

## **Consequence is Not the Same as Punishment: Considerations on Lot's Family (Genesis 19)**

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*The article reads the story of Lot's family at Sodom's destruction from a gender reading. Leaving aside readings that look at Abraham or Lot, the writer asks what could be said about "Mrs Lota" and the daughters, "the Lotitas". Mrs Lota's decision of looking back at Sodom while it is being destroyed by the angels may be read in many ways. Her becoming a pillar of salt may be read as consequence of her conscious act, rather than as punishment*

### **I. Introduction: Between experience and Scripture**

What profit does a biblical scholar get from reading gender theory? Where could these two areas of research meet? These and similar questions prompted me to start to seek a dialogue. This paper is just a beginning of that dialogue with myself and with other people. In it, I approach gender theory from my biblical expertise and not the other way around. Thus, I do not claim to be equally conversant on both fields, nor to give gender theory the amount of space it deserves. As any beginning, it cannot claim wholeness; there is still a long way to go.

Although a few definitions could be helpful here, it is virtually impossible to get into them without being enmeshed in a long discussion. There are almost as many definitions of gender, sex, and feminism –to name only a few concepts –as writers. While the first feminists spoke of “woman’s oppression” as of a universal phenomenon, it has become increasingly difficult to assume any representativity, because of the awareness of differences in socio-economic, political, ethnic, and educational conditions, as well as sexual and religious options. Thus, within the oppression suffered by the collective “women” (and several men) in the hands of some men, there are degrees of oppression and a variety of manifestations thereof. The further a woman stands from the parameