacrifice seems to have been one of the original boys’ clubs.’

Verse 4

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי (‘On the third day’) Wenham claims, ‘Three days is a typical period of preparation for something important (cf. 31:22; 40:20; 42:18).’

Verse 6

וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת־הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת־הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת (‘and he took in his hand the fire and the knife’) Waltke and O’Connor write that ‘[t]he article may also mark nouns definite in the imagination, designating either a particular person or thing necessarily understood to be present or vividly portraying someone or something whose identity is not otherwise indicated.’

Scene Three (vv. 9–10): The Sacrifice is Prepared

9. And they came to the place

---

405 Wenham, Genesis, 106.
406 Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 243. Italics original.
that [the]God had said to him,
and there Abraham built the altar.
And he arranged the wood
and he bound Isaac, his son
and laid him on the altar
on top of the wood.
10. And Abraham reached out his hand
and he took the knife to slaughter his son.

Notes on Scene Three

Verse 9

וַיַּﬠֲקֹד ('and he bound') This is the only use of this verb in the Hebrew Scriptures, and has given the story its Jewish name, the Aqedah.407

Scene Four (vv. 11–14): The Sacrifice is Countermanded

11. And a messenger of YHWH called to him
from the heavens
and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham.’
and he said, ‘Behold, it is I.’
12. And he said,
‘Do not reach out your hand to the lad
and do not do anything to him.

407 Wenham, Genesis, 99.
For now I know that you fear God and you have not withheld your son, your only one from me.

13. And Abraham lifted his eyes and saw, and behold! a ram (was) behind (him) caught in a thicket by its horns. And Abraham went and he took the ram and he offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son.

14. And Abraham called that place ‘YHWH will provide’ so that it is said today ‘On YHWH’s mountain it will be provided.’

Notes on Scene Four

Verse 12

‘וַיֵּרֶא אַבְרָהָם’ (‘you fear God’) Gesenius cites the study of E. Sellin408 who:

shows that the participle when construed as a verb expresses a single and comparatively transitory act, or relates to particular cases, historical

facts, and the like, while the participle construed as a noun … indicates repeated, enduring, or commonly occurring acts, occupations, and thoughts. 409

Verse 13

In verse 8, Abraham has assured Isaac that God would supply the sheep (שֶּׂה) for the offering. What Abraham discovers in this verse, however, is not simply a sheep but a ram. This is significant from a practical perspective, for only a ram would have horns to tangle in a thicket.

אַחַר (‘behind’) The text as we have it speaks of ‘a ram behind (him) caught in a thicket.’ BDB describes אַחַר in this instance as ‘an adverb of place’ meaning ‘behind’ and indicates its use in this sense in this passage and in Ps 68:26.410 Many people have suggested that it should read אַחֵר, which would yield the translation, ‘another ram caught in a thicket.’ This substitution of ‘another’ for ‘behind’ is supported by many of the versions, such as the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, and the LXX. The implication of this reading is that either Abraham or the narrator regards Isaac as a ram, the first ram, about to be sacrificed. This view is especially popular with commentators who wish to see this story as prefiguring God’s substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus.

Having emended אַחַר to אַחֵר Hamilton suggests ‘[a]lmost all commentators suggest emending ahar; “another,”’ to ehad, literally the numeral one, which can be used as the indefinite article, “a.”’411 In avoidance of both the emendation and its re-emendation, this study will continue to read this word as אַחַר, (‘behind’), with the Masoretic text.

409 Gesenius, Hebrew Grammar, 357. Italics original.
410 BDB, 29.
411 Hamilton, Genesis, 113.
Verse 14

Waltke and O’Connor point out that here the word אַשֶּׁר functions as a marker that introduces a result/consequence clause.\(^{412}\)

Both these expressions might be regarded as ambiguous, since יְהוָ֖ה יִרְאֶה may mean either ‘YHWH provides/will provide’ or ‘YHWH sees/will see,’ and בְּהַר יְהוָ֖ה יֵרָאֶה may mean either ‘On the mountain of YHWH it will be provided’ or ‘On the mountain of YHWH he will be seen (appear).’\(^{413}\) However, the context here leaves little doubt that the writer is speaking of YHWH’S willingness to provide. Abraham’s name for the mountain also recalls the name that Hagar gives to God (16:13) – ‘the one who sees me.’

Scene Five (vv. 15–18): The Blessing

15. And the messenger of YHWH called to Abraham a second time from the heavens

“‘By myself I have sworn” declares YHWH.

‘Because you have done this thing

---


\(^{413}\) Davidson, *Genesis*, 97.
and have not withheld your son, your only one,

17. [for] I will indeed bless you and I will surely make numerous your offspring as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is upon the seashore.

And your offspring will possess the gate of his enemies.

18. And will bless themselves by your offspring all the nations of earth because you have listened to my voice.

Notes on Scene Five

Verses 15–18

Many scholars have considered these verses to be a later addition to the story. Hamilton, for example, observes:

The consensus among source critics is that vv. 1–13 (or 14) are the work of E … v. 14 (or 15) – 8 are marked as secondary and are attributed to the redactor of the JE materials.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹⁴ Hamilton, Genesis, 99.
Some scholars, notably Jon Van Seters, G. W. Coates, T. D. Alexander and G. Rendsburg, have made a case for their being an integral part of the original story. Van Seters declares:

It is only with the inclusion, in the second speech, of the divine confirmation of the patriarchal promises, vv. 15–18, that the ultimate aim of the testing becomes clear. Because of Abraham’s obedience his children will be blessed.

Davidson, however, points out that these verses, which restate the main themes of God’s earlier promises to Abraham, are expressed in language that is quite different. He claims:

There is no parallel elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives to the introductory words This is the word of the LORD… though the words appear frequently in the prophetic books … nor to the solemn assertion, By my own self I swear (verse 16), nor to the statement, Your descendants shall possess the cities (literally ‘gates’) of their enemies (verse 17). That God’s promises to Abraham should be confirmed as the climax to this narrative is natural enough. Why they should be expressed in this form is unclear.

Thomas Römer states:

With respect to v. 15–16 it is generally accepted that these verses belong to a late addition to the text (v. 15–18). The second speech of the angel, a patchwork of divine promises, comes too late after the denouement.

---

419 Van Seters, Abraham in History, 239.
420 Davidson, Genesis, 97.
Moreover, its baroque language contrasts with the sober style of the previous narrative.421

Because of these anomalies, this study accepts the theory that different sources have been combined in this story, leaving traces in its final form, and that verses 15–18 are a later addition to the body of the story.

Verse 17

Here the infinitive absolute is followed by the imperfect of the verb ‘to bless.’ Christo Van der Merwe et al explain:

This construction usually intensifies the verbal idea. In this way, BH speakers/narrators express their conviction of the verity of their statements regarding an action. When a speaker has used this construction, a listener would not be able to claim at a later date that the speakers had not expressed themselves clearly enough.422

Verse 18

The conjunction עַטְקִיב is combined here with אַשֶּׁר to introduce a causal clause.423

Scene Six (V. 19): The Resolution

19. And Abraham returned to his lads וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נְﬠָרָיו
and they got up וַיָּקֻמוּ
and they went together to Beersheba. וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל־בְּאֵ֣ר שָׁ֑בַע
And Abraham remained in Beersheba. וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָ֖ם בִּבְאֵ֥ר שָֽׁׁבַע׃  

422 Christopher Van der Merwe et al, A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 158. Italics original.
423 Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 640-641.
Notes on Scene Six

Verse 19

This final verse ends the incident as the characters move on to another place. A significant example of gapping in the plot of this narrative occurs in this verse. Isaac’s fate after the aborted sacrifice is not mentioned, as Abraham returns alone from the mountain.

Rhetorical-Narrative Analysis

The story of the binding of Isaac is a notoriously difficult narrative to read coherently and ways of interpreting it vary greatly. As Konrad Schmid observes, ‘Genesis 22 is a highly controversial text, and there are many possible hermeneutical approaches to it.’424 This thesis will present one reading of the text. It is very far from being the only valid reading, but it is a reading which takes into account the text in its entirety and in all its singularity. In the words of William Peck, ‘I offer it in ignorance of what the authors and redactors of Genesis 22 may have originally intended, requiring only the same confession from my colleagues.’425

A number of significant problems arise in the interpretation of this story. They include: the two names of the deity; the reason for the highlighting of ‘the place that [the] God told Abraham’; the connection between this place, the mountain of Moriah, and the notion that God will provide; the willingness of Abraham to kill his son; and the

possible intertextual link with Judges 11, the story of Jephthah’s daughter. I will attend to these matters in this chapter and Chapter Nine.

Scene One (vv. 1–2): God’s Request to Abraham

The narrative begins ‘after these things,’ that is, the events of Chapter 21. God is referred to as הִים (‘the God’). The speech that follows is thus marked out as being from, not simply ‘a god,’ one of the ‘gods of the nations,’ but from the God of Israel. It establishes that this call upon Abraham comes genuinely from the deity, rather than from some other agent. Hamilton writes:

The affixing of the article … may be the narrator’s way of emphasizing that it was God, Abraham’s God, who was speaking to Abraham. What he was hearing came from no other source nor from his own imagination.426

In verse 1 we are given a significant piece of information; what is to follow is a test that will not be carried to its extreme conclusion. God does not, at any point in this story, desire that Abraham should kill his son. If God intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, this utterance would no longer be a test but merely a command. In using the verb נִסָּה (‘he tested’), the narrator has ensured that the reader is aware that this request is not going to be carried out and that its purpose lies in Abraham’s response to the asking of it rather than in its realisation. In telling us, the readers, that God is testing Abraham, the narrator has lifted us up for a time to share his omniscient overview of the story. This is something we could not know from our own observation and that the characters other than God do not know. Jerome Walsh explains:

426 Hamilton, Genesis, 100.
One of the common features of an omniscient point of view is a sense of distance from the characters, because we know more than any of them and, therefore, cannot share their limited perspectives.427

Hugh White claims, ‘The meaning of the test thus constitutes the horizon within which the meaning of the narrative should be determined.’428 As he points out, this test runs the risk of undermining Abraham’s trust in God. All the words of promise that God has bestowed upon Abraham are jeopardized so radically as to suggest that God has not been faithful to Abraham. The future which once was illuminated by God’s promises is now shrouded in uncertainty. White writes, ‘The issue to be resolved in this test must then be of overriding importance for such a risk to be taken.’429

Yair Mazor highlights the downside, from a narratological viewpoint, of the writer/redactor’s decision to tell the reader that what follows is a test and proposes the reason why this decision is justified. He points out that the writer/redactor has avoided exploiting the ‘thrilling plot of the binding story’ to grab the reader’s attention because too great an investment in the plot ‘may divert attention from the ideological message behind it.’430 Mazor concludes:

Thus, once the reader is freed from the worry over the end of the story, he is capable of deciphering the ideological message - Abraham’s exalted faith and devotion to God – that springs from them. Losing strong fictional interest enables the ideological lesson to become more obvious and consequently, more effective. Hence, the seemingly remiss rhetoric is indeed a proficient literary tactic which adroitly harnesses the rhetorical layer to the ideological purpose.431

429 White, *Narration and Discourse*, 189.
431 Mazor, ‘Genesis 22’, 82.
God does not call out to Abraham, but simply speaks to him (v.1). There is an intimacy in this, an implication that God and Abraham are together, not divided by the sort of space that separates Abraham from the messenger of YHWH, who ‘called to him from heaven’ (v.11). Abraham is already in the presence of God when the story opens. Like two friends who are busy about their individual concerns in the one room, they remain interconnected, even during their periods of silence. Abraham’s response, נִיהִנֵּ (‘Behold, it is I’) is immediate. This is the first of three usages of this phrase by Abraham in the story and each time he employs it to indicate that he is open and available to the speaker. God continues to converse, his manner in complete contrast to the content of his speech. ‘Please take your son, your only one whom you love, Isaac, and … offer him … as a burnt offering…’ (v. 2). These three objects, all expressions for the one person, Isaac, are arranged from the most general to the most specific.\(^{432}\) Bill Arnold writes, ‘With astonishing and unmistakable clarity, God makes it impossible to misunderstand or redirect the imperative.’\(^{433}\)

The designation of Isaac as יְחִידְ (‘your only [one]’) has posed interpretive problems, particularly in view of God’s description of Ishmael as Abraham’s seed less than a chapter before. A number of ways of resolving this textual difficulty have emerged. Hamilton employs one way when he writes, ‘yehideka should not be taken as “your only one” but “your precious one” (NJPS “favoured one”). … Note LXX’s rendering of yahid by agapeton, “beloved.”’\(^{434}\) John Goldingay uses another way of resolving the difficulty when he argues that Isaac is described as ‘your only [one]’ because he is the only child of Abraham’s primary wife. He claims:

\(^{432}\) Arnold, *Genesis*, 203.
\(^{433}\) Arnold, *Genesis*, 203.
\(^{434}\) Hamilton, *Genesis*, 97 n3.
Being a primary or secondary wife need not imply anything about the love and commitment your husband has for you; it likely relates mainly to your children’s inheritance rights. In this legal connection Isaac is indeed Abraham’s ‘only’ son.435

The simplest and most plausible solution to this problem, and the one that this study endorses, has been tendered by Terence Fretheim, who suggests that God refers to Isaac as Abraham’s only son because in the previous chapter, Ishmael has been banished from Abraham’s family and disinherited in favour of Isaac. Now he is no longer Abraham’s son in any real sense.436

This narrative contains a demonstration of Abraham’s obedience to God, but this is only one aspect of the story because Abraham is only one of the characters. If the perspective of each of the main characters is taken into consideration, the heart of the story is changed. It becomes instead a narrative about the vulnerability that ensues for all those who wholeheartedly enter into a loving and trusting relationship. In Genesis 22, Abraham is vulnerable on two fronts; because he loves and trusts God, and because he loves Isaac. Isaac, who is revealed as a trusting child in verses 7 and 8, is vulnerable because of his faith in his father. God is vulnerable because he loves and trusts Abraham. Hemchand Gossai suggests: ‘[W]e are led to believe that this is something of a risk for God and for the sake of unquestionable trust, God becomes vulnerable.’437 Through their relationships with each other, these three characters are all open to the pain of loss and hurt.

In verse 2, God demonstrates his vulnerability by the use of the particle of entreaty, נא (‘please’). The word נא always conveys a choice, as its English translation,

'please,’ which is an abbreviation of ‘if you please,’ suggests. It lays God open to the possibility that Abraham will choose to place his love for Isaac ahead of his love for God. Gossai writes,

The command “to take” is tempered with the use of *na*. Through the use of *na* there is a sense that God implores Abraham to undertake the test. If the horrific nature of the test leads God to implore, how much more difficult must it have been for Abraham! In the face of divine imploring, is the human being able to refuse? Here again, God’s actions place God in a vulnerable situation. God stands to lose much here.438

Many commentators fail to translate the particle in this verse,439 perhaps on theological grounds: God does not request humans, he commands. Cotter, however, writes, ‘This is a polite request, something more like “Would you take…,”’ and a request, moreover, that at least according to some commentators could be declined without difficulty.’ 440 Kass concurs with this opinion, when he suggests:

God does not exactly *command* Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he requests it of him… Thus Abraham is in fact free to refuse, as he would not be were he simply commanded to obey.441

Because God uses the particle of entreaty, therefore, this is not a command but a request, which Abraham has the option of declining. In the light of this right to refuse, Abraham’s silent and unquestioning obedience is extraordinary. This passage may be said to speak about God’s faith in Abraham, as well as Abraham’s faith in God.

The Hebrew phrase לְךָֹּל (‘get yourself,’ literally ‘go to/for yourself’) occurs only twice in the book of Genesis. The first occurrence is in 12:1, when God first calls

---

439 These include Von Rad (1961), Davidson (1979), and Goldingay (2010).
Abraham to leave his home and his family to journey to a new land. Its usage here, by echoing 12:1, suggests the renunciation of family. Gerhard Von Rad declares, ‘Abraham had to cut himself off from his whole past in ch. 12.1f.; now he must give up his whole future.’ Fretheim states:

> Although this divine command does not appear as abrupt as in 12:1, they are similar in other ways, in vocabulary (‘take, go’ to a ‘place that I shall show you’), along with Abraham’s silent, but faithful, response. Both are ventures in faith and enclose the story of Abraham; Abraham begins and ends his journey with God by venturing out into the deep at the command of God. The former cuts Abraham off from his past; the latter threatens to cut him off from his future.

Although the two commands of Genesis 12:1 and Genesis 22:2 share similarities of language, they nonetheless stand in contrast to each other. Mazor observes:

> The divine command in Gen 12, which ordains Abraham to leave his country for a new one, is absorbed with gladdening connotations as the new country is the promised one – the one in which the Lord will make Abraham ‘a great nation’. The divine command in Gen 22 which ordains Abraham to leave his country and go to the Moriah country is the reverse: the act which Abraham is compelled to commit in the new country is infiltrated with the murkiest connotations one can imagine. The connotational gulf between the two components of the allusion pattern produces a dense, ironic distance underlining the sombre nature of Abraham’s mission in the Moriah land.

The expression לָכְךָ is difficult to render in English. The KJV translates it as ‘get thee,’ but many recent versions have settled simply for ‘go.’ Goldingay chooses to translate it as ‘get yourself,’ Cotter as ‘go for yourself,’ Hamilton as ‘go to

---

42 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 239.
43 Fretheim, ‘Genesis’, 495.
45 Goldingay, *Genesis*, 43.
yourself,’ 447 and Wenham as ‘go by yourself.’ 448 This latter translation is not supported by the text, since in both cases, Abraham, ‘the paradigm of obedience,’ does not go by himself but with others. I have chosen to translate this expression as ‘get yourself’ rather than simply ‘go’ to preserve the link with Genesis 12:1.

It is significant that God asks Abraham to go to a mountain. Mountains, Seth Kunin tells us, ‘are liminal spaces,’ where ‘opposing domains meet’ as ‘the mountain joins earth and sky.’ 449 Liminal spaces are associated with change, danger, and even with death. As such, they sometimes appear in stories and myths as the place where rites of passage take place. Also, because the noun עלילה (‘whole burnt offering’) is derived from the same root as the verb עלל (‘to go up’), there is a natural association of ideas between the idea of mountains and sacrifice.

Scene Two (vv. 3–8): The Journey

Abraham complies silently with God’s request. He gets up early, saddles the donkey, takes two servants (literally נְﬠָרָיו ‘his lads’) and Isaac, and chops the wood for the sacrifice. Then he sets off to travel to the place to which God directs him. After three days, he looks up and sees it from a distance. The expression וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־ﬠֵינָיו (‘and Abraham lifted his eyes’) will be repeated in verse 13. Wenham claims, ‘To “look up” before seeing usually intimates that what is to be seen is of great significance (cf. 18:2: 24:63; 33:1, 5; 43:29).’

In verse 5, Abraham instructs the lads to stay and mind the donkey while he and Isaac go and worship, then both return. Some commentators have suggested that this

---

448 Wenham, *Genesis*, 97.
implies hope on Abraham’s part that Isaac will not die on the mountain, or will die but then be miraculously restored to him. Arnold writes:

> [t]he Talmud suggests Abraham’s prophetic gifts came to the foreground in this statement, and that he knew he would not have to carry out the command, while medieval Jewish sources claim that Isaac was killed and resurrected from the ashes of the altar.  

Fretheim declares that Abraham has absolute faith in God and ‘trusts that God will act to save Isaac.’ He perceives Abraham as having no doubt that Isaac’s life is not in jeopardy. In reference to the scene between Abraham and Isaac in verses 7 and 8, he writes:

> Isaac believes his father’s trust to be well-placed. Abraham’s trust in God has become Isaac’s trust: God will provide a lamb, which is God’s intention from the beginning, of course, and Abraham and Isaac are now both attuned to that intention and trust it.

From both a theological and a narratological view-point, Fretheim’s interpretation poses problems. If Abraham does not dread the loss of his son, if he has no doubt that God will provide a lamb, then his obedience ceases to be sacrificial and radical. If Isaac is certain to be safe, then Abraham can afford to obey with a light heart, and the whole matter of sacrifice is not fully engaged. Implicit in the idea of sacrifice is the notion that it is costly, that the sacrificial act offers up to the deity something of great value. If Abraham knows that Isaac will not die on the mountain at Moriah, he has made no personal sacrifice at all. Even the ram has cost him nothing. This interpretation strips the story both of tension and point, weakens the notion of testing and makes the

451 Fretheim, ‘Genesis’, 496.
452 Fretheim, ‘Genesis’, 496.
rewards heaped upon Abraham seem superfluous. As Andrew Yang remarks: ‘[I]f Abraham was indeed confident of Isaac's resurrection, then he was only "going through the motions."

Mazor suggests that there may be three reasons why Abraham does not tell his lads and Isaac about his intention to sacrifice his son: he desires to protect Isaac from the truth; he wants also to save the lads from understanding his purpose for as long as possible; and he hesitates to express the truth even to himself. It is the opinion of this study that it is in keeping with the character of Abraham, especially as revealed in Genesis 12:12-13 and 20:2, that he should place expediency above truth when he feels that this is necessary. Abraham equivocates to prevent the lads from intervening on Isaac's behalf and in order to spare Isaac’s feelings.

Abraham loads the firewood onto Isaac and takes the fire and the knife himself. In solidarity, they set off, ‘the two of them together.’ This phrase is repeated in verse 8 and frames a poignant scene. Isaac addresses his father, who replies, in the phrase he has used to God, ‘Behold me’. Isaac points out that they have the wood and the fire and demonstrates his knowledge of the requirements for sacrifice by saying, ‘But where is the sheep for an offering?’ Abraham replies, ‘God himself will see to the sheep for an offering, my son.’ This interchange opens with the word (‘my father’) and closes with the word (‘my son’), thus enfolding Abraham and Isaac within the bonds of family. It is the only conversation that is recorded between Abraham and Isaac in the Scriptures and it resonates both with intimacy and pathos.

---

Scene Three (vv. 9–10): The Sacrifice is Prepared

When they arrive at the appointed place, Abraham builds an altar. Then he stacks the wood, binds Isaac, and puts him on top of the wood. At the highest moment of tension, the narrator tells his readers that Abraham takes up the knife to sacrifice his son. The verb he employs, לִשְׁחֹט ('to slaughter'), is suggestive. Hamilton writes:

Biblical Hebrew has five verbs for ‘sacrifice’: sahat, tabah, zabah, the Hiphil of ala, and the Hiphil of qarab. Only the first two may be used for the slaughter of animals for both secular and sacred purposes. The last three are confined to slaughter for sacred reasons. In addition, sahat was used to describe the slaughter or sacrifice of children to false gods in pagan cults (see Isa. 57:5; Ezek. 16:21; 23:39). Its use in Gen. 22:10, then, makes Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac assume an even more dreadful aspect.455

Scene Four (vv. 11–14): The Sacrifice is Countermanded

At the crucial moment, the voice of ‘a messenger of YHWH’ intervenes to prevent the sacrifice of Isaac (v. 11). Derek Kidner claims:

The exact moment of intervention wrings the last drop of meaning from the experience…. It is the answer, vividly conclusive yet anything but facile, to the question of Micah 6:6,7.456

The messenger speaks for YHWH. This is no polite request from a God who is in the presence of Abraham, but a voice shouting an order down from heaven, relaying a second-hand message. There is no intimacy about this interaction. Yet Abraham,

---

455 Hamilton, Genesis, 111.
456 Kidner, Genesis, 144. Micah 6:6,7 reads:
With what shall I come before YHWH, and bow before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will YHWH be pleased with a thousand rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
seeming not to register any difference, responds in exactly the same way as he has responded to God in verse one. The messenger tells Abraham not to harm the boy, because now he knows that Abraham fears God. Von Rad suggests that the expression ‘fear of God’ serves as an Old Testament paraphrase of the later concept of ‘religion.’

[T]he phrase ‘fear of God’ says almost nothing directly about a special disposition of the soul, a special feeling for God. It must not be considered as a special emotional reaction to the reality of God which is experienced as *mysterium tremendum*.... [W]here the phrases ‘fear of God’ and ‘fearing God’ occur in the Old Testament, they refer not to a particular form of strong emotions but rather to their consequence, i.e. obedience.457

Speiser expresses a slightly different emphasis when he says of this phrase, that ‘the manifest stress is not so much on fear, or even awe, as on absolute dedication.’458

Abraham looks up, sees a ram caught in a thicket by the horns, and he sacrifices it instead of Isaac. Nahum Sarna states ‘the substitution of the ram for Isaac is a spontaneous gesture on the part of Abraham, performed at his own initiative and not divinely ordained.’459 It is certainly the case that God does not command, or even request, the sacrifice of the ram. Abraham’s naming of the place in the following verse (verse 14), however, links the proximity of the ram with YHWH’s provision for him, thus making it clear that in Abraham’s eyes at least, the entanglement of the animal is no fortuitous event but an act of God. God does not request a sacrifice to replace Isaac, but if Abraham feels the need to offer something, then the ram is God’s provision.

This is highlighted by the fact that the sacrifice of the ram does not make sense as an offering in its own right. One of the stipulations for an acceptable sacrifice is that

---

457 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 241
458 Speiser, *Genesis*, 163.
the animal sacrificed must be the property of the person making the sacrifice and must be something of value to him. This point is illustrated in 2 Samuel 24, when David builds an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah, who offers him a gift of oxen to sacrifice. Verse 24 reads, ‘And the king said to Araunah, “No. I will indeed buy from you for a price. And I will not offer to YHWH my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”’ Because the ram that Abraham sacrifices does not belong to him and costs him nothing, it is not an acceptable sacrifice under the Law. White states, ‘The animal is not a representative of Abraham’s labour and productivity, that is, of his self.’ It is only as a substitute for Isaac that it could in any way be considered a legitimate sacrifice. The text itself underlines this when it states in verse 13 that Abraham offers the ram תַּחַת בְּנוֹ (‘in place of his son’).

In verse 14, Abraham names the mountain ‘YHWH will provide’ and the narrator steps aside from the story to tell us that to this day it is said that ‘On the mountain of YHWH he will provide.’ The verb ראה (‘to see’) has an extremely wide semantic domain. It is worth noting that the English word ‘provide’ has its origin in the Latin word ‘providere’ which means ‘to foresee,’ and thus encompasses the verb to see also. It is customary to translate ראה as both ‘see’ and ‘provide’ in this narrative. In verses 4 and 13, it is usually translated as ‘Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw,’ while in verse 8, it is usually translated ‘God will provide.’ The verb is saved from ambiguity in verse 14 by the usage in verse 8.

To translate this as ‘provide’ has profound theological implications. Brueggemann explains:

Barth appeals to our text as the ground for his entire understanding of providence, the doctrine of God’s full provision of what is needed for his

---

460 White, *Narration and Discourse*, 198.
creatures…. [T]o link our word ‘see’ generally to the affirmation of providence makes the broadest claim possible that life is held in the purview of God and that we are destined to live according to his good will.461

Brueggemann identifies a new disclosure of God in this story. In verse 1, God is the tester; and in verse 14, God is the provider.462 Janzen writes:

The teaching of this mountain in Moriah is that to live within the providence of God is to live within a horizon defined not by our ‘seeing to’ but by God’s provision (‘pro-vision’). Yet at the same time, to live within that providence is to learn that the one thing God will not foresee is our response. God waits until we have acted before knowing our response (v. 12). If this has been Abraham’s severest test of trust in God, it has been no less an occasion in which (as in the case of Job) God has trusted the human partner in the covenant.463

Scene Five (vv. 15–18): The Blessing

Once again the messenger of YHWH calls to Abraham from heaven to deliver an oracle from YHWH. The messenger speaks for YHWH and he calls to Abraham from afar. Because Abraham has not withheld his only son, YHWH will bless Abraham, and multiply his descendants.

Scene Six (V. 19): The Resolution

Verse 19 rounds off the story by bringing Abraham down from the mountain, and sending him and his entourage, minus Isaac, to Beersheba. This is a standard Hebrew narrative ending. Amit writes, ‘The ending lowers the curtain, sends the players off the stage and behind the scenes, to another place and event’.464

---

462 Brueggemann, Genesis, 188.
463 Janzen, Abraham and All the Families, 81
464 Amit, Reading Biblical Narratives, 36.
The story of the Binding of Isaac is often seen as the highest point of the Abraham cycle. We have followed Abraham with Sarah from Ur to Haran and on to Canaan. We have seen him living peacefully in the land alongside the Canaanites and witnessed his acquisition of wealth. We have observed his growing relationship with his deity and the establishment of the covenant that formalises this relationship. Since 15:3, we have been aware of his regret that he and Sarah have no children to follow after them. In chapter 16, we have noted the uneasy compromise Abraham has made, in begetting a child through Sarah’s maid, Hagar. In chapters 17 and 18 the deity has promised Abraham that he will have a son by Sarah. At last, in chapter 21:2, the child of promise, Isaac, is born. On the day he is weaned, Abraham throws a party (21:8). It is in the very next chapter that Abraham is requested by God to sacrifice his son.

Jonathon Magonet regards the two לְךָ-לְךָ verses (12:1 and 22:2) as forming ‘some sort of bracket around the cycle of narratives’ of the life of Abraham. He perceives the arrangement of chapters 12 to 22 as concentric.

In organizing and editing the materials a sequence has been built up so that the first and last chapters match, as do the second and the penultimate, and so on. The sequence is: the call to do something extraordinary, then an episode where Abraham pretends that his wife is his sister, then something about Lot being in danger and the wicked city of Sodom, then the establishment of the covenant and at the centre, the issue of the child for Abraham, this time Ishmael. The order then reverses to conclude with a second call to go on a journey. Whatever the origin of these individual chapters and their detailed contents, they have clearly been organized in a deliberate sequence.

466 Magonet, ‘Abraham and God’, 162.
The story follows soon after the narrative concerning the expulsion of Ishmael, and as Wenham points out, ‘In content and outline, the stories in chapters 21 and 22 run parallel, with Abraham in a role like Hagar’s, and Isaac like Ishmael.’ Römer observes:

Gen 21.8–20 can indeed be understood as a prologue to Gen 22. Both texts contain interesting parallels: the boy’s life is threatened (in 21 by Sarah, in 22 by God); God gives an order and Abraham obeys it (21.12–14; 22.1–3;) the boy is saved by a divine intervention from heaven (cf. שׁמים in 21.17 and 22.11,15); but this retrieval does not bring back the son to his father (21.12: Ishmael is living far away from Abraham; 22.19: Abraham comes back from the sacrifice without Isaac.)

Elements of Narrative

Plot

There is a general consensus among scholars that the binding of Isaac is a straightforward story written with style and simplicity. Von Rad calls it ‘the most perfectly formed and polished of all the patriarchal stories.’ Davidson remarks upon ‘its restrained economy of words, its ability to depict with a few deft touches a scene almost unbearable in its emotional intensity.’ Arnold comments that ‘this text has been the object of much study for centuries, and rightly so.’ Coats declares: ‘Genesis 22 demonstrates an unusual skill in storytelling.’ Two things have made this story one of the most enigmatic and controversial in the Hebrew Scriptures – our lack of information about the inner life of God and our lack of information about the inner life of Abraham.

467 Wenham, Genesis, 99.
469 Von Rad, Genesis, 238.
470 Davidson, Genesis, 92.
471 Arnold, Genesis, 200.
Howard Moltz observes:

The story … is told with an economy of words perhaps unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible. So much, in fact, is unexpressed that the thoughts and feelings of God, Abraham and Isaac must largely be inferred. As Auerbach wrote, it is a story laced with ‘silence and fragmentary speeches’, a story that calls on the imagination of the reader to uncover the hidden.473

God’s request, at odds with the mildness and politeness of God’s words, is both shocking and so out of character for the deity that this narrative has, Davidson says, ‘captured the imagination and haunted the conscience of both Jews and Christians across the centuries.’474 God requests Abraham not only to negate the promise that he will be the father of a great nation in the future, but to take his beloved son and kill him upon the altar. Does God regret making this request of Abraham? Does the foreknowledge that he will not be permitted to actually sacrifice his son justify to God what Abraham feels? The reader is not told and cannot know.

Abraham’s inner life is also completely opaque to the reader. The silence with which he receives God’s request in verse 2 may be the silence of untroubled acquiescence or the speechlessness of total despair. Because we are given no insight into his feelings, a full gamut of emotions from despair to joy has been attributed to him. Some scholars see the Aqedah as uniquely horrible: Von Rad speaks of Abraham’s experience as ‘a road out into Godforsakenness,’475 while Speiser suggests that readers should ‘suffer with him in helpless silence,’476 and refers to Abraham’s testing as ‘this

474 Davidson, Genesis, 92.
475 Von Rad, Genesis, 244.
476 Speiser, Genesis, 164.
shattering ordeal.’ 477 Others, like Wenham, imagine Abraham as feeling conflicted: Wenham writes, ‘obedience to God and love for his son will tear him in diametrically opposed directions.’ 478 Still others perceive in Abraham’s silent obedience a calm resignation to the will of God. Kidner suggests, ‘From Abraham, the harrowing demand evokes only love and faith, certain as he is that the “foolishness of God” is unexplored wisdom.’ 479 Coats states, ‘He never objects to the unreasonable, slightly insane commandment to sacrifice his son… To the contrary, he seems to move about his grim task with silent resignation, as if he were an automaton.’ 480 Finally, Jerome Gellman brings to the reader’s attention a school of thought, found particularly among the Hasidim, that considers that ‘our father Abraham and our father Isaac both went together in great joy, the one to sacrifice and the other to be sacrificed in order to do God’s will.’ 481 Gellman also writes:

In the name of R. Simha Bunem of Przysucha (1765–1827), it is said that for Abraham there was no difference between the sacrificing of Isaac and the sacrificing of the ram. Isaac was simply the ‘first ram’ and the ram was the ‘second ram.’ 482

All of these perceptions of Abraham’s state of mind are equally justified in the face of the author’s reticence on the subject. Without any direct information from the narrator about the inner life of Abraham, we turn to the dialogue to tell us what is happening, only to be confronted by words that are ambiguous and enigmatic. Is Abraham lying when he tells his servants that he and Isaac will return, or does he

477 Speiser, Genesis, 165.
478 Wenham, Genesis, 104.
479 Kidner, Genesis, 142.
482 Gellman, Abraham! Abraham!, 6.
genuinely hold onto a hope that somehow Isaac will be spared? Is he trying to avoid a premature disclosure to Isaac when he says that God will provide a sheep for the sacrifice or does he himself believe that this will be the case? Since the dialogue cannot help us, we turn to his actions, and again we discover that we cannot form any definite conclusions from them. Both verses 3 and 9 contain strings of verbs that suggest concentrated physical activity. Some commentators claim that they show that Abraham is hurrying to finish the ordeal, while some suggest that he is delaying the actual sacrifice by attending to trivia. Others claim that he is like a ‘sleepwalker’ or an ‘automaton,’ performing actions of which he is scarcely aware. Still others believe that Abraham’s actions are indicative of his willingness and his joy in serving God.

In short, because this story has been written in such a way as to be factually explicit and emotionally ambiguous, it has remained open and living. The Aqedah is a mirror into which many have looked and seen themselves. Those who prize devotion to God far above all other relationships see Abraham going joyfully up the mountain. Those who love their children dearly see Abraham broken and tortured by what he must do. Those who are held in tension between love of God and love of family are torn by conflicting emotions. But whatever they see from their points of view, no one who looks into this mirror goes away unchanged.

The tension in the story is not built up gradually but aroused suddenly in verse 2. In the first verse, the reader’s interest has been captured by the relationship between God and Abraham, and by the information that God is about to test Abraham. In verse 2, the bombshell is dropped. God requests Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him on a mountain in the land of Moriah. The very concreteness of the request – the fact that the place is named, and the kind of offering stipulated – is shocking indeed. Because the
reader knows that this is only a test, the story’s tension resides in the reader’s curiosity about Abraham’s and Isaac’s reactions. There is a sense of waiting, as Abraham saddles the donkey, chops the wood, and sets out on his journey. The tension rises as the party reaches the end of the journey. When Abraham and Isaac leave the lads, to climb the mountain to the place that God has shown Abraham, it rises again. The poignant little scene between Abraham and Isaac begins the job of slowing the pace of the story, as it builds to its climax. When they, ‘the two of them together,’ reach their destination, the narrator screws the tension levels to their highest possible pitch as he details Abraham’s gruesome preparation. With every slow deliberate action – as Abraham builds the altar, arranges of the wood, binds Isaac, lays him on top of it – the story’s pace slows further and its tension rises correspondingly. It climaxes in verse 10, as Abraham reaches out with the knife to kill Isaac. For a moment, the reader’s confidence in the narrator’s assertion that this is a test is shaken. Abraham will not speak out on behalf of his son. Isaac will not run away. God will forget that he is simply testing Abraham, and the father will slaughter his son. At the very last possible moment, the messenger of YHWH intervenes, and the tension level is cut instantly. From this point, the story is resolved gently. The substitute sacrificial victim is offered, Abraham is rewarded not once but twice by the messenger of YHWH for his willingness to offer his son as a sacrifice. The tension level slides quickly back toward the place where it began and only one consideration prevents it from resolving completely. That is the nagging question about the disappearance of Isaac from the story.
Character

The Deity

In Genesis 22, the deity is known by two different appellations, the God (הִים הָאֱלָלֶה) and YHWH (יְהוָה). Why has the narrator permitted God to set the test, and YHWH to evaluate it? Many (for example Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 363; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 1961, 242; Speiser, *Genesis*, 1964, 143) have chosen to see the two names as the result of the combining of different sources. This is hardly an answer to the question, however. Although the narrative as it stands now may well have been drawn from several sources, this does not explain why so skilled an author/redactor has not consistently used one title for the deity throughout. In this study I make the assumption that since the author/redactor has elected to retain these two titles, his choice is meaningful and contributes to the narrative as a whole. Moreover, in this story, God and YHWH do not act interchangeably and do not relate to Abraham in the same way or share the same characteristics.

God

The story opens with God’s request to Abraham. He speaks from within the presence of Abraham, not across a gap or from a distance. God in this story is an immanent deity.

He does not speak to Abraham again in this narrative, or for the rest of his life. In verse 3 and verse 9, the narrator speaks about him using the name הִים הָאֱלָלֶה and in verse 8, Abraham speaks of him (without the definite article) as the one who will provide the sheep for the offering. In verse 14, however, he attributes the provision of the sacrificial ram to YHWH.
YHWH

In verse 11, YHWH takes his place in the text, and yet he can never be said to be an active participant of the story, for YHWH himself neither appears nor speaks. In his place, as a go-between, the reader hears the voice of ‘the messenger of YHWH.’ Although, as James Kugel has pointed out⁴⁸³, messengers of YHWH often resolve into appearances of YHWH himself, there must be a reason why the author/redactor of Genesis 22 has chosen to represent this intervention as coming from ‘a messenger of YHWH’ rather than directly from YHWH. Whatever the redactor’s intention may have been, this has the effect of distancing YHWH from the act of intervention in the sacrifice of Isaac. Even as a stand-in for YHWH, the messenger does not appear bodily as the messengers do in Genesis 18 and 19, nor does he speak to Abraham from close quarters as God does in verse 1 of this chapter. Instead, he relays YHWH’s message from afar, from heaven to earth. To emphasise the gap that lies between them, the messenger does not simply speak, but calls out (קרא) to Abraham.

YHWH in this episode is very different from (the) God. He does not speak from within the presence of Abraham, and he does not speak directly but through his messenger. Where God is immanent, YHWH is transcendent. Ironically, Abraham does not appear to perceive that there is any difference between God and YHWH. His response to YHWH’s agent, calling from afar, is the same as his response to God and his son Isaac, both of whom are in his presence.

It is YHWH, speaking through his messenger, who proclaims that Abraham has passed the test that God has set him. God himself is silent – the words he has spoken to Abraham in setting the test are the last he will ever speak to him. It is not the immanent

⁴⁸³ Kugel, The God of Old, 34–35. For discussion of Kugel’s observations, see chapter 6.
God who evaluates Abraham’s response to his test but the transcendent YHWH, who promises through his emissary to richly reward Abraham. Abraham acknowledges YHWH by naming the place ‘YHWH will provide’. The narrator steps forward to explain that, following in Abraham’s footsteps, people have continued ‘until today’ to call that mountain ‘YHWH will provide.’

As YHWH’s method of communication differs from God’s, so does the kind of reward he offers. After this test of Abraham, God withholds his intimate and immanent personal presence. It is YHWH who rewards him, with promises of future posterity and power, and with gifts of concubines and more children.

Two Deities

The appearance of the two most common names for the Deity together in this story does not necessarily suggest two different gods. In many texts throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the two names stand side by side and refer to the one Deity. In this story, however, the two names are affixed to two deities who do not behave in the same way.

The divine names יְהוָה and אלהים carry different nuances. Robert Gordon writes: ‘YHWH is rightly described as the God of Israel: he is the national God.’484 Bernard Lang remarks: ‘Elohim carries a more general meaning – he is the Creator and the universal god, ruler of all creation.’485 These two names do not only reflect different roles of the deity, but can also imply different characteristics. Lang claims:

The temperaments of the two deities also differ: whereas Yahweh appears to be a stern austere figure, prone to anger and meting out punishment, Elohim seems to be an intrinsically kindly god (just like El.

---

Shaddai). It should be clear, however, that this kind of distinction between Yahweh and Elohim does not operate in all biblical texts.\textsuperscript{486}

In Genesis 22, it is (ha)Elohim who asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Since we are told, however, that this does not represent his actual will for Isaac but is a test of Abraham, this does not imply that he wishes the sacrifice to be carried out. That God never speaks to Abraham again may suggest disappointment with Abraham’s response. I suggest that in showing himself willing to perform a human sacrifice, Abraham has failed the test. Stephen Stern concurs with this suggestion when he writes:

[I]f Abraham murders Isaac, he fails the test. This failure would expose and reemphasize that if Abraham’s ego silences Isaac (treating Isaac as an object for himself or a receptacle for his actions), he is being idolatrous and barbarically violent towards Isaac.\textsuperscript{487}

Paradoxically, although it is YHWH who authorizes the termination of the sacrifice, it is also he who rewards Abraham richly because he was prepared to perform it. It is the contention of this study that YHWH saves Isaac because he is to carry the future of Israel into the next generation and not because he wishes to teach Israel that child sacrifice is unacceptable. By bestowing his blessing in the form of a myriad of descendants who will ‘possess the gates of their enemies’ and bring blessing to all the earth, YHWH commends Abraham’s readiness to perform a human sacrifice.

In my reading of the Aqedah, the person who redacted different sources to make the final form of this story found before him two different portraits of Israel’s deity: one, the Creator God who stands beside his creatures and the other, YHWH, the powerful Lord of Israel. This writer/redactor chose not to harmonise the names, but left them side by side.

\textsuperscript{486} Lang, \textit{The Hebrew God}, 200.  
side in his final work. These two portraits do not, therefore, depict two different deities but serve to bring before the reader two differing perceptions of Israel’s deity. Thus we see YHWH as heaping rewards on Abraham for his willingness to participate in child sacrifice, while God ceases to interact with Abraham after this incident. It is important to note that the writer/redactor does not think in terms of two gods, but of two different ways of perceiving the One God. It is also important to note that these two portraits of the Deity cannot be generalised beyond this one text in the book of Genesis. Typically, the narrator does not tell his readers which perception of the Deity is correct, but lays them side by side for their consideration.

Abraham is revealed in this story as being obedient to the Deity, but also as lacking the ability to discern the differences between the two portrayals of God. I suggest that Abraham’s lack of discernment is being held up as the prototype of Israel’s lack of recognition of the true nature of her Deity.

It has been increasingly proclaimed, in the last forty years, that the religion of Israel during the period covered by the Hebrew Scriptures was not uniformly monotheistic. Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger state: ‘Recent Old Testament research … generally assumes that the religion of preexilic Israel and Judah is to be characterized as thoroughly polytheistic.’

Mark Smith points out:

Although the biblical witness accurately represented the existence of Israelite worship of Baal and perhaps of Asherah as well, this worship was not so much a case of Israelite syncretism with the religious

---

practices of its Canaanite neighbors, as some biblical passages depict it, as it was an instance of old Israelite religion.\textsuperscript{489}

Ziony Zevit, in his comprehensive study of the religions of Ancient Israel, describes Israel’s attitude as one of complex religious pluralism. Although YHWH was seen as Israel’s own Deity, people also worshipped other deities.\textsuperscript{490} Zevit traces the attempt at the centralization of the religion of Israel under Hezekiah in part to a ‘pre-deuteronomic YHWH-alone ideology’\textsuperscript{491} that Hezekiah harnessed to advance his irredentist program. Almost three generations later, Josiah again attempted to ‘replace popular cultic practices with an official religion.’\textsuperscript{492} Zevit points out that Josiah’s reforms may not have had popular support.\textsuperscript{493} Certainly, within months of Josiah’s death, his YHWH-alone policies had been set aside.\textsuperscript{494} This suggests that official religion had not succeeded in eradicating popular religion and that the YHWH-alone faction had not prevailed. Zevit explains: ‘Despite the efforts of YHWH-aloners, … there was hardly uniformity in the perceptions of YHWH’s history, mythologies, or cults, even during the eighth to sixth centuries.’\textsuperscript{495} He goes on to declare that the YHWH-alone movement eventually succeeded in having ‘the final say about the meaning of Israel’s past and its place in the cosmos \textit{vis-à-vis} YHWH’ with the result that ‘its voices alone sound clearly through the curated texts comprising the biblical corpus.’\textsuperscript{496}

\textsuperscript{489} Mark Smith, \textit{The Early History of God} (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), xxiii.
\textsuperscript{491} Zevit, \textit{Religions of Ancient Israel}, 660.
\textsuperscript{492} Zevit, \textit{Religions of Ancient Israel}, 658.
\textsuperscript{493} Zevit, \textit{Religions of Ancient Israel}, 661.
\textsuperscript{494} Zevit, \textit{Religions of Ancient Israel}, 662.
\textsuperscript{495} Zevit, \textit{Religions of Ancient Israel}, 688.
\textsuperscript{496} Zevit, \textit{Religions of Ancient Israel}, 689.
According to Zevit’s understanding, it may be assumed that the person who redacted the two or more original accounts of the Aqedah to produce the final form was a voice for the YHWH-alone interest and was also aware of the many other deities to which the people of Israel prayed and sacrificed. In portraying Abraham as a man who can see no difference between a deity who rewards his willingness to perform a human sacrifice and the God of Israel, he is holding up a mirror before his readers.

This was not just a matter of religious allegiance, of the name of the deity one chose to honour, but more importantly, about the nature of one’s deity. To say that one worshipped only YHWH while attributing to him all the characteristics of Baal was a misrepresentation of one’s God. To say one worshipped Elohim whilst caring only for the fate of Israel was to deny Elohim’s nature as creator of the whole universe. To honour one’s Deity as giver and sustainer of life for all human beings whilst offering a human sacrifice was to offer improper worship. The redactor of Genesis 22 is concerned with not just a token monism, but with the integrity of the recognition and worship of God.

I suggest that the writer/redactor of the binding of Isaac found before him a version of the story in which Elohim was portrayed as standing in intimate relationship with Abraham and a version in which YHWH was depicted as a distant but powerful deity. He thus allocated their roles in his final form of the story. He may also have been influenced by the universal nature of Elohim, who created and cares for all of the world and wished to employ this image of the Deity. Genesis 22 is linked intertextually with the narrative of Judges 11, the sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah. In this story, it is to YHWH that the vow is made and it is he who grants victory, making the vow binding.
This may also have influenced the writer/redactor of Genesis 22 in his apportioning of roles to YHWH and Elohim in this redaction of the Aqedah.

Abraham

This story adds the final touches to the portrait of Abraham that has been built up throughout Genesis to date. It shows us a man who is obedient to God, tolerant of others, non-aggressive, and sometimes non-assertive to the point of timidity. Asked by God to give up everything and go, he goes without question (Gen. 12:1–4). Twice when he feels that he is at risk because of his wife’s beauty, he pretends that she is his sister and is even prepared to have her enter another man’s harem rather than tell the truth and endanger himself (Gen. 12:11–5, 20:2–3). In 13:5–11, when there is conflict between Abraham’s servants and those of Lot, Abraham takes steps to restore the peace by separating from his nephew. He permits Lot to choose which area of land he will occupy, and is content to accept whatever is left for himself and his retinue. Although he takes part in the war of the four kings against five, it is only in response to the news that Lot has been taken into captivity. His participation in the conflict would appear to be more in the nature of defense than attack. Once Lot and the other prisoners have been recaptured, Abraham and his men are not reported as killing all their enemies, but pursuing them to Hobah (Gen. 14:15). In the sequel to this victory, Abraham shows that he is not acquisitive, when he refuses to keep any of the plunder he has regained in the battle, but gives a tenth of it to King Melchizedek of Salem and insists upon returning the remainder to the King of Sodom (Gen. 14:20–24). When Sarah reproaches Abraham because Hagar is openly contemptuous of her, he does not try to defend Hagar, but says,
'Your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please' (Gen. 16:6). In Chapter 21, he acquiesces to the sending away of Hagar and his son Ishmael.

Abraham does not demonstrate feelings of hostility or superiority toward the foreigners among whom he finds himself. In 21:22–24, he willingly swears an oath of loyalty to Abimelech and, when Abimelech’s servants seize a well, Abraham gives sheep and cattle to Abimelech as though he himself has been in the wrong. When Sarah dies, Abraham’s standing among his neighbours, whatever he might feel himself, is no longer that of a sojourner in a foreign land, for he is addressed by the Hittites as ‘a mighty prince among us’ (Gen. 23:6) and Ephron is willing to give him, rather than sell him, the cave of Machpelah. Throughout the history of his journeying with God, Abraham emerges as a man who is respectful, willing to compromise, sometimes fearful, but never openly aggressive and never seeking to dominate others. He is a peacemaker and a peace keeper. He uses violence only as a last resort, to protect Lot, who is entitled to his assistance as a kinsman and whose גֹאֵל (’kinsman redeemer’) he might well be.

This does not mean that Abraham is without faults and shortcomings. As we see in the two wife/sister accounts, he is prepared to lie and risk Sarah’s well-being to protect his own safety. Twice also he chooses not to oppose Sarah in her dealings first with Hagar alone, and then with Hagar and Ishmael. As head of his household he could be expected to protect the welfare of all his dependents and his wish to avoid conflict with Sarah causes suffering to his concubine and her son. Abraham’s faults may be said to be the underside of his virtues, the human weaknesses that arise out of his strengths. If his strength is his non-combative and peace-loving character, his weaknesses are his
occasional lack of courage and his unwillingness to embrace conflict in defense of his dependents.

The dark side of the kind of obedience that Abraham offers is that it is uncritical and indiscriminate. When told to go (chapter 12), he goes. When told to sacrifice, he prepares to sacrifice. Only in Genesis 18:22–33, do we find Abraham standing boldly in the presence of the deity and asking questions, calling his deity to account. Is God, in 22:1, attempting to elicit a similar response? Is there a possibility that Abraham will speak out, not only on behalf of Isaac, but of all those who, in the future, will become victims of child sacrifice – Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11), the oldest and youngest sons of Hiel of Jericho (1 Kings 16:34) – and condemn the practice of human sacrifice outright? He does not do so. The man who pleaded with eloquence for the lives of strangers has no voice to plead for his own son.

Isaac
Isaac is simply the victim, an agent without any character or personality of his own, until he opens his mouth and speaks to his father. In this little scene, we glimpse a childlike curiosity and an artless trust in his father. He does not question Abraham’s evasive reply, but accepts it in silence. We are not told his age, but he is evidently old enough to carry a load of firewood up the mountain and to understand the requirements for a sacrifice. On the mountain-top we perceive him as either passively acquiescent to his father’s intention to sacrifice him, or actively willing to offer himself upon the altar. Not only does he not run away from his aged father, he does not speak or utter a sound. When Abraham goes down from the mountain, Isaac is no longer with him.
The Lads

The lads are agents in this story, without personality or individuality. As Walsh expresses it: ‘They are more like hitching posts than people, but someone has to guard the donkeys!’ They are linked to Isaac by the term used to identify them, נַּר (‘lad’). Gossai observes:

The servants of Abraham (na’arim) are told to wait. As one would expect, the servants do not have a voice. They are simply told what to do. … These servants belong to Abraham, and are at the bottom of the power scale; even when they are present, their voices are silent. The characterization of Isaac in v. 5 is remarkably revealing in that Abraham refers to him as na’ar. That na’ar is used to refer to both the servants and Isaac is singularly significant.

Thus the position of the servants at the bottom of the scale of power suggests the powerlessness of Isaac.

The Narrator

Although he is active throughout the story, the narrator has chosen to work for the most part behind the scenes. Only in verse 14 does he step out of the story to give off-line information - ‘As it is said today, “On YHWH’s mountain it will be provided.”’ From within the narrative, however, he is very influential. In verse 1, he gives us the vital information that God is testing Abraham.

That the reader has been admitted to the narrator’s confidence about God’s intentions and Abraham has not, effectively isolates Abraham at the centre of the story. Because within the storyworld he has not told Sarah about the call to sacrifice Isaac and

497 Walsh, Old Testament Narrative, 24.
cannot tell Isaac or the servants, he is separated from his human associates by a great gulf. Abraham stands alone while God, YHWH, the narrator and the reader look on.

Time and Space

The references to time in this story are few. We are told that this narrative commences ‘after these things’ (v. 1), that is, after the birth of Isaac, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, and the covenant with Abimelech at Beersheba. We are told that Abraham gets up early in the morning (v. 3) to go to the place of sacrifice and that the journey takes three days. These scant mentions are all the indicators of time that the reader is given.

Indicators of space are given far more prominence. No containers are mentioned, and although the path Abraham and his party travel is suggested, the journey receives no emphasis in the text. Instead of focusing upon the journey, the attention of the reader is returned repeatedly to the destination. In verse 2, God tells Abraham to take Isaac and to sacrifice him על הארûים אשם אשם אלהים ('on one of the mountains that I will tell you'). This phrase is echoed in verses 3 and 9 - המוקם אשר אמרתי אלהים ('the place that [the] God told him'). The narrator speaks of המוקם ('the place') in verse 4, and המוקם הזה ('that place') in verse 14 (but in association, this time, with YHWH not ‘the God’). This destination is also referred to as הכל ('here’ – v. 5) and שם ('there' – v. 9). As readers, our attention is repeatedly drawn to the place of sacrifice. The writer of this story lays great emphasis on the place and on the fact that it has been chosen by God. It was in this place and no other that God had chosen to be worshipped. Schmid explains:

Abraham needs to travel to a special place to carry out the sacrifice: Gen 22 seems to know and respect the claim in Deut 12 for a centralized cult. And as becomes clear with the mention of Moriah (22:2; see 2 Chr 3:1),
Abraham is sacrificing in the place where later, in the time of Solomon, the temple of Jerusalem will be built. In keeping with the fictitious patriarchal setting of Gen 22, Jerusalem cannot yet be named explicitly.499

Many other scholars have also perceived this story as an etiology for a place of worship. Gary Anderson states:

Biblical scholars have long noted the etiological sense of Genesis 22. The story of the theophany that Abraham experiences on this mountain is not simply a one-time event but marks the founding of a site for worship.500

Levenson declares:

This tendency to attribute the foundation of the important centres of worship to the Patriarchs has suggested to many scholars that the major etiological function of the story of the binding of Isaac is to account for the founding of a particular cult-site.501

Levenson goes on to identify this cult-site with the site of the temple in Jerusalem.502 Guided by the tradition that found expression in 2 Chronicles 3:1, where Solomon’s temple is built on Mount Moriah, he identifies the temple mount as the mountain in Moriah which God, the God, has chosen himself as the place of sacrifice. Israel, following in the footsteps of Abraham, will be blessed by sacrificing in this place. Although the story does not exhibit the characteristics of an etiology of the abolition of human sacrifice, in functioning as an etiology for the establishment of the

---

501 Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 114.
502 Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 115.
site of the temple, where animal sacrifice was the norm, it nonetheless witnesses to the exchange of animal sacrifice for human sacrifice.

**Point of View**

As has been noted, from the first verse of this narrative, our perception of this story is complicated by the fact that our view as readers includes this important fact that Abraham does not know. Berlin states:

> Although the reader has knowledge that the main character is lacking – namely that God is testing Abraham – the reader does not perceive the events of the story from a remote distance, but focuses on them through Abraham. He hears what God says to Abraham, and moves with him through the slow, deliberate telling of each step in the preparations: saddling the donkey, taking his two servants, and Isaac, and the firewood. The camera, as it were, follows Abraham close up, rarely moving back to sweep the entire scene. In fact, we see the designated place for the sacrifice only when Abraham glimpses it from afar.\(^{503}\)

For most of the story, we see from Abraham’s point of view, but as Berlin makes clear:

> [E]ven when the view is internal in respect to the action, it is external in respect to Abraham, i.e., the psychological level. We do not know what is going on in his mind; we see only his physical movements and hear the words he utters aloud.\(^{504}\)

We continue to follow the story from Abraham’s point of view until the moment in verse 6 when Abraham and Isaac go up the mountain together. Then the camera moves and, from the perspective of the two lads, we watch them walk away. We watch as Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son and witness the intervention of the messenger of YHWH. The word הִנֵּה (‘behold’) lets us see momentarily through Abraham’s eyes

---

504 Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 58.
as he sees the ram. Our point of view then moves outside of him and remains fixed externally upon Abraham until he returns to the lads and they depart for Beersheba.

**Gaps and Ambiguities**

There are a number of gaps and ambiguities in this story. The most important is the fate of Isaac at the end of the story. All we are told is that Abraham comes down the mountain to re-join his servants, and that they go to Beersheba, where Abraham stays. As has been noted, Isaac is never seen in company with his father after this story.

I have already referred to several ambiguities within the text. In the first place, why does Abraham tell the lads that Isaac will return with him from the place of sacrifice? Although a number of theories exist on this point, I have suggested that the most plausible is that Abraham conceals the truth that he does not expect Isaac to return with him so that the two lads cannot intervene, or alert Isaac to the danger he is in. In the second place, why does Abraham tell Isaac that God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice? Again, I believe that he glosses over the truth, because he does not wish to alarm his son or warn the lads. Although these seem to me the most likely reasons for these two statements of Abraham, I must also suggest that the ambiguities in this story do not simply arise out of our distance from the event related and our lack of familiarity with the context of the writer, but are a deliberate result of decisions the author has made. Many ambiguities also arise, as we have seen, in the areas of the feelings and motivations of the characters, into whose hearts and minds we are given no access. Because of this reticence on the part of the writer/redactor of the final form of this text, readers will continue to find different things within this story.
Key Words, Motifs and Theme

The first fourteen verses of the narrative are heavily dominated by sacrificial language. The root 'עלה (‘to offer as a whole burnt offering’/ ‘to sacrifice’) occurs eight times (vv. 2[twice], 3, 6, 7, 8, and 13 [twice]). עץ (‘wood’) occurs five times (vv. 3, 6, 7, and 9 [twice]). A number of words are used twice – מאמצלת (‘knife,’ vv. 6 and 10), עץ (‘altar,’ v. 9 [twice]), אש (‘fire,’ vv. 6 and 7), איל (‘ram,’ v. 13 [twice]) and קָט (‘sheep,’ vv. 7 and 8). Three significant words are used once. שָׁחַט (‘to slaughter’) is found in verse 10, חוה (‘to worship’) is found in verse 5, and עָקַד (‘to bind’) is found in verse 5. In all, there are twenty-six occasions on which words pertaining to sacrifice are used. These words together form a sacrifice motif, which is very strong in the first fourteen verses of the narrative.

References to the place of sacrifice are also found in this section of the story. In verse 2, God tells Abraham to take Isaac and to sacrifice him על אֶת־הַר הַרְהֵר לְאָבִית (‘on one of the mountains that I will tell you’). In verses 3 and 9, the phrase המקומ 누רי א˃א מַלְכִּים (‘the place that [the] God told him’) is used. The word המקומ (‘the place’) occurs in verse 4, and המקומ הָאָרֶץ (‘that place’) in verse 14. These references build the motif of the divinely-chosen place of sacrifice.

The second section (vv. 15–18) is dominated by the language of promise. Earlier in the Abraham cycle we have heard God’s promises to Abraham (12:2–3; 13:14–17; 15:1–21; 17:7–8) and here they are reiterated, but with some changes and omissions. Perhaps because the promises follow Abraham’s willingness to relinquish his son, they centre upon the provision of many descendants and the blessing of other nations through them. There is no reference to the promise of the land, which figures so heavily in the promises in chapter 13 (vv. 14,15,17), chapter 15 (vv. 7,8,18–21) and chapter 17 (v. 8).
The root ברך (‘to bless’) and the root עֵユーザ (‘seed’/‘offspring’) are both used three times, and the root רבים (‘to make many’) is used twice.

The inter-generational family motif is also significant in this narrative. The word בֵּן with a pronominal suffix (‘your son,’ ‘my son’ and ‘his son’) occurs ten times in the nineteen verses of this narrative. The word אָב occurs twice, both times with pronominal suffixes (‘his father’ and ‘my father’). This reiteration of relational words serves to underline the parent/child relationship between Abraham and Isaac, and starkly illuminates Abraham’s renunciation of the two primary aspects of the father’s role with regard to his child: Abraham is prepared to take life from his child, rather than to give it, and to endanger his child, rather than to protect and provide for him. The disappearance of Isaac from the end of the story finally severs the parent/child bond that has been so deeply compromised by Abraham’s preparedness to sacrifice Isaac.

The task of identifying the theme of this story has been made more complex by the way that two or more different sources have been combined in this redaction of the Aqedah. Although all such notions are conjectural, I would suggest that we have before us a combination of two older accounts, one of which centres around a theme of child sacrifice as obedience to God and the rewards such deeds bring, and the other which is an etiology regarding the abandonment of child sacrifice in favour of animal sacrifice. The existence at one time of this latter document has been proposed by such scholars as Hermann Gunkel, Ernest Wright, and Coats. In combining these sources, however, the writer/redactor has superimposed a third theme: that Israel will only offer

---

507 Coats, ‘Abraham’s Sacrifice,’ 398.
acceptable worship to her Deity when she recognises the true nature of her God, and
where and how he desires to be worshipped.

**Conclusion**

Brueggemann declares:

> What we have in the Old Testament, rather than reportage, is a sustained memory that has been filtered through many generations of the interpretive process, with many interpreters imposing certain theological intentionalities on the memory that continues to be reformulated.

The layering of different interpretive strategies on the story of the binding of Isaac has produced a complex final form. As William Dever suggests:

> [T]he Hebrew Bible is a ‘minority report.’ Largely written by priests, prophets, and scribes who were intellectuals, above all religious reformers, the Bible is highly idealistic. It presents us not so much with a picture of what Israelite religion really was, but of what it should have been. 508

This study perceives, in the storyworld of the Aqedah, a vehicle used by the author/redactor to promote a religion in Israel that broke with the older pluralist religion by focusing on the worship of one God, at the Temple in Jerusalem, where animal sacrifice would replace the older tradition of child sacrifice.

A few questions still confront us in this story. Because God does not command Abraham but rather requests him to sacrifice Isaac, what motivates Abraham to accede without question to this request rather than refusing, or at the least engaging God in discussion on the matter? What is the significance of the name he gives to the place of

---

sacrifice, if this is indeed the site upon which the Temple will one day be built? In Chapter Nine, after the analysis of the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter in Chapter Eight, I will seek answers to these questions with reference to René Girard’s theory.
Chapter Eight: The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter (Judges 11)

Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse the last of the four selected stories, the narrative of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. The story will be translated as literally as is consistent with the conveying of meaning, then read for coherence and integrity. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the narrator’s use of some of the elements of narrative.

I have chosen to divide this narrative into six scenes. Scene One (vv. 1–3) functions as an introduction to the main character, Jephthah, and reveals the motivating force behind the story when it describes him as the illegitimate son of a prostitute, who is a mighty warrior. This verse also introduces Jephthah’s brothers and their expulsion of him from the family home. Scene One functions as a preamble to the story proper. Scene Two (vv. 4–11) depicts the negotiations between Jephthah and the elders of Gilead in the land of Tov. It has unity of place, character and theme. Scene Three (vv. 12–28) contains the messages that are exchanged by Jephthah and the king of the Ammonites and their outcome. It displays unity of character and subject, and also derives unity from the fact that it deals throughout with speech rather than action, and in the main with the past rather than the present. Scene Four (vv. 29–33) presents a complete change of pace and mood as the story returns to the present and gathers momentum. It demonstrates unity of mood, purpose, and subject, and is centred around the person of Jephthah himself. At the heart of this scene, between preparations for war, and its outcome, lies Jephthah’s vow. Scene Five (vv. 34–38) moves to the home of Jephthah and his daughter in Mizpah and is unified by time, place, characters and subject. The final scene, Scene 6 (vv. 39–40), functions as the conclusion to the narrative.
Translation

Scene One (vv. 1–3): The Expulsion of Jephthah

1. And Jephthah the Gileadite

And Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour

and he was the son of a woman, a prostitute.

And Gilead begat Jephthah.

2. And the wife of Gilead bore him sons

And the wife of Gilead bore him sons and the sons of the wife grew up, and they drove Jephthah away, and they said to him

‘You have no inheritance in our father’s house for you are the son of another woman.’

3. And Jephthah fled from before his brothers

And Jephthah fled from before his brothers and he dwelt in the land of Tov.

And empty men gathered around Jephthah, and they went out (raiding) with him.

Notes on Scene One

Verse 1

(‘and Jephthah’) The use of the disjunctive waw here, Webb suggests, serves to ‘set [the story that follows] off from the main stream of the narrative.’

(‘a prostitute’) Schneider states:

The term *zona* is understood to mean a professional prostitute who accepts payment for her services, but it could also apply to a woman who had sex before or outside the confines of marriage.\(^{510}\)

**Verse 3**

(Anîṣîm Šeikh, literally ‘empty men’) BDB defines this usage of ריק as meaning ‘empty, idle, worthless, ethically.’\(^{511}\) The characterization of Jephthah as the leader of a band of outlaws brings to mind Abimelech. As Schneider points out: ‘This is the same term used to describe the people whom Abimelech hired with his seventy shekels.’\(^{512}\)

*Scene Two (vv. 4–11): Jephthah Bargains with the Elders of Gilead*

4. It happened after some time

that the sons of Ammon made war with Israel.

5. And when the sons of Ammon made war with Israel

the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah from the land of Tov.

6. And they said to Jephthah,

‘Come and be our commander and let us make war against the sons of Ammon.’

7. And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead,

‘Did you not hate me

[\(\text{510 Schneider, Judges, 162.}\)
\(\text{511 BDB 9079, 938.}\)
\(\text{512 Schneider, Judges, 165.}\)
and drive me from my father’s house?

And why do you come to me now that you are in distress?’

8. And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah,
‘Therefore now we have returned to you and you come with us and make war against the sons of Ammon, and become a head to us for all the inhabitants of Gilead.’

9. And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead,
‘If you bring me back to make war against the sons of Ammon and YHWH gives them before me, I will be a head to you.’

10. And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah,
‘May YHWH be a hearer between us if we do not thus do as you have said.’

11. And Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead
and the people made him commander and head over them and Jephthah spoke all his words before YHWH at Mizpah.
Notes on Scene Two

Verse 6

הָגִין (‘commander’) John McKenzie claims: ‘This word has a general sense of ruler, but in this context it very probably signifies “military commander.”’513

Verse 7

מִבֵּית אָבִי הֲלֹא אַתֶּם שְׂנֵאתֶם אוֹתִי וַתְּגָרְשׁוּנִי (‘Did you not hate me and drive me from my father’s house?’) This question appears to identify the elders of Gilead with Jephthah’s brothers. Either the eldership of Gilead is made up entirely of Jephthah’s brothers, or at the least, the brothers form a significant part of it. If Jephthah is ‘the son of Gilead,’ as we are told in verse 1, then perhaps the family of Gilead has given their name to the region, and constitute its leading family.

Verse 8

שַׁבְנוּ (‘we have returned’) Webb writes:

This can hardly be taken in its simple literal sense here since it is Jephthah, not the elders who has literally gone away and who literally returns (3a,11a). Rather, it is used metaphorically of a change of mind or attitude in relation to Jephthah. … [The elders of Gilead] adopt the language of repentance.514

וְנִלְחַמְתָּ (‘and [you can] make war’) In verse 6 the elders used the expression ‘we will fight,’ but here the fighting is to be left to Jephthah and his troops. Schneider declares:

513 McKenzie, Judges, 146.
‘Although they made Jephthah a better offer, they exempted themselves from participation in the battle.’

לְרֹאשׁ (‘for a head’) In the face of Jephthah’s apparent reluctance, the elders of Gilead offer Jephthah a greater reward than military leadership by offering him headship over all Gilead.

Verse 9

It is difficult to translate this clause fully because of the emphasis conveyed by the use of the independent pronoun. Takamitsu Muraoka speaks of the ‘strong emotional heightening’ and ‘focused attention or deep self-consciousness’ expressed by the addition of the independent pronoun. This usage is in contrast to the use of the pronoun in verse 1, where the pronoun serves as a ‘simple surrogate’ designed to relieve the ‘monotony of the same noun being repeated again and again.’

Scene Three (vv. 12–28): Jephthah Bargains with the King of Ammon

12. And Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying,

‘What is there between me and you that you have come to me to make war against my land?’

13. And the king of the sons of Ammon said to Jephthah’s messengers,

515 Schneider, Judges, 168.
517 Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 293.
Because Israel took my land
when they were going up from Egypt
from Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan.
And return it in peace now.’

14. And once again Jephthah sent messengers
to the king of the sons of Ammon
and he said to him,
‘Thus says Jephthah:
Israel did not take the land of Moab
or the land of the sons of Ammon.

16. For when they came up from Egypt,
Israel went through the wilderness
as far as the Sea of Reeds
and came to Kadesh.

17. And Israel sent messengers
to the king of Edom, saying
‘Please let us pass through your land,’
and the king of Edom did not listen.
And he also sent to the king of Moab,
and he was not willing
and Israel returned to Kadesh.

18. And they went through the wilderness
and they went around the land of Edom
and the land of Moab.
And they came to the eastern side of the land of Moab.

and they camped beyond the Arnon.

And they did not come within the territory of Moab,
because the Arnon is the border of Moab.

19. And Israel sent messengers to Sihon, the king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, ‘Let us please pass through your land as far as our place.

20. And Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory and Sihon mustered all his people and they camped at Jahaz and made war against Israel.

21. And YHWH the God of Israel gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel and they defeated them. And Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites who dwelt in that land.

22. And they possessed
all the territory of the Amorites
from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok,
and from the wilderness as far as the Jordan.

23. And now YHWH the God of Israel has dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel, and you will dispossess them?

24. And will you not possess what your god causes you to possess?

And all that our God YHWH conquers from before them we will possess.

25. And now, are you indeed better than Balak, son of Zippor, king of Moab?

Did he contend indeed with Israel, or make war against them?

26. When Israel dwelt in Heshbon and her villages
and in Aroer and her villages,
and in all the towns that are beside the Arnon,
for three hundred years,
And why have you not recovered them in that time?
27. And I have not wronged you, and you are doing me injury by making war against me. Let YHWH, the one who judges, judge today between the sons of Israel and between the sons of Ammon.

28. And the king of the sons of Ammon did not listen to the words that Jephthah sent to him.

Notes on Scene Three

Verses 12–28

These verses serve to show Jephthah as an able negotiator and as one who is well versed in the history of Israel. Schneider explains:

While Jephthah’s messenger left out many details included in the original narration of these events (Num 21:22–35; chapters 23–24; Deut. 1:4), it does not deviate from those other references regarding Israel’s relations with Moab and her neighbors. Jephthah detailed the history of the conflict, which is ironic since he has been depicted as an outsider, exiled from his home, and yet was well versed in the history and tradition of Israel. This makes Jephthah the only leader in Judges who exhibited any knowledge of Israelite history or their conflicts.\(^{518}\)

Jephthah demonstrates here that he is steeped in the history of his people and respects the traditions of Israel.

---

\(^{518}\) Schneider, *Judges*, 172.
Verse 12

כִּֽי־בָ֥אתָ  מַה־לִּ֣י וָלָ֔ (literally, ‘What to me and to you that you have come?’) Waltke and O’Connor claim:

In a verbless interrogative clause מה can be used with the lamed of interest (advantage or disadvantage); the question concerns the object of l in a loosely or elliptically defined way. The object is usually personal … double objects are found.519

In this verse, the objects specified are both personal and double.

Verse 17

אֶﬠְבְּרָה־נָּא (‘Let us pass please’) Joüon and Muraoka explain, ‘the entreating particle … is very often found after the cohortative; it adds a nuance of prayer or request, sometimes of energy.’520

Verse 19

ﬠַד־מְקוֹמִי (‘as far as my place’) Waltke and O’Connor deem this to be an adverbial genitive, which involves ‘the object, direct or mediated, of the underlying verbal action’. They write: ‘In Hebrew, adverbial genitives can be classified according to the relationship of the verb to the basic object.’521 They add: ‘If the phrase refers to a goal, there is a verb of motion, either explicit or implicit,’ and they suggest that this phrase carries the sense of ‘the place I am going to.’522

519 Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 323.
521 Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 146.
522 Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 148.
Verse 20

וְלֹא־הֶאֱמִין סִיחוֹン אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל ﬠֲבֹר בִּגְבֻלוֹ (‘And Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his border’) Gesenius states that clauses with transitive verbs expressing mental acts, such as ‘to see,’ ‘to hear,’ ‘to know,’ ‘to believe,’ ‘to remember,’ ‘may be subordinated to the governing verb without the help of a conjunction by simple juxtaposition.’ In this clause, the infinitive absolute עַבְרָה is governed by the verb ‘to trust.’

Verse 23

Joüon and Muraoka write: ‘A question, even when genuine, can be indicated , as in many languages, merely by the rising intonation. ... This type of sentence is particularly frequent with a pronoun and surprised, rhetorical questions.’

Verse 27

Joüon and Muraoka suggest: ‘a personal pronoun tends to occupy the second slot [in a clause] when no prominence is intended to be given to it.’ Where personal pronouns are stressed for the sake of contrast, as they are in the first two clauses of this verse, they are moved to the initial position.

וְאָנֹכִי לֹא־חָטָאתִי לָ (‘I have not wronged you’) Waltke and O’Connor cite this usage of the verb חָטָא as the persistent (present) perfective, which ‘represents a single situation that started in the past but continues (persists) into the present.’

The usual sense of the preposition אַתָּה is comitative. Waltke and O’Connor state: ‘It may mark accompaniment (companionship, fellowship …), interest (accompaniment, literal or metaphorical, for the purpose of helping …) or the complement of verbs of dealing, speaking and making.’\(^528\) Here it occurs with the verb ‘to do/make.’

Scene Four (vv. 29–33): Jephthah Bargains with God

29. And the spirit of YHWH was upon Jephthah

30. And Jephthah made a vow to YHWH.

And he said,

‘If you will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand,

31. and whoever/whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon,

will belong to YHWH,

and I will offer him/her/it as a burnt offering.'
to make war against them
and YHWH gave them into his hand.
33. And he struck them from Aroer
until you come to Minnith, twenty towns,
and as far as Abel-Keramim,
a very great blow,
and the sons of Ammon were humbled
before the sons of Israel.

Notes on Scene Four

Verses 29–31

The narrator does not reveal whether Jephthah’s vow is made under the influence of the spirit or merely on Jephthah’s own initiative.

Verses 30 and 31

These two verses, which tell of Jephthah’s vow, interrupt the flow of the action, and subvert the story line. Up to this point the narrative has concerned the conflict between Israel and Ammon, and Jephthah’s part in it. The end of this story will be told in summary in verses 32 and 33, but the tension of the story is now invested in the fulfilment of Jephthah’s vow. The wording of the verses on either side of those that concern the vow suggest that verses 30 and 31 are an interpolation, since the three usages of the verb עבד (‘to pass over/through’) in verse 29 are separated from the single use of the verb in verse 32.
Verse 31

וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדַּלְתֵי בֵּיתִי (‘whoever/whatever comes out of the doors of my house,’ literally ‘the outcomer that comes out of the doors of my house’) The ambiguous phrasing of Jephthah’s vow makes possible the tragic outcome of the story.

Scene Five (vv. 34–38): Jephthah’s Victim

34. And Jephthah came to Mizpah to his house, and behold! his daughter (was) coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. And she was his only child; apart from her he had neither son nor daughter.

35. And when he saw her, he tore his clothes and said ‘Alas, my daughter! You have indeed brought me low, and you have troubled me! And I opened my mouth to YHWH and I cannot turn back.’

36. And she said to him, ‘My father, you opened your mouth to YHWH. And I opened my mouth to YHWH. Do to me that which went out of your mouth since YHWH has avenged you’
of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.’

37. And she said to her father,

‘Let this thing be done for me.

Let me alone for two months
and let me go up and down on the mountains
and let me weep over my virginity,
I and my companions.’

38. And he said ‘Go!’

and he sent her away for two months.

And she went, she and her companions,
and wept over her virginity upon the
mountains.

Notes on Scene Five

Verse 34

The similarity of this description of the daughter to that of Isaac in Genesis 22:2 has frequently been remarked upon. Both descriptions involve four parts, and both emphasise that this child is an only child. They both employ the word יְחִידָה (‘only one’) to denote the child, (Gen. 22:2; Jdg. 11: 34).

מִמֶּ֖נִּי (‘apart from her’ [literally, ‘him’]). Gesenius declares: ‘Through a weakening in the distinction of gender, which is noticeable elsewhere … and which probably passed from the colloquial language into that of literature, masculine suffixes (especially in the
plural) are not infrequently used to refer to feminine substantives.’529 In this verse a masculine singular ending may be found, where a feminine singular could be expected.

**Verse 35**

Alice Logan suggests that the verb עֲכַר (‘to trouble’) carries a greater intensity of meaning than can readily be expressed in English. It is used eleven times in the Hebrew Scriptures, eight times as a verb and five times as a proper noun in the place name, the Valley of Achor (‘the Valley of Trouble’).530

**Verse 37**

בְּתוּלַי (‘my virginity’) Mieke Bal has suggested that the word בתולה is not simply a positive synonym for the negative clause in v. 39, ‘and she had not known a man’ but that it means ‘nubile’ or ‘marriageable.’ She suggests that this is the period in a girl’s life when she prepared to leave her father’s possession and to pass into the possession of a husband. It is therefore a time of loss of the securities of the father’s house and anxiety about the new life that is to come.531

**Scene Six (vv. 39–40): Jephthah’s Sacrifice**

39. And at the end of two months, מִקֵּץ שלִּים חֳדָשִׁים
she returned to her father, והִי אָלָבָה
and he did to her his vow אֲשֶׁר נָדָר
that he had vowed.

And she had never known a man. וְהִיא לֹא־יָדְﬠָה אִישׁ

And there arose a custom in Israel

And there arose a custom in Israel

40. from that day to this,

from that day to this,

the daughters of Israel went

the daughters of Israel went

to lament

to lament

the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite

the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite

four days a year.

four days a year.

Rhetorical-Narrative Analysis

Scene One (vv. 1–3): The Expulsion of Jephthah

Scene One introduces Jephthah and his brothers and lays before us their relationship.

With typically Hebrew economy, the entire complexity of Jephthah’s character is hinted at in the initial verse. He is described as ‘a mighty man of valour’ and ‘the son of a woman, a prostitute.’ In the space between these two designations, Jephthah’s fate is inscribed. He is a man of power who is powerless, a warrior without a home to defend.

The shadow of his origins will lie across the whole of his story. Because of his illegitimacy, he is rejected by his brothers and driven from his home. He flees to the land of Tov, where he gathers around him a band of mercenaries, ‘empty men’ (v. 3).

Webb writes, ‘other social misfits gather round him and “go out” with him (3d). We are left to draw the natural conclusion – Jephthah and his men sustain themselves by plunder.’

According to Gregory Mobley, the expression גיבור

means something like “hero” or “champion.” Etymologically, with its doubled middle consonant, gibbor is an intensive form of geber, “man.”

In this regard, as masculinity squared, gibbor roughly compares to the English compound “he-man.”

The word חַיִל is more difficult to define. Definitions range “from “capable” to “powerful,” since hayil refers to both wealth and strength.” When the two words combine in the expression גִּבּוֹר חַיִל it is often translated as ‘valiant man,’ or ‘brave warrior’ (de Vaux), or ‘hero of might’ (Bal).

The term אֲנָשִׁים רֵיקִים (‘empty men’) has been variously translated as, for example, ‘vain men’ (KJV), ‘lawless men’ (NET), ‘a group of adventurers’ (NIV), ‘a band of worthless rebels’ (NLT), ‘a rabble’ (NAB), ‘worthless fellows’ (NAS), and ‘outlaws’ (NRS). Mobley writes, ‘The question is what it is that “men with nothing” lack.’ He suggests that these אֲנָשִׁים רֵיקִים are a class of men who have no legitimate place within Israelite society.

Early Iron Age Syro-Palestine was a society in which social identity was rooted in kinship networks and inherited land. Second sons and sons of secondary wives, misfits and mercenaries, outlaws and outlanders: these are just some of those who fell between the kinship cracks. The also-rans in their natal groups, these empty men compensated by forming pseudofamilies under the patronage of warlords, trading their services for portions of martial harvests and brigandage.

This expression occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible: in Judges 9:4 and 11.3 and in 2 Chronicles 13:7.

---

Scene 2 (vv. 4–11): Jephthah Bargains with the Elders of Gilead

The Ammonites declare war against Israel, and the elders of Gilead go to the land of Tov ‘to fetch’ Jephthah (vv. 4, 5). The use of the verb לָקַח, ‘to take’ or ‘to fetch,’ suggests confidence on the part of the elders that they will have no difficulty in procuring Jephthah’s services. As an opening move, the elders offer Jephthah the position of commander of the army. Kenneth Craig suggests:

The office of General will last only as long as the battle itself, and if he falls on the battlefield they suffer no loss. This son of a prostitute, exiled by his brothers, living in a land outside Gilead with “empty” men, they know, but never say, is expendable.537

Jephthah, who has not forgotten his expulsion from his home, bluntly asks whether they are not the same people who hated and rejected him. The elders choose to ignore this rhetorical question. Their discussion with Jephthah is conducted on a business basis: considerations of family have no place in their negotiations. They set out to drive a hard bargain, but find that Jephthah is their equal when it comes to negotiation.

In verse 6, they offer to make him their קצין (‘commander’), but by verse 8 they have had to raise the stakes, in the face of Jephthah’s lack of enthusiasm for their initial offer. Craig observes:

With the original title of General (קָצִין) off the negotiating table, they propose to make him Governor (ראשׁ). The first offer denotes a military leader whose tenure is limited by the time of war. This latest offer of ראשׁ is for political office and assures a term lasting indefinitely, beyond the restoration of peace times. Indeed, Jephthah will hold power ‘for six years’ (12,7). 538

---

Jephthah finally agrees to be the head of all the Gileadites but only if YHWH grants him victory against Ammon. Jephthah goes back with the elders and is made commander and head over Gilead at a ceremony before YHWH at Mizpah.

Prior to Abimelech, all the judges have been ‘raised up’ by YHWH, but in the Jephthah story, the elders make no pretence of consulting YHWH. Schneider remarks:

The legitimacy of the elders’ offer to Jephthah is questionable…. The text provides no indication that the deity told them to make an offer, or that they consulted the deity.539

Scene Three (vv. 12–28): Jephthah Bargains with the King of the Ammonites

Jephthah begins his career as head of Gilead by sending messengers to the Ammonite king to ask ‘What is there between you and me that you have come to me to make war against my land?’ As Webb points out: ‘The tone is not conciliatory, and these are not the words of a man who is desperate for peace.’540 The reply from the king of Ammon is equally terse and uncompromising, as he claims that Israel, in the days when they came up from Egypt, took land that belongs to Ammon. In reply, Jephthah launches into a lengthy rationale for the possession of the land in question. Many scholars have debated why he appears to confuse the history of Ammon with that of Moab. McKenzie dismisses this section of the text as either without historicity or not original, when he argues: ‘This cannot possibly be related to any dispute between Israel and Ammon; unless it is a free composition by a narrator or a redactor, it has been displaced from its original context.’541 Klein regards these verses as an intentional misrepresentation by the writer, designed to tell us something about the character of Jephthah. She declares:

539 Schneider, Judges, 167.
541 McKenzie, World of the Judges, 146.
Jephthah has his facts all wrong. His ‘logical’ argument conflates Moabite, Ammonite, and Amorite historical figures and events and even transposes the national gods….The conflation serves a function: it implies that Jephthah’s knowledge of his people is inaccurate on a factual level. It is no wonder that the king of the Ammonites does not ‘heed the message’ (11.28).542

Klein thus perceives the verses containing Jephthah’s argument to be a ploy on the narrator’s behalf to discredit Jephthah.

Far more convincing is Webb’s explanation, that ‘behind the present expansion of Ammon into Gilead lies a prior expansion of Ammon into Moab.’543 He suggests that Jephthah sees the king of Ammon as ruler of both Moab and Ammon. ‘Thus to his opponent’s charge that Israel took away “my land” (v. 13) Jephthah replies that it took away “neither the land of Moab nor the land of the Ammonites” (v. 15).’544 Brensinger concurs with this view. He suggests that the Ammonite claim on the land in question results ‘from another shift on the political scene of Jephthah’s day.’545 Ammon has defeated Moab and has taken over the southern parts of Moab. As Brensinger remarks: ‘In essence, what was once Moab’s now belongs to Ammon, at least in the Ammonite view of things.’546 This explanation is persuasive and continues to develop the portrayal of Jephthah as a pragmatic, capable and knowledgeable man.

The reason for the inclusion in the Jephthah narrative of this lengthy passage of diplomacy is frequently debated. Schneider writes:

Many scholars have trouble understanding the point of Jephthah’s messenger’s entire recitation. It is long, repeats information found in

542Klein, The Triumph of Irony, 89.
543 Webb, Judges: An Integrated Reading, 56.
544 Webb, Judges: An Integrated Reading, 56.
545 Brensinger, Judges, 131.
546 Brensinger, Judges, 131.
more detail in other books, and does not have any impact on the enemy ruler.\textsuperscript{547}

She goes on to conclude that the speech is included primarily for ‘the readers and or the others in the text who would have heard Jephthah give the speech’.\textsuperscript{548} Jephthah has begun the story as the rejected son of a prostitute, an outsider who serves as the leader of a band of outlaws. Now he demonstrates a new side to his character, presenting himself as a devoted Yahwist who knows the history of his people and strives to vindicate them, seeks peaceful settlement through negotiation, and glorifies his God.\textsuperscript{549}

From the viewpoint of the narrative, therefore, the lengthy diplomacy scene does perform an important function. The narrator has outlined Jephthah’s history in Scene One, he has explained how he rose to the position of commander of the army in Scene Two, and here he presents a lucid picture of how Jephthah functions in this role. Jephthah’s character is set before the reader far more clearly as he is seen in action than could ever be achieved through personal description. At the end of Scene Three, the reader knows that Jephthah is rational and patient, knowledgeable about his country’s history, willing and able to negotiate, a loyal follower of YHWH and a very shrewd man. Without this diplomacy scene, it would not be possible to appreciate the skills that Jephthah brings to his office. In view of the vow scene that will follow, the reader will need to understand who Jephthah is.

The scene also serves another purpose in the story. The narrator carefully sets up the reader’s expectations throughout this diplomatic exchange, generating the anticipation that an account of the war, of the participation of Jephthah and his army in

\textsuperscript{547} Schneider, \textit{Judges}, 173.  
\textsuperscript{548} Schneider, \textit{Judges}, 173.  
\textsuperscript{549} Schneider, \textit{Judges}, 173.
international events, will follow. Having prepared themselves for a narrative of action from the great public world of men, readers will find themselves thrust suddenly into the private world of Jephthah’s home, where he and his daughter alone share the bonds of family. This sudden change has the power both to surprise and to heighten, through unpreparedness, the impact of the scene that will follow. The diplomacy scene lays the foundations for the subversion of the reader’s expectations.

Scene Four (vv. 29–33): Jephthah Bargains with God

The spirit (or breath) of YHWH, deemed by Niditch to be ‘powerful, empowering, dangerous, and difficult to control,’ comes upon Jephthah. Although Jephthah has been chosen by the elders of Gilead without reference to YHWH, he is nonetheless endowed with the spirit of YHWH now (v. 29).

The role of the spirit of YHWH in the book of Judges is open to conjecture. L. G. Stone writes:

Ironically, the spirit plays no role in the stories of Ehud and of Deborah, the two most exemplary and effective judges. By contrast, the spirit’s involvement with Gideon, Jephthah and Samson raises more questions than it answers, directly preceding Jephthah’s vow and Samson’s violation of certain provisions of his Nazirite vow.

He suggests that the book of Judges explores ways to stem the disastrous tide of Israel’s downfall and that endowment with the spirit is one alternative. The spirit of YHWH, however, ‘appears ultimately impotent to save Israel.’ Stone observes:

550 Niditch, Judges, 133.
Occasional onrushes of the spirit’s power have no impact on the downward spiral, and, in the cases of Jephthah and Samson, even appear to accelerate it. Israel’s faithlessness arises from a madness deep in the nation’s heart and cannot be dislodged by a tour de force of the spirit. In contrast to the ecstatic-charismatic ‘power’ approach to leadership embodied in the central section of the book, Judges 1–21 insinuates an alternative: kingship.

The spirit of YHWH is described as being upon Othniel (3:10) and Jephthah (11:29), ‘putting on’ (clothing itself in) Gideon (6:34), and three times as ‘rushing upon’ Samson (14:6, 19; 15:14). With each of these men, the spirit of YHWH prepares them for battle. In the case of Samson, however, it is more than simply empowerment for the task at hand. Mobley writes, ‘[C]ertainly for Samson, the rushing of the breath of YHWH represents the ancient Israelite idiom for divinely inspired martial fury.’

Dolores Kamrada refers to the term ‘wars of YHWH’ (מלחמות יהוה) and suggests:

God assists the warring Israel in many different ways, even casting such wars as the personal struggle of YHWH. Into this concept fits the idea that the spirit of YHWH inspired the commanders. Such a motif, as is well known, is connected to the age of the judges and the beginning of the monarchy in the Deuteronomistic History.

Under the spirit’s influence, Jephthah passes rapidly through Gilead and Manasseh, through Mizpah and on to the Ammonites. Lawson Younger Jr. claims, ‘His “tour” of Gilead and Manasseh (11:29a–b) was probably related to preparation for battle such as recruitment and morale building.’

554 Mobley, Empty Men, 60.
556 Younger, Judges/Ruth, 261.
Up to this point, the narrative has proceeded predictably as a story of diplomacy and war. But here, verses 30 and 31 break into the text, with the account of Jephthah’s vow separating the three usages of the verb עבר (‘he passed through/over’) in verse 29 from the single usage in verse 32. It is here that the expectations of readers are suddenly undermined. Where they have anticipated a description of the battle and its outcome for Gilead and Jephthah, they find a new plot beginning to unfold. This plot will replace the war motif from the ‘outside’ world of men with a sacrifice motif from the ‘inside’ world of women. The conduct of the war, and its outcome, are told briefly in summary in two verses (vv. 32–33) by a narrator whose focus has moved on to the content and implications of Jephthah’s vow.

The beginning of verse 30, וַיִּדַּר יִפְתָּח נֶדֶר (‘And Jephthah made a vow’) forms an inclusio with 39b, וַיַּﬠַשׂ לָהּ אֶת־נִדְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר נָדָר (‘and he did to her his vow he had vowed’). Between these two clauses is enclosed all that pertains to the vow and its execution – the victory given by YHWH that makes the fulfilment of the vow binding upon Jephthah, the identification of the victim, the dialogue about the vow, the daughter’s successful stipulation and the performance of the sacrifice.

Many writers, from antiquity to the present, have speculated about why Jephthah makes this vow. Some, notably Phyllis Trible, have claimed that it is unnecessary since Jephthah has already been endowed with YHWH’s Spirit and indicates a lack of faith on Jephthah’s behalf. Brown concurs with Trible’s view:

But how pious was Jephthah’s vow? Would not the gift of the Holy Spirit have been sufficient to assure him of victory? Rather than go in the

557 Webb, Judges: An Integrated Reading, 63.
558 Trible, Texts of Terror, 96.
strength he had …, Jephthah preferred to strike a deal with the Lord, to manipulate him in order to guarantee success.\textsuperscript{559}

Kamrada offers a convincing explanation for the making of Jephthah’s vow. She describes holiness in the Hebrew understanding as having two aspects: a positive aspect which protects, and a negative aspect which threatens. הֶרֶם, the dedication by which conquered enemies are destroyed for YHWH, is a manifestation of the latter aspect of holiness. YHWH, although he may fight for Israel, can also turn against his people if he is displeased. Kamrada states:

According to the religious concept of warfare, as we could already see in some texts, Israel should be very careful, since either the wrath of YHWH or herem curse or trouble and misfortune might well turn against Israel too.\textsuperscript{560}

Judges 10 describes the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel, who have worshiped other gods and have roused the anger of YHWH. Jephthah may therefore have gone into battle with doubts about whether YHWH will unleash his just anger upon his army. In order to invoke the positive aspects of holiness and secure YHWH’s protection for his people, Jephthah makes his vow. After analysing the sacrifices of Mesha (2 Kings 3:27) and Hiel (1 Kings 16:34), Kamrada concludes: ‘the human sacrifice dedicated to YHWH was possibly regarded as effective for gaining military success.’\textsuperscript{561}

Other scholars regard the vow as having been hastily and perhaps rashly made in the heat of battle. Yairah Amit describes Jephthah as ‘an irresponsible taker of vows, who becomes entangled in human sacrifice.’\textsuperscript{562} Boling speaks of Jephthah’s ‘hastily formulated vow.’\textsuperscript{563} Brensinger refers to the vow as Jephthah’s ‘most devastating

\textsuperscript{559} Brown, ‘Judges’, 228.
\textsuperscript{560} Kamrada, \textit{Heroines, Heroes and Deity}, 16.
\textsuperscript{561} Kamrada, \textit{Heroines, Heroes and Deity}, 22.
\textsuperscript{562} Yairah Amit, \textit{The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing} (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 87.
\textsuperscript{563} Boling, \textit{Judges}, 210.
mistake.’ 564 Younger writes that the vow is ‘rash and imprudent.’ 565 Arthur Cundall claims, ‘[Jephthah] showed his lack of appreciation of the character and requirements of the Lord, … by seeking to secure the favour of God by his rash vow.’ 566 The narrator has gone to great lengths, however, to depict Jephthah as a shrewd man and a capable diplomat. In his negotiations with the elders of Gilead and the King of Ammon, he has been anything but rash, impetuous or imprudent. The reader has had ample opportunity to observe him in speech and action and therefore cannot attribute his vow to such personality traits.

I suggest that Jephthah makes his vow because he is always, even as the commander of the army of Gilead, ‘a mighty man of valour’ who is ‘the son of a woman, a prostitute.’ Like many before and after him, Jephthah cannot cast off the tyranny of the past. Throughout his life, he will continue to try to compensate for his early powerlessness at the hands of his brothers and the driving force behind his life and career is this need for power. In this scene, this strong imperative drives Jephthah to make his vow. Kamrada claims:

Jephthah has just managed to find his way back to the clan system from a position of quasi-outlaw. He is a קצין and ראשׁ of Gilead (terms probably denoting military and civil leadership positions respectively), but everything seems to be at stake, the stability of his position may depend on the outcome of the war (cf. Judg. 11:6–10). When taking his vow, Jephthah’s intention seems to be to secure his position at all costs — even to the extent of offering someone else’s life, and trying to bribe YHWH. 567

564 Brensinger, Judges, 133.
565 Younger, Judges/Ruth, 262.
567 Kamrada, Heroines, Heroes and Deity, 25.
In this vow, Jephthah makes his greatest bid in bargaining with YHWH. Webb writes, ‘As the elders once offered inducement to Jephthah, so Jephthah now offers inducements to Yahweh.’ Jephthah understands Israel’s God to desire sacrifice, and if he has, as I will suggest, framed this vow to entrap a human victim, he perceives human sacrifice as the most pleasing offering to his God. It is this conviction of the desirability of human sacrifice to YHWH that brings about the tragedy of the death of his daughter. Jephthah will know that YHWH has accepted the vow and has invested him with power if the Ammonites are given into his hand.

The narrator tells us, ‘So Jephthah passed on to the sons of Ammon to make war against them, and YHWH gave them into his hand. He beat them hard from Aroer until you come to Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-Keramim, and the sons of Ammon were humbled before the sons of Israel’ (vv. 32–33). This victory, so powerful and comprehensive, demonstrates that YHWH has put his authority behind Jephthah, as he gives the Ammonites ‘into his hand’ (v. 32). All Jephthah has to do now is to fulfil the vow that YHWH has accepted.

In response to Brown, Amit, Boling, Brensinger, Younger and Cundall, this study argues that the reader’s knowledge of Jephthah, so carefully cultivated by the narrator in Scene Three, precludes an understanding of the vow as rash, ill-considered or hastily performed. Jephthah has been shown to the reader as a careful and capable man. He has, however, never been depicted as kindly, compassionate or warm. It is the claim of this thesis that Jephthah makes the vow as a considered move in his rise to power, in acceptance of the fact that someone else will die in the service of his ambitions.

568 Webb, Judges: An Integrated Reading, 64.
For centuries, there has been disagreement about who or what Jephthah expects will come out of the door of his house. Boling argues that, because livestock were kept within the walls of houses in Jephthah’s time, he might have anticipated that an animal would emerge, but this argument is not persuasive. 569 A number of reasons why this scenario is unlikely have been put forward. Ehrlich sums up the most obvious objection when he writes, ‘It follows from the wording of the verse that Jephthah referred to a person and not to an animal, as an animal does not go forth to greet someone coming.’ 570 A second reason for doubting that an animal sacrifice was envisaged lies in our knowledge of human nature. Schneider states, ‘Sisera’s mother reveals that, at least among the Canaanites, or the Canaanite nobility, women waited anxiously for the men to return. This has not changed considerably throughout the last three thousand years.’ 571 For this reason, Jephthah could expect that a human being who loves him would be the one to hurry out in greeting.

There are also several practical problems involved in assuming that Jephthah is expecting an animal to meet him. Granted that animals were kept in the area enclosed about the house, they were presumably not able to wander out into the street at will, but were suitably confined, and so would not come out the doors. In addition, among those kept penned in the courtyard would be animals that by virtue of species, age, health or gender could not according to law be sacrificed. For these reasons, this study assumes that Jephthah was offering his deity a human sacrifice. James Martin concludes that ‘Jephthah must have envisaged human sacrifice … The Deuteronomist passes no judgement on the practice; he simply records it.’ 572

569 Boling, Judges, 208, 209. Younger (Judges, Ruth, 263) concurs with this view, when he writes, ‘Sheep or cattle (things usually offered as a burnt offering) would … be in view.’
571 Schneider, Judges, 175.
The question then arises, ‘Does Jephthah expect this human sacrifice will involve his daughter?’ Given that his wife is absent from the text, the most likely person to come out to meet Jephthah is his only family member, his daughter. E. C. Rust points out that ‘[a]s with Miriam’s greeting and at Saul’s victorious return (Exod. 15:20; 1 Sam. 18:6),’ so Jephthah will be ‘greeted by the women of his household with timbrels and dances.’573 I suggest that, at the very least, Jephthah must have been aware of the possibility that his daughter would be the one to step into the victim’s place in his vow.

Scene Five (vv. 34–38): Jephthah’s Victim

Jephthah comes home to Mizpah in triumph, and goes to his house. Before he has reached the door, we are arrested by the expression, "וְהִנֵּה בִתּוֹ יֹצֵאת לִקְרָאתוֹ" (‘And behold! His daughter coming out to meet him!’). Brown comments:

[T]he sentence does not even contain a verb, but only a participle, which further heightens the dramatic impact of the moment; the present tense draws us into the story so that we, along with Jephthah, watch the events unfold.574

Jephthah’s daughter emerges from the door of his house ‘with timbrels and with dancing’ (v. 34a). Esther Fuchs makes the comment, ‘Greeting her father with timbrels and dance the daughter is presented as a victim of dramatic irony; she does not know the gruesome meaning of her joyful actions.’575 The narrator chooses this moment to tell us: ‘She was his only child; apart from her he had neither son nor daughter’ (v.34b).

Webb writes:

[S]he comes out alone, and it is her solitariness which is given terrible emphasis in 34cd: ‘only she, alone; beside her he had neither son nor daughter’. The words underline both the isolation of the child (she and no other is to be the sacrifice) and the plight of the parent (the vow will render him childless, his personal שלום is shattered).\textsuperscript{576}

Jephthah responds by rending his garments and saying, ‘Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become trouble to me! For I opened my mouth to YHWH and I cannot turn back.’ As was highlighted in the notes on Scene Four, the word that I have translated as ‘trouble’ (עכר) is very significant. Logan claims that in many of its verbal usages ‘the word describes the terrible anger of YHWH and the disaster it brings when an agreement with him has been breached.’\textsuperscript{577} Logan suggests that the connection with the Valley of Achor, where Joshua executed the person who broke the ban, is important here, and that the use of the word in this context functions as ‘a constant reminder of the serious consequences of not keeping a war vow, and a serious portent of what would happen if Jephthah did not keep his.’\textsuperscript{578}

Jephthah has been much criticised for both making and keeping this vow. Vow making, however, was a common and legitimate activity in Israel. Brensinger writes:

Vows constituted a common and accepted practice among both the Israelites as well as their neighbors… Rather than condemning them, the legislative materials in the OT even provide instructions to ensure that vows are properly carried out.\textsuperscript{579}

\textsuperscript{576} Webb, \textit{Judges: An Integrated Reading}, 66.

\textsuperscript{577} Logan, ‘Rehabilitating Jephthah’, 679.

\textsuperscript{578} Logan, ‘Rehabilitating Jephthah’, 679.

\textsuperscript{579} Brensinger, \textit{Judges}. 138.
Vows to YHWH, Brown states, ‘were believed to be impossible to nullify, since
the word spoken represented the deed done.’ Moreover, this is no ordinary vow, but a
vow made in time of war. Niditch clarifies:

As with Num. 21:2–3, the warrior promises a sacrifice of some sort to
God in exchange for victory in battle. The war ideology of the ban by
which whole populations and towns are destroyed as a ‘whole burnt
offering’ to YHWH (see Deut 13:16) is integrally related to an ideology
of sacrifice…. The authors of Genesis 22 and this passage understand
that all life is God’s to bestow or take back.

Kamrada asserts:

[T]he vow, like every vow, is irrevocable; no matter how dreadful it was,
if Jephthah did not fulfil it, it would be a great offence against the holy
sphere and a misuse of holiness.

Jephthah’s daughter is quick to guess Jephthah’s meaning. Moore suggests that
although Jephthah has not specifically mentioned the vow, his daughter has already
understood. He writes:

Since it appears in verse 37 that she is fully aware of her fate, although it
has not been named, Budde conceives that, by accident or design, part of
the dialogue has been omitted between verse 35 and verse 36; the
daughter must have asked the meaning of her father’s enigmatic speech,
verse 35, and he must have given the explicit answer. To me it seems,
on the contrary, much more in accord with the native art of the story-

581 Numbers 21:2–3 reads, ‘Then Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will indeed give this
people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns.” The LORD listened to the voice of Israel,
and handed over the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so the place was called
Hormah.’
582 Niditch, Judges, 133.
583 Kamrada, Heroines, Heroes and Deity, 22.
584 This is a reference to Karl Budde, Das Buch der Richter und Samuel, 126.
teller that he lets the situation and a woman’s quick presentiment suffice, without this prosaic explanation.585

No less than Jephthah does his daughter believe that this vow cannot be redeemed. She at once connects the vow to the outcome of the war, saying ‘Do to me according to what has come out of your mouth, since YHWH has avenged you of your enemies…’ (v. 36). She goes on to make her only stipulation. ‘Let this thing be done for me. Let me alone for two months, and let me go up and down on the mountain, and let me weep over my virginity, I and my companions’ (v. 37). Danna Nolan Fewell concludes:

She chooses to take upon herself his vow, but she does not choose his company. She spends her remaining days with other young women who know her, who know what it is like to be a young woman in the midst of a violent society, and who, in the end, will not forget what she has done.586

Verses 36 and 37 contain all the words that Jephthah’s daughter will speak. She begins with אב ('my father') and ends with רעותי ('my companions'). Cheryl Exum writes, ‘Symbolically, through speech, she journeys from the domain of the father who will quench her life to that of the female companions who will preserve her memory.”587

The clause אמבטיה עליבוהל ('and I will weep upon my virginity') has been interpreted by many commentators as an expression of regret by Jephthah’s daughter that she has been denied the fulfilment of motherhood.588 Schneider, however, reflects on the unique portrayal of the role of women that is found in Judges. She argues:

585 Moore, Judges, 302.
588 For example, Boling, Judges, 209; Brown, ‘Judges’, 230–231; Brensinger, Judges, 135; Cundall, ‘Judges,’ 148; Klein, Triumph of Irony, 95; McKenzie, Judges, 148.
In other biblical books the women’s main role revolves around their reproductive status and, if they produce children, how they play a role in the lives of their offspring. Such is not the case in Judges. … The assumption that Jephthah’s daughter’s distress is rooted in her lack of children is unfounded and goes against the pattern of women in the book thus far.  

Schneider goes on to suggest that ‘[t]he stress repeatedly on what she was missing emphasises sexual experience.’ Given the model provided by the book of Judges, this is a valid assessment.

Jephthah responds to his daughter’s request with the single word, ‘Go!’ and she goes to spend two months weeping over her virginity in the mountains. Commentators do not remark on the extraordinary nature of this request and Jephthah’s agreement to it. In Ancient Israel, virginity was a prerequisite for marriage for a woman. Wenham remarks, ‘in biblical society, girls married young and premarital sex was viewed with contempt, so girls were expected to be virgins when they married.’ The act of permitting a band of nubile girls to wander unsupervised in the mountains for two months is therefore foolish indeed. Since they are unlikely to have carried sufficient food with them to support such a long stay, they must have been accessible to others, who would deliver what they needed from time to time. They would therefore be accessible to any men who chose to make the journey into the mountains. In addition, this story occurs halfway through Judges, when the safety and security of Israel has already begun to decline toward its nadir in chapters 19–21. A band of young women, alone in the mountains, must surely court considerable risk. Why are the parents of Gilead prepared to allow their nubile daughters such perilous freedom?

589 Schneider, Judges, 180–181.
590 Schneider, Judges, 181.
One possible answer to this question is that this is not an activity that Jephthah’s daughter has just devised, but a pre-organised occurrence. The girls’ stage of life, coupled with the fact that mountains are sometimes viewed as liminal zones, suggests that perhaps this expedition was an annual event, in which girls approaching marriageable age went with their peer group and adult mentors into a remote place to prepare for their move into an adult phase of life. Jephthah’s daughter may be referring to the fact that she has planned to be part of this expedition and is asking for permission to join in with her peers before being sacrificed. Peggy Day concurs with this reading when she claims that Jephthah’s daughter goes with her companions to ‘bewail her adolescence’ as part of an annual expedition concerned with the female rite of passage to adulthood. This ensures that every year when girls participate in this rite of passage, Jephthah’s daughter will be remembered.\textsuperscript{592}

\textit{Scene Six (vv. 39–40): Jephthah’s Sacrifice}

At the end of the two months, she returns to her father, who ‘did to her the vow that he had vowed.’ Phyllis Trible writes:

The verb \textit{do} has now completed its life in this episode. ‘\textit{Do} to me,’ she had said, ‘according to what goes forth from your mouth, since Yahweh has done to you deliverance’ (11:36). Thus ‘he did to her his vow which he had vowed,’ (11: 39b).\textsuperscript{593}

Many people, from David Kimchi (at the end of the 12\textsuperscript{th} century) to the present, have been uneasy about this story of human sacrifice and have attempted to find less offensive ways to read it. Until medieval times, however, both Jewish and Christian


\textsuperscript{593} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 105.
interpreters believed that Jephthah did indeed sacrifice his daughter as a burnt offering.

C. F. Keil and F. Delitzch observe:

With regard to Jephthah’s vow, the view expressed so distinctly by Josephus and the Chaldee was the one which generally prevailed in the earlier times among both Rabbis and fathers of the church, viz., that Jephthah put his daughter to death and burned her upon the altar as a bleeding sacrifice to Jehovah. It was not till the middle ages that Mos. and Dav. Kimchi and certain other Rabbis endeavoured to establish the view, that Jephthah merely dedicated his daughter to the service of the sanctuary of Jehovah in a lifelong virginity.  

In defence of his theory, Kimchi writes:

It is quite clear that he did not kill her because the text does not say ‘I will mourn for my life.’ This indicates that he did not kill her but rather that she did not know a man, because the text says ‘she did not know a man.’

Kimchi’s theory that Jephthah’s daughter’s life was spared and that she was devoted to a life of celibacy in God’s service has continued to prove attractive to some, but a number of arguments have been made against it. It has frequently been pointed out that there is no evidence that women did remain virgins in God’s service in Ancient Israel, or that celibacy was prized for either sex. Also, as Matthew Henry states, ‘Besides, had she only been confined to a single life, she needed not to have desired these two months to bewail it in: she had her whole life before her to do that, if she saw cause.’ More

importantly, the most obvious sense of the passage is that Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt offering. Moore writes:

To connect and translate, He did to her what he had vowed, and she did not know a man, that is, remained unmarried for the rest of her life, is ungrammatical; if the writer had meant this he must have written the last clause differently.  

Martin Luther sums up the heart of the case for the dominant interpretation when he writes, ‘Some affirm that he did not sacrifice her, but the text is clear enough.’

The clause הָיְהָ לְאַרְשֵׁנָה אִישׁ (‘and she had not known a man’) is, Bal suggests, an assessment of the value of the offering that Jephthah has given his deity. As a nubile virgin the daughter’s value is high. She is therefore, in the eyes of the male narrator, a worthy offering to YHWH in view of the overwhelming victory that YHWH has given. Commenting on the remark, ‘and she had not known a man,’ Fewell states, ‘A woman reader might reply that she had known men, at least one all too well, and that is the heart of her tragedy.’

The story concludes with the report of a custom which sprang up on account of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. Kamrada observes:

Quite a few scholars regard the festival mentioned in vv.39b–40 as a female initiation or premarital rite of passage…. [T]he biblical story about the vow and sacrifice is itself understood as the foundation legend of the rite. Several elements of the biblical narrative fit remarkably well into the framework of the foundation legend of a female initiation ritual, especially the all-female ‘retreat’ of Jephthah’s daughter and her companions into the mountains.

597 Moore, Judges, 302–303.
598 Martin Luther, Die Deutsche Bibel (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1939), 131.
599 Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, 51.
601 Kamrada, Heroines, Heroes and Deity, 36.
Exum writes:

The vow is carried out, but the unnamed young woman who leaves behind no children as a legacy is not forgotten. Her memory is kept alive by the ritual remembrance of women. Because she does not protest her fate, she offers no threat to patriarchal authority. And because she voluntarily performs a daughter’s duty, her memory may be preserved.  

Biblical Context

As has been noted already, the book of Judges depicts the downward spiral of Israel under the Judges. With each cycle, Israel’s communal life and her relationship to her deity degenerate further. The people of Israel continue to turn away from obedience to YHWH, who is becoming unwilling to intervene on their behalf. In 10:13, YHWH declares: ‘And you have abandoned me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more.’ This prelude to this story of Jephthah begins in chapter 10 verse 6, where, as Niditch suggests, we find the beginnings of ‘a richly Deuteronomic-style rendition of the conventional pattern of apostasy and rehabilitation within the literary form of the lawsuit.’  

Verses 7 and 8 relate what happens to Israel when YHWH refuses to raise up a champion for them – they are defeated and oppressed by the Philistines and Ammonites for eighteen years. Then, in verse 16, the people of Israel repent and turn back to YHWH, and his ‘soul is grieved by the misery of Israel.’

In verse 17, the reader learns that the army of Ammon is rallying and preparing for war (v.17). Webb brings to our attention that the two opposing forces are not treated equally by the narrator. There is a ‘subtle difference of nuance between ה_large_circle ויעצקו “were called [to arms]” (17a) and ה_large_circle יאספו, “assembled” (17c),’ which ‘hints at the theme

---

602 Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 33.
603 Niditch, *Judges*, 121.
which is developed in the direct speech of verse 18: Israel is without effective leadership and hence extremely vulnerable in the face of this new threat.\footnote{Webb, The Book of Judges, 49.} The enemy is encamped at Gilead and there is no-one to lead the Gileadites into battle. Verse 18, the last verse of chapter 10, reads, ‘Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He will be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead!’ And, like an answer to prayer, chapter 11 begins, ‘And Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour…’

**Elements of Narrative**

*Plot*

Before the commencement of chapter 11, tension levels within the larger context of the book of Judges are already high. The heightened tension of the end of chapter 10, along with the words of the leaders of Gilead in verse 18, ‘Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He will be for a head to all the inhabitants of Gilead’, means that Jephthah steps onto the stage of the narrative in the full glare of the spotlight. This man, and none other, is destined to lead Israel in its current crisis. However, although YHWH actively raised up judges to lead Israel earlier in the book, there is no implication that Jephthah has been chosen by God.

Chapter 11 begins then with a heightening of significance, a lowering of tension and a slowing of pace. From the urgency of the question of who will lead the army against an enemy who is already encamped at the gate, the reader steps back in time, to read the preamble to the story of Jephthah.

The plot itself unfolds simply. Scene One consists of the history of events that happen prior to the story proper. A young illegitimate warrior is driven from his home
by his brothers and sustains himself in exile by banditry. The reader steps back into the
tensions of Gilead’s situation in verse 4, at the beginning of Scene Two, as the elders of
Gilead set out to supply an answer to the question of 10:18. In Scene Three, after an
able but unfruitful exercise in diplomacy, Jephthah prepares his army for war. The
tensions within the story recede slightly. Now Gilead has a leader, גִּבּוֹר חַיִל
(‘a mighty man of valour’/‘warrior’) and he is preparing them for war. The attention of the
reader is focused on the outcome of this battle and the consequences for Jephthah. The
vow that Jephthah makes cuts through all the prearranged pattern of expectations and
diverts the reader’s interest from the outcome of the war to the outcome of the vow. The
decisive and triumphant conclusion of the battle becomes little more than proof that
YHWH has accepted Jephthah’s vow and that Jephthah lies under a stern obligation to
fulfil it.

The tension levels of the story climax in the moment when Jephthah arrives
home and his daughter, his only child, comes out to meet him. This represents the
highest point of tension in the narrative, as the reader’s question concerning the identity
of the one who will die in the execution of the vow is answered. From here, the story
works toward a second but lower peak of tension, concerning whether Jephthah will
actually sacrifice his daughter or whether she will be saved by some intervention.
Between these two peaks of narrative tension lies the intimate dialogue between
Jephthah and his daughter, who are isolated alone together in the centre of this story.
There is no drama about the actual sacrifice: after the dialogue. It has become inevitable
and the closer the reader comes to the death of the daughter, the less hope of
intervention may be entertained.
By the end of the story, there remains no tension left and the reader’s concerns for the fate of Israel under the Judges has been redirected. It will be revived in chapter 12, when Jephthah again moves into the outside world of men and action. The final verse serves to attribute some meaning to the truncated life of Jephthah’s daughter.

The plot of Judges 11 is quite simple. What makes this story difficult and has kept it alive for readers through the ages is not the complexity of its story line, but its poignancy and its many gaps and ambiguities.

*Character*

**YHWH**

The character of YHWH broods over this story and plays a brief but significant part in the unfolding of the plot. For most of the narrative, however, YHWH is passive. In verse 11, he is said to be present when Jephthah ‘says his words’ at Mizpah. Jephthah refers to him six times, in verses 9, 21, 23, 24, 27 and 35, and addresses him in verses 30–31 when he makes the vow that is crucial to the story. The elders of Gilead invoke him as a witness to their agreement with Jephthah in verse 10 and Jephthah’s daughter speaks of him twice in verse 36. But YHWH himself does not speak, either to Jephthah or to any other character. In verse 29, he becomes active when his spirit enters Jephthah to prepare him for war and in verse 32, he gives Jephthah’s adversaries into his hand, ensuring an overwhelming victory. These two occasions are YHWH’s only active interventions in the narrative.

Because he does not speak, and is passive for much of the story, a feeling of distance is created. Whether this is a result of the rift between YHWH and Israel in
Jephthah

Jephthah is a גִּבּוֹר חַיִל (‘a mighty man of valour’), and a natural leader. He stands alone as the main character of the story. At the beginning of the narrative, in verse 2, we see him as a victim, when ‘the elders of Gilead drove him away.’ Here he functions as the object of the verb גרשׁ (‘to drive away/out’), with his brothers in the subject position. As the story progresses, we see that Jephthah is becoming more powerful, is taking the subject position, and ceasing to be a victim. Throughout Scene 2, we see the elders vying for power with Jephthah. They go ‘to fetch’ him, as though he has no choice but to obey them, and once again he is the object of their actions. They tell him to ‘come, be our commander, and we will make war against the sons of Ammon.’ Although he has become the implied subject of the verb ‘to come’ in this sentence, it is at the behest of the elders. But Jephthah does not accept the dominance of the elders and by the end of the scene, he stands alone as ‘head of Gilead.’

In Scene 3, he negotiates with the king of Ammon from a position of assumed equality. As Webb has remarked,606 although the mighty Ammonite army is already encamped in Gilead, there is no hint of subservience in Jephthah’s messages to their king. He demonstrates in this scene that he is a subtle and clever negotiator, who is familiar with the history of his people.

When negotiations are over, in Scene 4, he is empowered by YHWH’s spirit and leads his army of ‘the sons of Israel’ in a resounding victory against ‘the sons of Ammon.’ He has now assumed the subject position and is not only fulfilling his own

---

potential for power, but is being given power from YHWH. He comes home to Mizpah as the conquering hero. When his daughter comes out to meet him, he realises that the price of power is going to be very high. If he wishes to continue to have YHWH’s backing, then he needs to sacrifice his daughter, his only child. The need for power to compensate for the pain of his early life is the beginning and end of Jephthah’s story: he is truly ‘a mighty man of valour,’ who is ‘the son of a woman who was a prostitute’ (v. 1).

Throughout his rise to dominance, it is evident that Jephthah is a man who is comfortable with aggression and one who is obviously a leader of men. He is also a man who covets power. When at first he refuses to come back from Tov to help the Gileadites, the elders know exactly what to offer him: power over all Gilead. He is a risk-taker, and is prepared to jeopardize this position of leadership should he not win the battle with the Sons of Ammon. He takes a second gamble when he offers to YHWH whatever comes first out of his gate to meet him on his return home. When he realizes that his only child is the one who will be required to die in fulfilment of the vow, he does not even consider reneging on the vow, or seeking a substitute victim. He does not draw back from the task of killing his daughter with his own hands. He may express regret, but he does not spare her life. Jephthah is brave, a faithful believer in YHWH, a man who delivers what he promises. His failings are the dark side of his virtues: Jephthah is also aggressive in war, ruthless and desirous of power.

The question of the narrator’s attitude to Jephthah has received a great deal of attention through the centuries. Susan Niditch suggests, ‘the neutrality of the narrator in Judg. 11.29–40 is fascinating and shocking.’ Similarly, Mikael Sjöberg declares,

---

the lack of moral judgement by the narrator stands out as exceptional in the context of the Deuteronomistic history, where the narrator constantly evaluates rulers according to their degree of religious orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{608}

I will go on to suggest that the narrator is not neutral and that with typical Hebrew circumspection he makes his opinions known in this narrative.

The view has frequently been expressed that the Hebrew Bible unequivocally condemns human sacrifice and that Jephthah must have known that his vow and its fulfilment would violate the prohibitions of YHWH and of the Scriptures. Logan foregrounds this perception when she claims:

Christian fathers, rabbinic tradition, and modern biblical exegetes likewise condemn the act, evaluating Jephthah on a broad continuum of opinion ranging from (in the worst case) coldhearted scoundrel to (at best) faithless fool. Although each commentator has a unique take, most assessments boil down to some variation on the chutzpah and/or stupidity of a man who believed he could win God over by offering him a quid pro quo and was punished to disastrous effect for having made the attempt.\textsuperscript{609}

The practice of child sacrifice may not have been regarded as offensive to YHWH in early times. Zevit suggests that the rituals mentioned in Jeremiah 7:32, 19:5 and 32:25 may reflect cremation rather than child sacrifice, but adds:

I reach this conclusion after a consideration of the context, not out of a conviction that child sacrifice was not practiced in Israel. Cf Isa. 57:5-13 … and 2 Kings 3:27 which clearly establishes its practice among the nearby Moabites; and Ps. 106:37 which describes it as an Israelite practice.\textsuperscript{610}

\textsuperscript{608} Mikael Sjöberg, ‘Jephthah’s Daughter as an Object of Desire or Feminist Icon’, \textit{Biblical Interpretation} 15, 2007, 379.

\textsuperscript{609} Logan, ‘Rehabilitating Jephthah,’ 665.

\textsuperscript{610} Zevit, \textit{The Religions of Ancient Israel}, 550, FN 129.
Logan suggests:

Modern scholars are beginning to conclude that preexilic Yahwism included groups who not only viewed such sacrifice as authentically Yahwist but also considered it a form of worship highly pleasing to YHWH. Some cite the capstone position of the offering of a first-born son in the sacrifice list in Mic. 6:6–7 as positive evidence in support of this contention.611

Logan goes on to declare that ‘sacrificing one’s child, arguably one’s most precious possession, in order to save one’s country might well have been part of a king’s job description.’612 Jephthah then becomes a conscientious head-of-state who sacrifices his only child for the sake of his people.613 Johanna Stiebert also presses for a positive narratorial opinion of Jephthah when she argues that ‘both Genesis 22 and Judges 11 are type-scenes designed to illustrate the faithful devotion of fathers—devotion that comes, especially in Jephthah’s case, at a considerable cost.’614

In disagreement with Logan and Stiebert, it is the view of this study that Jephthah cannot be perceived by the narrator as a righteous judge who offers a legitimate sacrifice to save Gilead. There is a wide scholarly consensus that the book of Judges depicts the descent of Israel into anarchy and rebellion against YHWH. Schneider sums up this view:

[T]he book of Judges is organised to show a degenerative progression; each cycle shows a generation beginning yet lower on the scale of legitimate behaviour regarding the Israelites’ relationship with their deity than the previous generation had. The worsening situation is shown in the book through the actions of the judges and the Israelites in their

611 Logan, ‘Rehabilitating Jephthah’, 672.
relationships to each other, to the surrounding communities, and, most importantly, to their deity … Judges’ organising principle is not related to historical chronology but reflects a worsening theological situation in Israel’s relationship to its deity during the narrative time of the period of Judges. Israel’s decline is revealed by the order of the stories, which are unified by thematic threads, the use of irony, and specialized terminology.615

For Logan to give substance to her view, she would need to dismantle this widely-held perception of the structuring principle of Judges. Jephthah’s story has been placed within this downward progression at roughly a mid-point between the story of Othniel and the story of the death of the Levite’s concubine and its aftermath. The narrative of Othniel, the first of the major judges, is described by Stone as ‘an exemplary passage, a scorecard, for assessing the rest of the narratives,’616 and Cheryl Exum refers to him as ‘our paradigm judge’617. Othniel thus begins the leadership of Israel at a high point, from which it will steadily decline. If this organising principle is accepted, then the reader may expect to find that Jephthah has sunk a little lower than Abimelech, yet not quite as low as Samson. It is surely significant that both the Jephthah and Samson episodes lack the concluding peace formula where the land is described as ‘resting.’ Stone observes: ‘Given the Othniel account as the standard, the absence of the land’s resting constitutes a negative judgement on Jephthah and Samson.’618 As Stone also points out:

615 Schneider, Judges, xii.
In the cases of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah and Gideon, the time of rest is a multiple of the years of oppression, but the careers of Jephthah and Samson are fractions.619

Logan makes this statement regarding the attitude of the narrator to Jephthah, that ‘not only did he condone Jephthah’s actions, he applauded them.’620 This study believes that in this matter, Logan’s view is incorrect, as are those of Niditch and Sjöberg when they suggest narratorial neutrality. The narrator of this story has indeed provided clues to his disapproval of Jephthah, in the position of the narrative within Judges, in the brevity of Jephthah’s rule, and in the lack of a concluding peace formula. As Kamrada sums up:

[W]hile the effectiveness of Jephthah’s offering is not disputed, … this does not amount to a tacit approval of his taking such a vow. The tragic outcome, however, does indicate some great problem with his vow.621

Jephthah’s Daughter

Jephthah’s daughter stands in contrast to her father in many ways. He is male; she is female. He comes to their meeting from the great outside world of ‘men’s business,’ that is, politics and war; she emerges from the little inside world of the home. He is the maker of the vow; she is its victim. He apportions blame unfairly; she accepts unmerited blame without question. He has great power; she has very little. He continues to live; she dies.

The issue of power is crucial to the daughter’s situation. She is powerless before her father on a number of fronts. In the first place, both her gender and her age are

621 Kamrada, Heroines, Heroes and Deity, 25.
against her, because as a young woman she has not passed from her father’s ‘ownership’ to that of a husband. In the second place, she appears to have no other family apart from him. He embodies her whole kinship group and is her only גאל (‘kinsman-redeemer’). Although he would no doubt protect her in the face of danger from others, there is no-one to protect her from him. In the third place, on a practical level she is dependent on her father for the basics of life; without money and family she has nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Bal suggests that her powerlessness in this situation is reflected on a literary level by her namelessness.622

Not only does the daughter of Jephthah have no personal name in the text, but even the inadequate epithet ‘Jephthah’s daughter’ is used sparingly. Only once, in the last verse of the story (v. 40), is she actually called בַּתִּי (‘Jephthah’s daughter’). When Jephthah sees her emerging from the door of his house (v. 34), she is referred to as בַּתּוֹ (‘his daughter’) and when he addresses her (v. 36), it is as בֵּית (‘my daughter’). Apart from these references, she is always spoken of in the text by pronouns, pronominal suffixes and feminine singular verbal forms. Does the minimization of the presence of Jephthah’s daughter in the text point to her lack of power and status, or is it a device designed to keep Jephthah as the story’s focus, by showing it through his eyes?

Within the close confines of her situation, Jephthah’s daughter makes her one gesture toward personal autonomy when she makes her stipulation to her father. In asking for two months to spend with her friends, she has probably done the only thing she can in her situation. Some writers have suggested that she should not have so tamely acquiesced to death at her father’s hands. Fuchs critiques the character of the daughter because ‘not only does her speech denote acceptance and submission, it also echoes the

622 Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, 23.
very words used by her father.’623 David Janzen claims that, in view of the
‘Deuteronomic prohibition’ on human sacrifice, Jephthah’s daughter should reject the
necessity for her father’s sacrifice, but that instead of protesting, ‘she meekly
complies.’624

What would her options have been, had she chosen to resist her father’s
intention to offer her as a burnt offering? Since Jephthah is head of state, there is no-one
who stands above him to whom she can appeal. There is no family to influence him, or
to offer her protection. Her only option would be to use the two months she has gained
to run away. But the story of the Levite’s concubine (Jdg. 19) is graphically descriptive
of the dangers that confront a woman in the outside world of Israel under the Judges.
Sacrifice at her father’s hands may well seem the better choice.

More importantly, in verse 26, she concurs with both Jephthah’s belief that his
vow must be honoured, and his conviction that an heir sacrifice is an appropriate gift to
YHWH in exchange for the victory he has bestowed. She therefore confronts death
resolutely because she is absolutely persuaded that it is necessary. Her life has been
forfeited to her God; he who gave her life, both from the heavenly perspective (YHWH)
and from the earthly perspective (Jephthah), now reclaims that life. Jephthah’s daughter
complies with dignity and grace.

**Jephthah’s Daughter’s Companions**

The narrator reveals nothing about the companions of Jephthah’s daughter. Presumably
they were of a similar age and stage in life. The reader learns only that they lived, while
she died, and that they were faithful to her memory, going out each year to recount her

624 David Janzen, ‘Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter’, *JSOT* 29,
2005, 347.
story. No glimpse of them as individuals is offered, but only as a group. She is the one who died at her father’s hand; they are those who lived and continued for a time to keep her memory alive.

The Elders of Gilead

The elders of Gilead, equated without explanation to Jephthah’s brothers, hold all the power at the beginning of this story. As he rises in strength and prestige throughout this story, so they diminish. When their region is in danger from the Ammonites, they enrol Jephthah as leader and head over Gilead. After the exchange of power is complete, they play no further part in the story.

Time and Space

In this narrative, the notion of the portal is again very significant. From the moment that Jephthah utters his vow (vv. 30–31), the doors of his house become the focal point of our attention. We skip quickly over the account of the outcome of the battle and wait eagerly to see what will happen when Jephthah returns home.

Like Lot’s daughters and the Levite’s concubine, Jephthah’s daughter is safe while she remains in the house. It is in the act of passing through the doorway that she becomes vulnerable. So for her, as for the women in Genesis 19 and Judges 19, the doorway is the liminal zone between her safety indoors and a life-threatening danger that is enacted simply by crossing the threshold.

Gaps and Ambiguities

The main human characters, especially Jephthah, are clearly drawn and we are given access to their inner lives at several crucial points in the story. But although the
characterisation is therefore lucid, the plot is obscured at some points by gaps and ambiguities. In verse 7, Jephthah claims that the elders of Gilead were the ones who expelled him from his home, thus linking them in some unexplained way with his half-brothers. In verse 29, we are not told why Jephthah, under the influence of ‘the spirit of YHWH,’ travels through Gilead and Manasseh, then Mizpah before passing on to the Ammonites. It is reasonable to suggest that his journey is related to recruiting or morale building before the battle, but this is not stated in the text.

In verse 31, two crucial gaps have raised a multitude of conjectures among readers of the narrative. The first concerns the making of Jephthah’s vow. Was it made under the influence of ‘the spirit of YHWH,’ or was it made unnecessarily, after YHWH’s spirit had equipped Jephthah for victory, and therefore in spite of the spirit of YHWH? Since the making of the vow occurs in the verse after the endowment with the spirit, and before YHWH has given Jephthah victory, it is quite reasonable to suppose that it is prompted by the spirit of YHWH, but the reader is never specifically informed that it is. The second gap found in verse 31 concerns the content of the vow. Does Jephthah, as the head of Gilead, intend to offer up to YHWH an heir-sacrifice to ensure success in war for his people, or is he hoping to offer someone of lesser value to himself? I have concluded that a human sacrifice is intended, and that Jephthah must be aware that it could well be his daughter who becomes the victim.

In verse 37, why does Jephthah’s daughter request take the form it does? Why the period of two months, and why the mountains? This thesis has suggested that this time and place may have reflected a traditional rite-of-passage excursion to prepare for the transition to adulthood and marriage, rather than being something that the daughter has thought of on the spur of the moment. But why does the text show her mourning her
virginity, instead of her impending death? I have concluded, in the light of the portrayal of women in the book of Judges, that what she mourns is a relationship with a man and sexual experience. In verse 40 the final question stands; why do the ‘daughters of Israel’ recount the story for four days each year? Is the number four significant in some way? The narrator chooses not to explain. This study regards some instances of gapping and ambiguity in this story as deliberate and a part of the author’s technique. They ensure that this story will not ever be definitively interpreted, or closed and finished.

Key words, Motifs and Theme

An important motif in Judges 11 concerns family relationships. Scene One and Scene Five are linked by their use of familial language. The word בֵּן (‘son’) occurs four times in the first scene (vv.1 and 2 [three times]) and once in the last (v. 34). The word בת (‘daughter’) is found four times, all in Scene Five (vv. 34 [twice], 35 and 40). The word אִשָּׁה (‘woman/wife’) occurs four times in Scene One (v. 1 and three times in v. 2). The word ילד (‘to bear/father a child’) is used twice in Scene One (vv. 1 and 2). The word אח (‘brother’) is found once in the first scene (v. 3). The word father is used five times, twice in Scene One (vv. 2 and 7), and three times in Scene Five (vv. 36, 37 and 39). It is also used once in Scene Three in verse 7, referring to Jephthah’s ‘father’s house.’

In the usages of these words there are a number of oppositions. The word ‘son’ is used in Scene One to denote the sons of Gilead, including Jephthah; in Scene Five it denotes Jephthah’s lack of a son. Three of the four usages of the word ‘daughter’ refer to Jephthah’s daughter, who is about to die; one refers to ‘the daughters of Israel,’ who will live on and perpetuate her memory. Twice the word ‘woman/wife’ describes the wife of Gilead; twice it describes a woman who is ‘a prostitute’ or ‘another woman’.
The word ‘to father/bear a child’ is once used to denote the transient role of the father, who confers on his son Jephthah no long-term place in the family; the other denotes the stable role of the mother, the ‘wife of Gilead’, who imparts a lasting place in the family to her sons. The use of the word ‘brother’ in Scene One contrasts with the absence of the word in Scene Five, when Jephthah no longer has a place among his siblings. The word ‘father’ is used once to denote the father who gives life to Jephthah and his brothers in Scene One; it is also used three times in Scene Five to denote Jephthah as the father who takes the life of his only child.

In each of these oppositions, Jephthah is assigned the lower position. Jephthah is the one who, unlike his father, does not beget a son. Instead, he becomes the father of a daughter who will not live to perpetuate his line. He is the child of a woman who stands outside the bonds of family. He is born illegitimately to a father who dies and cannot secure for him a lasting role in the family. He is the one who no longer has brothers. He is the father who instead of bestowing life, kills his only child and ends his family line.

The heart of the story can be found among the different usages of these family words. Because Jephthah is illegitimate, he is rejected by his family. Because he has no sons to confer worth on him, to maintain his family name, and to back up his power as a גִּבּוֹר חַיִל he needs to make the vow that results in the death of his only daughter, and the end of his line. Because he has not had a lasting place and an inheritance in his father’s house, he turns to the need for power which will ultimately bring about the end of his own house. The family motif built up by familial language is pivotal to the story.

A second motif concerns war and diplomacy. Language that pertains to war and diplomacy flavours the second, third and fourth scenes. The keyword לָוחַם (‘to make war’) is used ten times over the three scenes (vv. 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 20, 25, 27 and 32).
The expression וְנָתַן יְהוָה אוֹתָם לְפָנָי (‘and YHWH gives them before me’) in verse 9 is recalled in verse 21, יְהוָה יָדֹלוֹת אֹבְדֵית וְאֵת כָּל אֶרֶץ (‘and YHWH the God of Israel gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel’) and again in verse 32, יְהוָה בְּיַד (‘and YHWH gave them into his hand’).

In Scene Three, we find a number of words that are not restricted to the realms of war/diplomacy but that are used in that context here. There are eleven occurrences of the word אֶרֶץ (‘land’) (vv. 12, 13, 15 [twice] 17, 18 [three times], 19 and 21 [twice]), and five occurrences of מַלְאָכִים (‘messengers’) (vv. 12, 13, 14, 17 and 19). We also find סָבַב (‘to surround’) (v. 18), חָנָה (‘to camp’) (v. 18), גָּבֹל (‘border’/’territory’/’boundary’) (vv. 18, 20 and 22), אֵסָף (‘to assemble’/’gather’) (v. 20), נָבָה (‘to smite’/’defeat’) (v. 21), and יָרֵשׁ (‘to possess’) (v. 21). The term בְּנֵי אָמוֹן (‘the sons of Ammon’) is used seventeen times, (vv. 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 and 36) and the term בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (‘the sons of Israel’) is used twice. (vv. 27 and 33).

When Jephthah negotiates with the king of Ammon and recounts Israel’s history in Scene Three, a number of countries and peoples are mentioned – Israel, Egypt, Ammon, Edom, Moab, Gilead and the Amorites – and five rulers are named – the king of Ammon, the king of Edom, the king of Moab, Sihon king of the Amorites and of Hesbon, and Balak son of Zippor king of Moab. Many landmarks are found in the text; the Arnon, the Jabbok, the Jordan, Kadesh and ‘the wilderness, the towns of Mizpah, Heshbon, Aroer and Jahaz. These words give local colour and a sense of geographical and historical authenticity to the scene. They also build for us a picture of Jephthah as a man who knows his history, one who looks beyond the boundaries of his time and place
to the past as it has impacted Israel and her neighbours. This scene allows us to see how skilled and shrewd a negotiator he is.

The motif of war and diplomacy is not only background in this story, it is also motivation. It is because of the Ammonite threat that Jephthah is recalled and installed as ‘leader’ and ‘head’ of all Gilead. It is because of the fear that Israel may not win the war on her own merits that Jephthah makes the vow. And it is because of the Israelite victory that Jephthah’s daughter comes first from the door of his house with timbrel and dance.

The third motif that is significant in this story is that of leadership/headship and it is formed from a small group of key words that are all found in Scene Two. The phrase זִקְנֵי גִלְﬠָ֗ד (‘the elders of Gilead’) occurs six times (vv. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11), the word קצין (‘leader’) occurs twice (vv. 6 and 11) and the word ראשׁ (‘head’) occurs three times (vv. 8, 9 and 11). The authority of the elders shapes Scene Two, but the scenes that follow are dominated by Jephthah’s exercise of power as leader of the army and head of all Gilead.

As we place these motifs side by side, the theme emerges. Jephthah falls into the bottom position in every binary opposition that deals with family. As a young man, he is powerless in his family which proceeds to reject him completely. To shore himself up against further powerlessness, he goes to Tov and becomes the leader of a band of outlaws. He thus exerts a little power over a small group. When he becomes the commander of the army and the ruler of Gilead, he achieves great power. His victory in battle ensures him lasting power. And when he goes home in triumph, fulfilled at last as a mighty man of valour, to take his place as head of his family and founder of his line, he discovers that in his last desperate bid for power, he has effectively erased his own
family. The desire for power to uphold his place in family has led him to destroy his own family line.

Jephthah’s story consists of the recounting of his struggle for power. Scene One recalls his denial of power in his birth family. Scene Two depicts his tussle for power with the elders of Gilead. Scene Three shows his wrestle with the king of Ammon, and his enticement to YHWH to support his cause. Scene Four demonstrates his very successful overpowering of the ‘sons of Ammon.’ Scene Five brings us, and Jephthah, up short, when the price of power is revealed. He progresses from pursuing power in the family, to power over an outlaw band, to power as head-of-state, to inter-tribal power as the victor in an international conflict. Then, at the height of his success, he is called upon to sacrifice his only child, and to end his own dynasty.

The theme of this narrative may thus be expressed: the pursuit and attainment of personal power is costly. It involves struggle and sacrifice. The tragedy for Jephthah and his daughter is that the sacrifice is a literal one, a burnt offering.

**Conclusion**

Several questions still remain from this story. Although we know from the story of the defeat of Israel by the king of Moab in 2 Kings 3:26–27 that it was not unknown for leaders in the ancient Near East to offer a human sacrifice in battle, it was not the usual practice for Israelites to do so. Why then does Jephthah believe that it will be efficacious to offer a human sacrifice in this instance? What motivates him to care so deeply about the outcome of this battle that he is prepared to risk ending his family line?

I will consider these questions in light of Girard’s theory in Chapter Nine.
Chapter Nine: Genesis 22 and Judges 11 as Worship of the False Sacred

Introduction

In this chapter, Genesis 22 and Judges 11 will be examined intertextually and viewed through the lens provided by Girard’s theory. The Girardian notion of the false sacred – the worship of the scapegoat mechanism in place of God – will be employed to shed light on the stories.

Similarities between Genesis 22:1–19 and Judges 11

Many similarities may be found between the stories of the binding of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. To begin with, both stories concern the rite of human sacrifice within the cult of the God of Israel. Both depict leaders who are willing to sacrifice their child. Both accounts are reported by narrators who neither explicitly condemn the custom nor censure their protagonists. In both stories, the Deity is implicated, explicitly or implicitly, in the matter of child sacrifice. In Genesis 22, God requests the sacrifice of Isaac and although he later revokes this request, the story takes place against the background of the claim stated in Exodus 22:28–29 that the first born son should be given to God. In Judges 11, YHWH’s connection with human sacrifice is not as explicitly stated as it is in Genesis 22. It is suggested, however, by two pieces of information that we are given. Jephthah utters his vow after coming under the influence of the spirit of YHWH, and immediately following his vow, YHWH gives Jephthah’s army an overwhelming victory against the Ammonites. In summary, then,

625 Exodus 22:28–29 states: The fullness of your harvest and your wine you shall not delay to offer. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. Thus you shall do with your cattle and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.
both of these narratives develop against the background of the notion of human sacrifice in the cult of Israel’s Deity.

In both texts, the act is to be the heir sacrifice that is underwritten by Exodus 22:28–29. B. Levine writes, ‘Owing to his favoured status, the first-born was considered the most desirable sacrifice to a deity where human sacrifice was practiced.’626 In Isaac’s case, although he is not literally his father’s first born, he becomes Abraham’s heir when Ishmael is banished so that, as Sarah declares, ‘the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac’ (Genesis 21:10). In the case of Jephthah’s daughter, although she is female, she is eligible to be the victim in an heir sacrifice because she is Jephthah’s only child. Both Isaac and Jephthah’s daughter are designated by the root ייחד (‘only, only one’) (Gen. 22:2 and Judg. 11:34). Both Abraham and Jephthah are endangering their family line by offering their heirs as sacrifices.

In keeping with the notion of sacrifice as ‘men’s business,’627 in neither text is the mother of the victim present, or even, as far as we are told, cognizant of the intention of the victim’s father to make an heir sacrifice. Sarah does not appear in this episode of the patriarchal narratives and may perhaps not even be aware of God’s request that Isaac be sacrificed. In the case of Jephthah’s daughter, no mother is mentioned in the story at all.

Both Abraham and Jephthah are without the support of a wider family. Abraham has been obedient to the voice of God saying ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you’ (Gen. 12:1). In chapter 12, he and Sarah have parted from their last link with their birth family when they separate from Lot and Lot’s family. In 23:4, after the death of Sarah, Abraham describes himself

---

627 Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Scared Violence*, 11, quoted in Chapter Seven, Notes on Scene 2, verse 3.
גֵר ותושב (‘a sojourner and an alien’) in the land. Jephthah has been rejected by his family ostensibly because he is illegitimate and has gone to stay in the Land of Tov. Thus, in a society where family and clan ties are all-important, both of these men are separated from their kinship community.

Both of the selected victims are young. We are not told how old Isaac is, although we perceive that he is still a child, young enough to ask Abraham a naïve question (Gen. 22:7), but old enough to carry the firewood. Jephthah’s daughter is still living under the authority of her father and is therefore either pubescent or approaching puberty, since she understands the implications of her virginity. The maturity of her reply to Jephthah (Judges 11:36) also suggests that she is nearing adulthood. Because of their youth and their subordinate status, or perhaps out of loyalty and solidarity with their fathers, they are both compliant in the face of death by sacrifice.

In both stories, peers of the victim play a part. Naming Isaac as a נער (‘lad’) brings him into the domain of the other two נערים (‘lads’) who travel with Abraham and Isaac, but are left at the bottom of the mountain. Isaac leaves the other lads and goes with his father to the place of sacrifice. Jephthah’s daughter herself identifies her peer group when she says that she wants to go to the mountains to mourn with her companions (רעות). She goes away for two months with this group and parts company with them to go to her home where Jephthah will sacrifice her. So, in both these stories, the victim leaves a peer group to go to the place of slaughter. Because in each story, the sacrificial victim is taken from among a group of peers, the peer group then represents safety to both Isaac and Jephthah’s daughter.

These similarities in the two stories of the binding of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter demonstrate in duplicate the plight of a father faced with sacrificing
his child. We see the beginning of a pattern concerning the outcome of engaging in worship of the false sacred. The notion that human sacrifice belongs to the domain of the false sacred will be unpacked further in this chapter.

**Differences between Genesis 22:1–19 and Judges 11**

One of the greatest divergences between the two stories concerns the characters of the two protagonists. Although both men are faced with sacrificing their heirs, Abraham and Jephthah are very different. In Chapter 7, this thesis analysed the character of Abraham, and concluded that he is a non-aggressive and respectful man. He is also timid, and occasionally cowardly. Jephthah, on the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 8, is courageous, a leader of men, confident and willing to take risks. He is also ruthless, hungry for power and aggressive. There is irony in the fact that these two very dissimilar men will each be brought to the point of standing over his own child with a sacrificial knife in his hand. For each man, this situation reflects something of his relationship to the God to whom he sacrifices. As could be expected, Abraham and Jephthah relate to God in very different ways.

We do not know what leads up to the moment when YHWH calls Abraham in Genesis 12:1. Does this call come at the end of a long search for God? Or does Abraham, in the midst of the cares of life, suddenly hear the voice of an alien God, a voice that is so compelling that he walks away from the ties of home and kin into a new life lived in obedience to this God? We are not told. Whatever its beginnings, this obedience will carry Abraham across many miles and through many years, until it brings him one day to stand beside the bound child, Isaac, on the mountain of Moriah. It is not, however, a blind and silent obedience. It is an obedience that is the fruit of a
relationship of trust and openness toward God. On a number of occasions, Abraham enters into conversation with YHWH and sometimes he questions him. When, in Chapter 15, YHWH assures him that his ‘reward will be very great’ (15:1), Abraham feels free to voice his doubts. ‘My Lord YHWH, what will you give me? And I remain childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus’ (15:2). He adds, laying the cause of the problem at YHWH’s door, ‘For you have given me no offspring, and look, one born in my house will be my heir!’ (15:3). YHWH responds with reassurance and a reiteration of the promises of a myriad of descendants. Abraham accepts God’s reply with faith: ‘And he trusted in YHWH, and he accredited it to him as righteousness’ (15:6).

In Genesis 18:23–33, we see a vivid depiction of the closeness of the relationship between YHWH and Abraham. For many characters in the Hebrew Scriptures, the response to the notion of standing in the presence of YHWH is one of fear. But Abraham’s relationship with his deity gives him the confidence to stand boldly before him. Not only does Abraham trust YHWH enough to question him, he feels free also to call him respectfully to account. In response, YHWH answers Abraham’s question patiently and is prepared to bargain with him. In this scene, we witness the love and trust that exists between them.

In the Judges story, Jephthah’s relationship with YHWH is much more conventional. Jephthah never stands in the physical presence of YHWH and we never hear YHWH speak to him. Nonetheless, Jephthah is a man of faith, who speaks of YHWH often. In Judges 11:9, he states his dependence upon YHWH when he says, ‘If you bring me home to fight against the Sons of Ammon, and YHWH gives them over to me, I will be your head.’ After the battle, when he is speaking of his victory, he gives the credit to YHWH (Judg. 12:3). When he is trading messages with the King of the
Sons of Ammon in the diplomatic exchange that precedes the war, he mentions YHWH four times (Judg. 11:21, 23, 24, and 27) and when he is reporting his vow to his daughter, he speaks of him once more (11:35). However, we only hear of him speaking to YHWH twice and one of these occasions, Judges 11:11, presumably refers to some sort of ritual utterance rather than private communication, as Jephthah speaks ‘all his words before YHWH at Mizpah.’ The only time in the Jephthah narrative that he independently addresses YHWH is when he makes his vow in 11:30–31. It is noteworthy that when Jephthah does address YHWH on this one occasion, YHWH does not reply, or initiate a conversation, as he does with Abraham, although he does honour the vow that Jephthah makes. In spite of Jephthah’s faith, then, we do not glimpse the intimacy that we see in the relationship between God and Abraham. YHWH does, nonetheless, send his spirit upon Jephthah and by YHWH’s power, Jephthah wins the battle and routs the enemy. So although the transcendent and powerful being of the deity is known to him, he does not know the intimacy of relationship with the immanent God.

Another significant difference between the two stories concerns the factors that cause each of the two fathers to prepare to offer an heir sacrifice. In the case of Abraham, the reason is very clear – God has requested that he sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:2). This is not an offer Abraham has made to God and he does not, as far as we are told, expect to gain anything by it. Jephthah, on the other hand, himself makes the offer to perform an עֶלֶה (‘burnt offering’) sacrifice in a moment of crisis to ensure victory for his army and himself. Whether he expects that his daughter will be the one to emerge from his doors first, or whether he believes that it may be someone else, he is nonetheless ready to take the life of another person as an inducement to YHWH to grant his request. As Kamrada declares:

[T]he conduct of Jephthah appears highly problematic. Not only does Jephthah offer someone else’s life (after all, that is precisely what
Abraham is about to do by obeying the divine command), but in so doing he hopes to achieve a specific aim. In other words, Jephthah acts with a selfish intention, while Abraham seems to have no other pretext in mind, On the contrary, Abraham is ready to give up his only hope, his son, in favour of the deity, while gaining nothing by the bargain.628

This difference in precipitating factors holds the key to the outcome of each story. Because, in Genesis 22, it is the Deity who asks that Isaac be offered as a sacrifice, he can countermand the request and spare Isaac. Abraham is then freed from any obligation to sacrifice Isaac. The offering of the ram from the thicket is Abraham’s substitute, a free and unsolicited gift for the deity. Jephthah on the other hand believes that he is bound to carry through with his sacrifice because he has used it in bargaining with YHWH. As he says, ‘I have opened my mouth to YHWH and I cannot go back’ (Judg. 11: 35). His daughter underlines this statement by pointing out that he will have to honour all that has gone out of his mouth, since YHWH has given him victory (Judg. 11: 36). This is an echo of Numbers 30: 2; ‘A man who makes a vow to YHWH, or swears an oath to bind a bond upon his life shall not break his word; he shall do all that goes out of his mouth.’

Mountains play a part in both stories, but they function differently in each. In Genesis 22, the mountain is the place of danger. For three days Isaac moves closer and closer to the place of sacrifice that God has chosen on the Mountain of Moriah. He leaves his peers (Abraham’s lads) at the foot of the mountains to go up to the place of sacrifice. In the Judges 11 text, however, the mountain functions as a place of refuge. Jephthah’s daughter goes with her peers to spend time on the mountain before going back to face her sacrificial death. So Isaac leaves the safety of home to go to the

perilous mountain where his death is to take place, but Jephthah’s daughter goes to the safety of the mountain, and then returns home, to the dangerous place of her sacrifice. This runs counter to the traditional Hebrew notion that the home is the only safe place for a woman, and to the notion, expressed in Chapter 8, that Jephthah’s daughter is safe until she crosses the threshold of her home. In this narrative, Jephthah succeeds in violating the safety of his daughter’s place of refuge.

The differences between the two stories reassure us that we are indeed seeing a repetition of the one phenomenon in two situations, not simply the same story being retold with superficial variations. I will argue that here we see the effect of Girard’s false sacred in different situations, on two different sets of characters.

**Engaging with Girard’s Theory**

Because humans learn by imitation, including imitation of the desire of others, they are always in danger of interpersonal antagonism and rivalry. Girard writes: ‘in human relations there is a conflict principle that can’t be resolved by rational means.’

Religion is the instrument by which human societies strive to prevent the escalation of mimetically generated aggression. The scapegoat sacrifice unites antagonistic individuals and puts a temporary end to violence. To prevent its recurrence, Girard claims:

> potential antagonists avoid each other and are separated from each other. They undertake not to desire the same objects. Measures are taken to avoid the same generalized mimetic contagion: the group divides itself up and separates its members by means of taboos. When crisis appears to be looming once more, the group resorts to drastic measures. … Therefore a victim is chosen as a substitute, and dies in the original

---

victim’s place: this is the invention of ritual. Finally the sacred visitation is remembered: this is called myth.630

Together these elements – taboos, ritual and myth – form what Girard terms the false (or violent) sacred. Worshipped by all pagan religions, it is nothing more nor less than the method that has served humankind since their emergence from the ranks of the animal kingdom to found civilization. The false sacred is the victimage mechanism which redirects violence into the sacrifice of those who are expendable and lack the power to save themselves from becoming victims. For many centuries, the scapegoat mechanism has appeared in the guise of pagan deities, who are defined by Girard not as divine beings nor all-powerful lords, but simply humanity’s technique of preventing the spilling of much blood by the spilling of a little. The pagan gods are a mechanism, wielded by human power. Thus medieval representations of idols made to represent Moloch unintentionally describe the false sacred. John Rundin remarks:

[M]edieval and modern sources represent Molech as a calf-headed, human-bodied bronze or copper idol in whose hands children were placed and then roasted or pitched into a brazier below.631

What a powerful metaphor for the false sacred such idols make! Created by human hands, having power over life and death, but only when the device is operated by the puny human figures that stand behind it. The false sacred is revealed as a machine, a device, for sacrificing the small and powerless to appease the violence that is fundamental to human society.

630 Girard, When These Things, 21.
For Girard, the worship of the Christian God is not religion, but is the undoing of religion\textsuperscript{632}, through the scriptural revelation of the scapegoat mechanism and by its stance beside, rather than against, the victim. He perceives the Hebrew Scriptures as ‘a history of religion’\textsuperscript{633} He explains that throughout the Bible, there is a development in the understanding of the nature of God.

[T]here’s a change in how God is understood. But the thing that makes the Bible so interesting is that this change is a change from the mythical spirit, from the spirit of archaic religion, to the mature biblical spirit which, in the Jewish Bible, would be called the prophetic spirit.\textsuperscript{634}

In analysing these two stories of sacrifice, I will begin where Girard’s theory begins by tracing the mimetic relationships of their two protagonists, Abraham and Jephthah. Their choice of a model, and their relationship to that model, can be expected to underpin the events of the stories.

\textit{The Mimetic Model}

In Girard’s theory, when two people enter into a relationship of mimetic rivalry, whether it be for a material object, the regard of a person, or a more abstract attribute, they exhibit an increasing absorption with each other, often, as the rivalry escalates, to the exclusion of the desired object itself. In the Abraham story, we do not see the pattern of growing antagonism that results in preoccupation with the being of a rival at all. In the situation that culminates in the separation of Lot’s retinue from Abraham’s (Gen. 13), the text indicates that the dispute does not involve Abraham and Lot, but has sprung up among their servants. Abraham suggests separation not because he and Lot are rivals for

\textsuperscript{632} Michel Treguer, in Girard’s \textit{When These Things Began}, 2.
\textsuperscript{633} René Girard and Steven Berry, \textit{Reading the Bible with René Girard} (Lancaster: LDA Press, 2015), 100.
\textsuperscript{634} Girard and Berry, \textit{Reading the Bible}, 99.
pasturelands for their flocks, but so that they or their servants will not enter into a
rivalrous relationship in the future. After Lot and his people have gone to live in Sodom,
there is no suggestion that Abraham feels any sort of mimetic absorption with his
nephew. When he goes to free Lot after the battle of the five armies against four, the text
shows no indication of any obsession with Lot – in fact, the messenger speaks of the
capture of אחיו (literally ‘his brother,’ but the term can also refer to ‘kinship in a wider
sense’⁶³⁵) rather than mentioning Lot by name (Gen. 14:14), thus underlining the
familial relationship between Abraham and Lot. This relationship carries an obligation
to redeem family members who have been taken captive. In the remainder of this
narrative (Gen. 14:15–24), Lot is only mentioned once in passing (14:16), in the list of
the people and plunder won back by Abraham. There are, therefore, no grounds for
seeing Abraham’s model in the person of Lot. Nowhere else in the Abraham saga is
there any suggestion of a relationship with any other person that involves contention or
competitiveness.

Who, then, is Abraham’s model? This study suggests that the one relationship
that absorbs Abraham, and that is present throughout the whole of the Abraham cycle, is
the relationship that exists between Abraham and God/YHWH. This relationship alone
causes him to leave his home and family and become a sojourner in a foreign land for
the rest of his days. It is this intense identification with the deity that leads Abraham to
take his son up the mountain of Moriah as a sacrifice. In Genesis 22 Abraham is
exhibiting the paradigm of positive mimesis, centred on his relationship with God.
Since, as Girard suggests, it is not possible for a human being to renounce desire, the
only way to avoid mimetic conflict is to direct desire toward God or toward some other

⁶³⁵ BDB, 26, 318.
positive and non-aggressive role model, and to thus begin to reflect a mimesis that is
creative rather than violent or destructive.636 This mimetic relationship is the source of
Abraham’s exemplary obedience to the Deity. When he prepares, without a protest, to
take his son and sacrifice him, he does so because God is the model who has shaped his
behaviour for many years. Whether he expects to have to go through with the sacrifice –
a question much discussed by commentators through the ages – is not the point. He
follows God, obeys God and loves God with the directness of the imitator with his
model.

Because Abraham models his behaviour on that of God, we can expect that he
will exhibit godly traits. These we see in the irenic nature of his relationships to the
peoples who live in the land, in his concern for the fate of the people of Sodom (chapter
18), and in his non-acquisitive behaviour (14:21–24). In the Aqedah, however, Abraham
seems unable to distinguish between the redactor’s two portrayals of his deity –
Elohim, who calls him to a close personal relationship that involves championing the
cause of others (as in Genesis 18) and YHWH, who calls his followers to worship of the
false sacred.

The case of Jephthah is very different. The relationship of mimetic antagonism
into which he is locked with his brothers is central to his motivation to win the war. It is
a curious and unexplained facet of the text that when the elders of Gilead come to
Jephthah to bring him back from Tov to lead the army in battle, he says to them, ‘Are
you not the ones who hated me, and who drove me out of my father’s house?’ (11:7).
Since there is no question of the involvement of anyone apart from his brothers in the
act of expulsion (11:2), this verse can only mean that the eldership of Gilead is either

636 Girard, Girard Reader, 63–65.
composed of his brothers, or at least includes his brothers. So Jephthah, perceiving that
his brothers have the power that he, as a גִּבּוֹר חַיִל ('mighty warrior') needs, moves into
a mimetic relationship with his siblings, who are in authority in Gilead. These brothers
are undifferentiated, speak with one voice, and form one composite character in the text,
a character that is also called the ‘elders of Gilead.’

The motif of rival brothers is an extremely pervasive one in myth, literature and
history. Girard writes,

We instinctively tend to regard the fraternal relationship as an
affectionate one; yet the mythological, historical and literary examples
that spring to mind tell a different story: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau,
Eyteocles and Polynéices, Romulus and Remus, Richard the Lion-
hearted and John Lackland. The proliferation of enemy brothers in Greek
myth and in dramatic adaptations of myth implies the continual presence
of a sacrificial crisis, repeatedly alluded to in the same symbolic terms.
The fraternal theme is no less ‘contagious’ qua theme for being buried
deep in the text than is the malevolent violence that accompanies it. 637

The struggle for dominance between Jephthah and his brothers conforms to this
paradigm of ‘enemy brothers.’ Since the Girardian rationale behind this kind of
opposition is that brothers are insufficiently differentiated from each other, the naming
of Jephthah by his brothers as ‘the son of another woman’ is revealed as an attempt to
create difference between them and thus avoid further conflict.

As has been noted in Chapter Two of this study, mimetic rivalry is never stable
and constant, but always escalates. However, in the case of positive mimesis, where
model and imitator build each other up, the process of escalation can be expected to
move more gradually, since it is not attended by any feelings of anxiety, urgency or

614 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 64.
anger. There is no progressive breakdown of the individual brought on by the stresses of mimetic rage. In Abraham, we see only a growth in the trust that he has developed toward God/YHWH. The man who laughs when the Deity tells him that he will father a child by Sarah at the age of ninety-nine (Gen. 17:16-17) is prepared, some years later, to take his beloved son without question to the Mountain of Moriah as a sacrifice.

In the case of Jephthah, however, we do see progressive deterioration in the man who begins the story as a victim himself, but goes on to victimise others. When his brothers abuse him, and drive him from his home, he demonstrates his need to emulate them as he goes at once to the Land of Tov and builds up a personal power base with his ‘empty men.’ Under his leadership, they live by extortion as they prey upon the local inhabitants. When he returns to Gilead, his position is not secure. His brothers, the elders, who have placed him in the top position in Gilead, may well remove him from it once he has served the purpose for which they have chosen him. He turns his mind to the task of cementing his position, so that they cannot ‘drive him out’ a second time. The necessity of winning the war is therefore paramount. In order to do so, Jephthah is prepared to make a victim of the person who comes first out the gates of his house to greet him.

Although there is a kind of symmetry between Jephthah the head of Gilead and the King of the Sons of Ammon, in his dealings with the king Jephthah does not express a personal sense of rivalry. His negotiations with the King of the Ammonites are reasoned and calm, and have a certain formality and remoteness. Jephthah makes a sustained effort to avert war, even though, with the army of the Sons of Ammon camped at his door, peace is an unlikely outcome. His negotiations with the king of Ammon are recounted comprehensively in sixteen verses (Judg. 11:12–27). By contrast, in the
chapter that follows the story of Jephthah’s daughter (chapter 12), the deterioration in Jephthah becomes evident as he answers the challenge of the men of Ephraim in just two verses before launching an offensive against them (Judg. 12:2–3). In spite of their status as fellow Israelites, he accords them none of the reasoned argument or persuasion he has expended in his negotiations with Ammon, but attacks immediately.

In summary, then, Jephthah enters into the typical triangular relationship of mimetic rivalry with his brothers as opponents and models, for the object they both desire: power in Gilead. Although in this chapter, he shows himself to be a capable and reasonable statesman, he begins in chapter twelve to display progressive deterioration due to this mimetic relationship, as he begins a war against the men of Ephraim on very little provocation. It is significant that after Jephthah has made his vow and is preparing to vent mimetic violence on his victim, the elders/brothers slip from the story. Girard explains, ‘Once we have focused attention on the sacrificial victim, the object originally singled out for violence fades from view.’ In Jephthah’s behaviour, however, we can still see the mimetic imprint of the brothers’ actions.

This thesis will now read the two stories in the light of the Girardian notion of the false sacred.

The False Sacred in Genesis 22:1–19

The story of the binding of Isaac depicts the partial dominance of the false sacred. Abraham has lived in the presence of God, the God, who tests him by asking him to commit the act that constitutes participation in the cult of the false sacred. Abraham does not refuse to do so. Without the anger, or the growing antagonism that indicates the presence of aggressive mimesis, Abraham laboriously prepares to obey his Deity.

638 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 5.
Without any of the needs that drive those who strive for release from mimetic rage through sacrifice, he prepares in obedience to sacrifice his son. He is willing to comply with the outward act of false religion, but he does not demonstrate any of the symptoms we would expect to find in a person who has resorted to human sacrifice. He does not perceive his son Isaac to be guilty of anything, nor are we aware of a crisis of any sort that this sacrifice is intended to resolve. He is prepared to perform the sacrifice solely because of his identification with his model.

His naming of the place of sacrifice on the hill at Moriah as יְהוָה יִרְאֶה (‘YHWH will provide’) is very significant from a Girardian perspective. In verse 13, Abraham finds the ram caught in a bush and sacrifices it instead of Isaac. In the next verse, he gives the place its name, which relates to YHWH’s provision of the ram.

Girard points out that although mimetic violence cannot be set aside, it can be diverted to another victim. He regards this as one of the themes of the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis chapter 4). As Girard explains:

The Bible offers us no background on the two brothers except the bare fact that Cain is a tiller of the soil who gives the fruit of his labor to God, whereas Abel is a shepherd who regularly sacrifices the first-born of his herds. One of the brothers kills the other, and the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal.639

Cain and Abel experience the lack of differentiation that is common between brothers and it leads to rivalry between them. Cain is predisposed to express this rivalry in violence because his job as ‘a tiller of the ground’ provides him with no outlet for his

---

anger. Abel, however, has an alternative at hand in the sacrifice of animals from his flock. Girard remarks:

To say that God accedes to Abel’s sacrificial offerings but rejects the offerings of Cain is simply another way of saying – from the viewpoint of the divinity – that Cain is a murderer, whereas his brother is not.640

In Genesis 22:14, Abraham names the place of sacrifice ‘YHWH will provide’ following YHWH’s provision of the ram for a sacrifice. YHWH thus gives Israel, through her progenitor Abraham, a more acceptable outlet for mimetic violence in animal sacrifice. Because this place is seen as the site of the Temple, Abraham, in choosing this name, is commending God’s future provision of the whole system of animal sacrifice, which has the capacity to avert interpersonal violence by providing an outlet for human violence. This is YHWH’s provision for Israel.

René Girard interprets the Aqedah as an etiology for the abandonment of human sacrifice and the institution of animal sacrifice in its place. He writes:

The Bible is essentially historical. It shows us the history of the relationship between God and man, the progressive revelation of more and more truth. So, at the beginning, not only was there sacrifice, there was the sacrifice of the firstborn. The first books of the Bible are really immersed in this theme of the sacrifice of the firstborn, which was real. The sacrifice, or should I say, the non-sacrifice, of Isaac is the shift from sacrifice of the firstborn to sacrifice of an animal. That’s what it’s about.641

Römer speaks in support of Girard’s interpretation when he states:

God only asked Abraham to sacrifice his son to test him, since the sacrifice turned out to be that of an animal. Ezek 20 and Gen 22 are texts

640 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 4.
641 Girard and Berry, Reading the Bible, 87.
from the late Babylonian or early Persian period that tried, in the context of nascent Judaism, to eradicate the idea that YHWH would need child sacrifices.642

Many scholars, however, have disagreed with the notion that the Aqedah is an etiology of sacrifice. Brueggemann sums up the views of many when he declares:

Where some have urged cultic emphases here, our exposition must try to stay within the theological claim of the text. It is of no value to find in this story an exchange of animal sacrifice for human sacrifice, as it addresses much more difficult issues.643

Jon Levenson concurs that this is not an etiology that depicts the change from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice:

[I]t is passing strange to condemn child sacrifice through a narrative in which a father is richly rewarded for his willingness to carry out that very practice. If the point of the aqedah is ‘abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead,’ then Abraham cannot be regarded as having passed the test to which Gen 22:1 tells us God is here subjecting him.644

Girard identifies the god of the old religion of Israel as El.645 He claims:

Abraham obeys God. He obeys the old common ways; he’s a traditionalist. He follows the rules. It’s tradition itself that changes here. … The command to Abraham to sacrifice his child is not an order to a single special man: it’s about cultural change. … Abraham is the symbol of that enormous change, which is from the sacrifice of humans and even children to the sacrifice of animals.646

643 Brueggemann, Genesis, 185–186.
644 Levenson, The Death and Resurrection, 13.
645 Girard and Berry, Reading the Bible, 87.
646 Girard and Berry, Reading the Bible, 88.
I do not find myself wholly in agreement with Girard in this instance. In identifying Elohim, who requests the sacrifice, as El, a representative of the old religion in which human sacrifice was acceptable, Girard fails to take seriously the narrator’s assurance that Elohim is testing Abraham and does not require that Isaac be sacrificed. It is the characterisation of the Deity that the redactor refers to as YHWH who rewards Abraham richly for his acquiescence to the principle of sacrifice. I have suggested that YHWH forbids Abraham to sacrifice Isaac only on the practical grounds that Isaac is to carry forward the patriarchal line, but that it is he, in his rewarding of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice, who represents the worship of the false sacred.

I do not see this story as a straight-forward etiology of the abandonment of human sacrifice because, as Levenson has pointed out, Abraham is rewarded for his willingness to perform the sacrifice of Isaac. However, instituting the Temple in Jerusalem as the divinely chosen site for the worship of the Deity establishes Temple worship, in which animals are sacrificed in place of humans, as the acceptable practice. Thus, in this final redaction, the practice of substitution of animal sacrifice for human sacrifice is ratified through the etiology of place.

In this narrative, the false sacred attains some sort of dominance in the latter part of the story. No longer will we see Abraham in the presence of God and never again will God speak to him. In his inability to distinguish between true God and false sacred, Abraham has compromised the mimetic relationship that has brought him to this place, but his exemplary obedience will still be rewarded with YHWH’s promises for the future. From now on, he will substitute the joys of family and prosperity for his close relationship with God.
The False Sacred in Judges 11

In the Jephthah story, all the basic elements that form Girard’s theory with regard to the false sacred are present. From the first time we hear of them, Jephthah and the brothers/elders are locked into the mimetic cycle. Our first glimpse of Jephthah is very significant. ‘And Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior’ (11.1a). Thus, from the outset we are informed of Jephthah’s potential for violence. His brothers perform the first act of aggression that the reader witnesses when they expel Jephthah from the family circle. Although this is the first act of mimetic violence within the story, it is reasonable to suppose that it does not arise suddenly in an otherwise amicable situation but is the result of an on-going antagonistic relationship between Jephthah and his brothers. This banishment of Jephthah serves both to appease the anger of the elders and to prevent, by removing Jephthah from their proximity, the escalation of his retributive rage into violence. It has the effect of adding distance within the relationship, so that the mimetic rivalry moves toward being externally mediated.

Then the Ammonite army makes war upon Gilead. The Gileadites are unprepared and desperately need a ‘mighty warrior’ to lead them into battle. So, perhaps with reluctance, the brothers/elders of Gilead go to the land of Tov, and offer Jephthah the leadership of the army. In their approach to him, there is no suggestion of apology, nor any attempt at appeasement. When Jephthah asks tersely, ‘Are you not the very ones who hated me and drove me from my father’s house? And why do you come to me now that you are in distress?’ the elders do not answer, but simply restate their invitation. Now that the distance between them has been removed, the mimetic antagonism has the potential to recur. In order to remain in Gilead as its head, Jephthah must deal with the urge to violence against his brothers. It is interesting to note that it is at this point that
the brothers/elders disappear from the narrative, leaving him with no opportunity to vent his anger against them. Jephthah turns to Girard’s classic method of dealing with anger – by deflecting it in an act of sacrifice.

Girard declares, ‘Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into.’

The desire to commit an act of violence on those near us cannot be suppressed without a conflict; we must divert that impulse, therefore, toward the sacrificial victim, the creature we can strike down without fear of reprisal, since he lacks a champion.

Girard draws to our attention two Greek myths where people who are filled with the rage that is generated by the mimetic crisis turn their anger on others when the rival is not present. In the story of Ajax the warrior, he becomes furiously angry with the leaders of the Greek army who refuse to give him the weapons of Achilles. In a wild rage, he slaughters all the sheep that are kept to provision the army. In Euripides’ version of the Medea story, the principle of the substitution of one victim for another is savagely illustrated, when Medea’s anger is aroused by her faithless husband, Jason, and she deflects it by killing her children. Before this act, the nurse pleads with the children’s tutor to keep them out of their mother’s way. She says:

‘She’ll not relax her rage till it has found its victim.

God grant she strike her enemies and not her friends!’

Girard remarks, ‘Because the object of her hatred is out of reach, Medea substitutes her own children.’ He concludes:

647 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 4.
Medea, like Ajax, reminds us of a fundamental truth about violence; if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into ‘proper’ channels.\textsuperscript{651}

Jephthah’s daughter is a sacrificeable victim, in Girard’s terms, even though she is female. Because she is young and single, there is no husband to avenge her death. She has no mother to plead for her life. Because of the rift with Jephthah’s brothers, she has no uncles, aunts or cousins to stand by her. She is completely in the power of her father who has the right of life and death over her. Her only allies are the group of friends with whom she spends two months on the mountains; a group of young women who are as powerless as she is to change the situation.

The difference between vengeance and sacrifice is that in a sacrifice, the victim is a surrogate, who stands in for the real principal. By definition, a victim of sacrifice is innocent of the crimes that may be attributed to him, her or it. However, as Girard repeatedly makes clear, in the case of scapegoat victimage, it is necessary for the person making the sacrifice to believe that the victim is guilty. Myth is an indispensable part of the process. Girard claims: ‘The mythic systems of representation obliterate the scapegoating on which they are founded, and they remain dependent on this obliteration.’

In the business of the vow, we see the mythic cover-up of the nature of the crime. It is necessary, because Jephthah himself must perceive his daughter to be guilty in order for the sacrifice to be efficacious. Girard declares,

As we have seen, the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of \textit{misunderstanding}. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the

\footnote{Girard, \textit{Violence and the Sacred}, 10.}
true role of the sacrificial act. The theological basis of the sacrifice has a crucial role in fostering this misunderstanding. It is the God who supposedly demands the victims; he alone, in principle, who savors the smoke from the altars and requisitions the slaughtered flesh. It is to appease his anger that the killing goes on, that the victims multiply.652

So Jephthah makes his vow to slay whoever comes first from the doors of his home when he returns in victory. Predictably, it is his daughter who emerges first with her timbrels, dancing the traditional welcome for victorious menfolk. The first thing Jephthah does is to pronounce her culpability, by making an accusation against her. ‘Alas, my daughter,’ he cries, ‘you have brought me very low, and you have troubled me!’ This is the daughter’s doing, not Jephthah’s, because she has unwittingly stepped into the sacrificial place in his vow. Hers is the fault and Jephthah will therefore be justified in what he does. He goes on to underline the necessity for carrying out the sacrifice in fulfilment of his vow by saying ‘I opened my mouth to YHWH and I cannot turn back’ (v. 35). Girard states:

Men can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment. 653

Jephthah is bound to carry out his vow because, under the influence of the scapegoat mechanism which requires self-deception in order to be efficacious, he must perceive that his deity demands the fulfilment of all such utterances.

Jephthah’s use of the root עכר ('trouble'/'to trouble') in the context of a vow made in time of war resonates intertextually with the story found in chapter 7 of the book of Joshua. From a Girardian perspective, the story of the execution at the Valley of

Achor is very significant, and has been used as a classic illustration of the function of the scapegoat mechanism.\textsuperscript{654} In this account the root עכֶר is very prominent, appearing in the verb עכֶר (‘to trouble,’), the name of the victim, עָכִין (‘Achan’) and the place where the killing is carried out, עֵמֶק עכֶר (‘the Valley of Achor’). In this chapter of Joshua, three thousand men of the army of Israel attempt to take the town of Ai and experience defeat. Morale is low, the narrator declares that ‘the hearts of the people melted and turned to water’ (Josh. 7:5). The Israelites come together, choose a victim, and regain their identity as a group by sacrificing Achan and his family. Then the army of Israel is able to take the town of Ai. James Alison observes:

[I]n a classic lynch murder, such as that described in Joshua 7, where ‘all Israel’ gathers against Achan and ‘stones him with stones,’ the wrath of God is simply, and straight forwardly associated with the group’s loss of morale, and the subsequent build up to anger which turns them into a lynch mob.\textsuperscript{655}

The loss of morale and the fear of the sons of Israel when they are unable to take Ai are attributed to the wrath of God. When God indicates the man who has sinned and brought the anger of YHWH upon the sons of Israel, they gather together to stone him. Alison declares:

In their very act of ganging up together, unanimously, against poor Achan, of whose guilt they convince themselves through the liturgical mechanism of the lottery, they create peace among themselves. And in that very moment when their stones are all discharged, then ‘the Lord turned from his burning anger’ (Josh. 7:26). Of course he did: the shifting patterns of fear and mutual recrimination which had riven the

\textsuperscript{655} Alison, ‘Wrath and the Gay Question’, 12.
people have been overcome by their triumphant and enthusiastic unanimity.\textsuperscript{656}

This account is an example of a story of scapegoating from the Hebrew Scriptures where the elements of myth predominate and the scapegoat mechanism is not revealed. Jephthah’s use of the word \textit{עכר} here raises echoes of this incident, a mythic account of the scapegoat mechanism in action.

The timing of Jephthah’s vow is also significant. Girard speaks of the contagion of violence and bloodshed. He suggests that warriors returning from battle, fresh from scenes and acts of violence, are regarded as dangerous until they have been through a period of ‘decontamination.’ As Girard declares, ‘A special sort of impurity clings to the warrior returning to his homeland, still tainted with the slaughter of war.’\textsuperscript{657} Mobley writes:

Conventions of homecoming described in Judges and Samuel … provided for integration of warriors back into civilian life. The solitary, mundane release of a man beating a sword back into a plowpoint against an anvil provided a ritual catharsis as the killing point was beaten out of the weapon and the fury out of the warrior.\textsuperscript{658}

It is significant, therefore, that Jephthah is in the midst of the battle, still fully contaminated by the will to violence, when he offers the life of an unspecified person to YHWH in return for victory. As Kamrada states:

[S]ince Jephthah is a typical warrior hero, the killing of his own daughter can be read as the consequence of his dangerous liminal condition he bears upon his return from war.\textsuperscript{659}

\textsuperscript{656} Alison, ‘Violence and the Gay Question’, 13.
\textsuperscript{657} Girard, \textit{Violence and the Sacred}, 43.
\textsuperscript{658} Mobley, \textit{Empty Men}, 14–15.
\textsuperscript{659} Kamrada, \textit{Heroines, Heroes and Deity}, 61.
Thus, Jephthah achieves release from the anger stemming from the mimetic relationship with his brothers without guilt. It was necessary that his daughter should die, because she had stepped into the victim’s place. Only the companions of Jephthah’s daughter are clear-sighted enough to perceive her as innocent and to set aside four days each year to commemorate her needless death.

‘Dionysus versus the Crucified’

Girard’s engagement with Nietzsche’s juxtaposition of Dionysus and the Crucified, discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, can be said to form an excellent illustration of the contrast between participation in the false sacred and worship of the God revealed in Scripture.

   For Nietzsche in his early work, Dionysus was ‘a metaphor for the vital, passionate, sacrificial, and destructive side of human culture,’ whom Nietzsche perceived as opposed to Apollo, who functioned as ‘a metaphor of human imposition of order and constraints.’ In his later work, he restated his thought as an opposition between Dionysus and the Crucified. In Nietzsche’s schema, Dionysus represents the will to power, the strength of the dominant, the willingness to shed the blood of weaker victims, the absolute dedication to the advancement of the self. The Crucified represents the complete inverse of Dionysus: the refusal of power over others, the altruism of one who stands beside the victim, and who puts away the advancement of self in favour of the advancement of others. This study suggests that Jephthah and Abraham step neatly into the camps of, respectively, Dionysus and the Crucified.

In Jephthah, the reader sees a worthy son of Dionysus. He is proud, ambitious, and willing to shed innocent blood. Because he is not Dionysus, but only a disciple of the way of Dionysus, he does display a moment of weakness when he sees who has come first from his gate. In Abraham, by contrast, we see embodied the type of the Crucified. He is a peace lover, a man of tolerance, who does not display violence toward others. Because he is not the Crucified, but simply a follower in that way, Abraham still demonstrates areas of imperfection, as in the wife/sister accounts, his dealings with Hagar and Ishmael and his inability in Genesis 22 to distinguish between God and the false sacred, and his willingness to contemplate violence.

Just as Girard does, Nietzsche perceives human society as being kept safe from its own violence by the shedding of the blood of victims. He regards human sacrifice as desirable since it is necessary to maintain human society, and to elevate the strong to their true position. He expresses this necessity in terms of the ‘morality of the masters’ versus the ‘morality of the slaves.’

Although Nietzsche sees the equivalence of the collective murder of Dionysus and the Passion of Jesus, he also perceives that ‘[t]he martyrdom of Dionysus is interpreted by the adepts of his cult in a manner quite different from the Christian interpretation of Jesus’ Passion.’ Nietzsche therefore identifies two different types of religion.

In one type of religion, which he identifies as the type of Dionysus, he includes all pagan religions in which life itself, in all its ‘eternal fruitfulness and recurrence’ is celebrated fully in both its positive and negative forms. Birth and burgeoning, suffering, and torment are celebrated equally. ‘[I]t says yes to all this; it assumes willingly the

---

663 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 246.
664 Girard, *Girard Reader*, 249.
worst together with the best. It is beyond good and evil.\textsuperscript{666} This religion celebrates the strength and will to dominate of the strong, and accepts the necessity of subjugating the weak. Its gods delight in sacrifice, in the blood of victims. As Girard expresses Nietzsche’s thoughts:

A culture has to pay a price in order to breed a class of higher men. It has to assume even the worst forms of violence. Time and time again, Nietzsche tells us that Dionysus accommodates all human passions, including the lust to annihilate, the most ferocious appetite for destruction. Dionysus says yes to the sacrifice of many human lives.\textsuperscript{667}

The second type of religion that Nietzsche identifies and opposes to the pagan is Christianity, or the way of the Crucified. Girard remarks, ‘Nietzsche saw clearly that Jesus died not as a sacrificial victim of the Dionysian type, but against all such sacrifices.’\textsuperscript{668} The way of the Crucified unmasksthe false sacred and thus disempowers it. Since a belief in the guilt of the victim is necessary to the scapegoating process, the death of the innocent Son of God reveals scapegoat victimage as arbitrary and unjust, and in the process, destroys the efficacy of all such sacrificial acts. In their place, in the theory of Girard, Jesus substitutes forgiveness for revenge, and love for violence.

Girard claims:

Nietzsche drew attention to the irreconcilable opposition between a mythological vision grounded in the perspective of the victimizers and a biblical inspiration that from the beginning tends to side with the victims[.]\textsuperscript{669}

Kirwan thus summarises the two forms of religion:

\textsuperscript{666} Girard, \textit{Girard Reader}, 250.
\textsuperscript{667} Girard, \textit{Girard Reader}, 246.
\textsuperscript{668} Girard, \textit{Girard Reader}, 250.
\textsuperscript{669} Girard, \textit{Girard Reader}, 251.
There are two types of religion therefore: one which is prepared to accept even the most severe degree of suffering, for the sake of the higher values which are thus preserved or brought into being, and one which rejects suffering and seeks to overcome it. Nietzsche sides with Dionysus, and holds the Bible and Christianity responsible for the destruction of all culture. As Girard asserts, this makes Christianity ‘anti-pagan’.670

Conclusion

This study suggests that the god whom Jephthah worships under the name of YHWH is a pagan god of the type of Dionysus (who stands in Nietzsche’s thought for all the pagan gods of archaic religion, and who, according to Girard, serves as a mask for the scapegoat mechanism.) The Hebrew Scriptures in a number of places bear witness to an early form of the cult of YHWH in which Israelites performed human sacrifice, in continuity with their Canaanite neighbours.671 Thus we are granted an insight into the forward and backward movement in the Hebrew understanding of the nature of their God. Some texts, like the Jephthah narratives in Judges, lay before us the archaic sacred, whose ‘heart and secret soul’ is, according to Girard, ‘violence.’672

Although Girard sets the notion of the false sacred in opposition to the worship of the God of the Bible, he does not regard it as being completely negative. He concedes:

What is false is the choice of victims, the scapegoat, but since these sacrifices are critical to the survival of the species we call humanity, we cannot be against them. We owe our own existence today to the fact that

670 Kirwan, Discovering Girard, 86.
our ancestors practiced sacrifice. Humanity would have destroyed itself without it.673

Abraham, by contrast, has dwelt in close relationship with God. In Genesis 22, when he offers the ram in place of his son, he stands midway between Jephthah and his kind who practise human sacrifice, and those who reject all sacrificial offerings, like Hosea (‘For I delight in loving kindness and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God instead of burnt offerings,’ 6:6) and Amos (‘I hate, I reject your festivals, and I take no delight in your assemblies. Even though you offer me burnt offerings and gifts, I will not be pleased; and the peace offerings of your fatted animals I will not regard…. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,’ 5:21–22, 24).

The story of Abraham can be said to climax in Genesis 22. More hangs on the outcome of this story than whether or not Abraham will be the progenitor of Israel: at stake lies the matter of whether humanity is ever called by its Deity to sacrifice others, to engage in the age-old practice of scapegoating and victimage. We are told in 22:1 that this is a test of Abraham, but it is another test as well - a test of whether the true Deity calls his people to kill or to love, to take revenge or to forgive, in order to deal with interpersonal violence. In the Aqedah the real identity of Israel’s God hangs in the balance: is this Dionysus, or is it the Crucified?

673 Girard and Berry, Reading the Bible, 100.
Chapter Ten: Evaluation and Conclusion

Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to focus on the problem of violence in the Hebrew Scriptures, using the theory of René Girard to shed light on four stories. My aim was twofold – I hoped both to answer some of the questions raised by these narratives, thus presenting fuller readings of them, and to test the efficacy of the Girardian theory as a tool for biblical interpretation. In this final chapter, I will summarise the findings of this study, looking first at one pair of stories and then the other, and will draw my conclusion on the value of Girard’s theory as an exegetical tool.

Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of these two stories is the fierce desire of the townsmen to humiliate and punish men who come peaceably to their towns. We are aware that aggression is not their invariable response to strangers, for both Lot and the old man have come to sojourn without eliciting this savage response. Why do we witness this extreme inverse of hospitality? Why do the men of each town so rapidly form a mob with one heart and one intention? Why do both Lot and the old man offer women to the crowd in exchange for the safety of the men? Why is this offer accepted in the case of the old man and rejected in the case of Lot? In Judges 19, why does the anger of the mob dissipate once the concubine has been attacked? Girard’s notion of the lynch murder provides answers to each of these questions.

According to Girard, a community ceases to be able to function safely once the differences and hierarchies that shape it are compromised. When this happens, regardless of the cause, interpersonal violence will proliferate until a crisis of violence,
involving all its members, is reached. Then the community, in the age-old mechanism that initially permitted humanity to form societies, seeks a sacrificeable victim or victims in whose blood reconciliation can be achieved. Because the crisis has the power to eliminate the whole community if it is not resolved, there is a great urgency about the matter of finding a suitable victim, yet to choose a person who cannot safely be sacrificed is to risk making the situation worse. The chosen victim(s) must stand outside the bonds that tie people within the group to each other, so that no one will seek to avenge the attack. Therefore, when a victim or victims who have no ties to the community walk unsupported into the town, they are at once perceived as the way for the townsfolk to resolve their crisis.

So the lynch mobs form outside the doors of the houses where their chosen victims shelter. In these mobs, there are no longer individuals: all are joined in the mysterious unanimity brought about by the desire to enact violence. Lot and the old man, equipped by their narrators with an understanding of the lynch process, know that this desire cannot simply be dissipated, but can only be diverted onto another victim. With their patriarchal values well to the fore, they try to appease the mobs with the offer of women in place of the men. In the Genesis story, the townspeople refuse to accept Lot’s daughters, who are engaged to men who must be presumed to be part of the crowd, since the crowd contains all the men of the town. To vent their mimetic rage on these women could precipitate the kind of all-against-all violence that the scapegoat mechanism strives to avert. The Levite’s concubine, however, has no protector except for her husband who, in pushing her out to the crowd, tacitly gives them permission to misuse her in his place. Ostensibly, violence committed upon her will serve the purpose of reconciling the community at the expense of one whom no-one will seek to avenge.
In the event, the Levite does subsequently initiate revenge upon the men of Gibeah, but the mob is in no condition to predict this change of heart.

In Judges 19, where the scapegoat violence is enacted, the rage of the townsmen is dissipated completely by the pack rape of the woman. The Levite, so urgently sought the night before, packs and leaves Gibeah in the morning without harassment. The mimetic crisis has been resolved and for now, harmony reigns in the town.

The Girardian notion of the lynch murder depicts a pattern of loss of differentiation within a community leading to increasingly violent interpersonal interactions, which can only be resolved by the scapegoat victimisation of a sacrificeable person. The outcome of such an act of violence is the restoration of harmony within the community. In the story of the surrounding of Lot’s house, we witness an attempt to commit an act of violence on two scapegoats that is thwarted by the unsuspected power of the proposed victims. In the mob attack upon the Levite’s concubine, we are shown the complete lynch murder. Girard’s theory has clarified many aspects of these two stories that would otherwise remain difficult to explain.

**Genesis 22:1–19 and Judges 11**

One significant question that these two stories raise is: what motivates a parent to sacrifice a beloved child? Although it seems very possible that child sacrifice was practised at some times in Israel, it was by no means a universal phenomenon. Not every father was moved to devote his child so radically to his deity. From the records of the past that have been left to us, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the other documents and artefacts that have been unearthed by archaeologists, there has been nothing to support the notion that child sacrifice was extensively practised or that it was ever the
norm in Israel. If it is the case that redemption of the firstborn, as prescribed in Exodus 34:19-20, was not the usual practice, why were Abraham and Jephthah prepared to sacrifice their children?

We are told in the text of both stories that Isaac and Jephthah’s daughter are their parents’ only children, the sole links to the prospect of family continuity for their fathers, who are both without the all-important network of family and clan relationships. We have been told that Abraham loves Isaac (22: 2). We are not specifically informed of Jephthah’s love for his daughter, but in 11:34, in the words ‘and she was his only child: apart from her he had neither sons nor daughters,’ her value to her father is suggested.

The drive that overcomes Abraham and Jephthah’s paternal feelings must therefore be uncommonly strong. Girard has a name for it – mimeticism. This drive is so engrossing that it has the capacity to override other passions and absorb those under its sway in the relationship to the model above all else. I have suggested that Abraham’s mimetic model is his Deity and that Jephthah is locked into a relationship of mimetic antagonism with his brothers, the elders of Gilead. Both of these two mimetic relationships are strong enough to motivate the two men to sacrifice their children.

This mimetic modelling also explains why Abraham’s sacrifice of his child can be aborted but Jephthah’s cannot. It is the model himself, Abraham’s Deity, who countermands the sacrifice of Isaac, thus releasing Abraham from his obligation to offer his heir. In Jephthah’s case, however, because he has used his daughter’s life to gain power over his brothers through his vow, Jephthah believes that the sacrifice must be carried through to its conclusion.

These two mimetic relationships also explain the general direction of the development of the two protagonists in these stories. Under the benign influence of
positive mimesis, Abraham has grown slowly in obedience to his God, while Jephthah demonstrates the typical rush toward rage engendered by antagonistic mimesis. Abraham grows closer to his model by positive mimesis, while Jephthah reflects ever more fully the aggression of the brothers who drove him from his home.

The Girardian concept of the false sacred is the mechanism which, by posing as worship of a deity, permits the resolution of mimetic conflict through sacrificial killing. Jephthah is not able to vent his anger on his brothers but he can dissipate it through the killing of his daughter without guilt, since he perceives her death as a necessary offering to his god. He offers a human life to his deity at the height of battle, under the contamination of violence that large-scale killing provokes, and is later unable to rescind the vow without the risk of losing the favour of his god.

In spite of his mimetic attachment to God, Abraham is also under the sway of the false sacred, for in the end, he cannot distinguish between the voice of his Deity and the call of the false sacred. The test set by God is not a test of whether or not he loves his son more than his deity, but a test of whether or not he recognises his God and rejects the false sacred. Where his God looks to him to speak out against the sacrifice of his son, to denounce human sacrifice, he prepares to offer Isaac on the altar. The story of the binding of Isaac sets side by side two understandings of the deity of Israel – the God, and the lord of the false sacred, known (here only) as YHWH.

**An Evaluation of Girard’s Theory as an Exegetical Tool**

I believe that Girard’s theory has brought to light aspects of these stories that would otherwise remain obscure. In return, the stories have clothed the theory with flesh and blood so that we see it enacted before us.
In first pair of stories, Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19, we test the validity of the notion of the lynch murder. We note the precise correspondence in so many details: the state of crisis, the underlying reason for the choice of victims, the lynch violence (actual or proposed) and the urgency of the group in dispelling the possibility of all against all violence. In Judges 19 where the lynching is carried out, we see the restoration of order and unanimity through scapegoat mechanism. Not only is the Levite of no further interest to the townsmen, we find that in 20:14, the town of Gibeah has become the rallying point for all of the tribe of Benjamin, who stand together against the rest of Israel. From being a town rent by mimetic violence, it is now the centre of unity for the Benjaminites.

In second pair of stories, we see how a mimetic relationship can result in the worship of the false sacred. The displacement of worship onto this violent sacred leads people to sacrifice those they love on the altar – not of a deity, but of the disguised mechanism that humanity has devised to avoid all-against-all feuding and violence. These two stories not only show the mechanism in action, they also demonstrate the cost of such sacrifice.

In this thesis we have also put to the test, admittedly in a very limited sampling, Girard’s contention that the Hebrew Scriptures, although they may sometimes act as myth and conceal the moment of violence, also on occasion step out from the mythical tradition. Thus they proclaim aloud the presence of scapegoat mechanism in human society and disclose the grim outcomes of worship of this mechanism in place of God. In the first pair of stories, no attempt is made by the narrators to deflect blame onto the victims and the mob is not protected but exposed in all their guilt. In Genesis 19, the men of Sodom are destroyed on account of their wickedness. In Judges 19, the
townsmen begin by being called ‘sons of worthlessness’ and end by being denounced by
the people of Israel. Ultimately, they too will be destroyed. In the second pair of stories,
the revelation is incomplete. Jephthah’s sacrifice is permitted to stand as an offering to
God without comment by the narrator, but Jephthah himself does not benefit by it in the
long term. He judges Israel for only six years before he dies, and the narrator does not
accord his rule the peace formula that followed many of the earlier judges. This, with
his placement of the story in the middle of the decline of Israel throughout Judges,
serves to critique Jephthah, but the surrogate victimimage behind the sacrifice of his
daughter is not explicitly exposed in the text. In the Aqedah, the substitution of the ram
for Isaac serves in some measure both to critique the practice of human sacrifice, and
justify the practice of animal sacrifice in its place. In laying side by side the two
perceptions of the Deity that were found in Israel in his time, this narrator, while he has
not overtly critiqued Abraham, has exposed his failure to discern the presence of the
Girardian false sacred alongside the worship of the loving creator God of Israel.

Conclusion

René Girard’s theory offers answers to many questions that have confronted humankind.
What is the origin of religion? Why is sacrifice, in all its different guises, so prevalent in
pre-state religion? Why, throughout the history of human society, has the persecution of
scapegoats been perceived to be both necessary and efficacious? Becoming familiar
with Girard’s theory has been like putting on glasses that reveal what was blurred and
indistinct in our understanding of human culture. The constantly recurring patterns of
hypermimeticism, and the scapegoat remedy for the ills it brings, has been brought
sharply into focus.
Girard perceives the Bible as depicting the slow journey out of religion – the human institution which contains violence by endorsing violence against a few people to prevent all-against-all violence. He acknowledges that in the Hebrew Scriptures this journey is incomplete. But it is in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures that we see the first stirrings of compassion for the victim, and the first willingness to abandon the cloak of myth and confront the violence of the false sacred. The Hebrew Scriptures are, therefore, an excellent place to utilise Girard’s theory.

Girard writes, ‘Untried ideas and theories should not be criticized in the abstract; they should be put to work. This is how we can find how useful they are.’674 In this thesis, I have put Girard’s ideas to work on four stories of violence and implicit or explicit sacrifice. I have reached the conclusion that the theory of René Girard has the potential to be of great use as an exegetical tool in the study of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially with texts of violence.

Bibliography


Budde, K. *Das Buch der Richter*. KHCAT, 1897.


Luther, M. *Die Deutsche Bibel*. Weimar: Herman Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1939.


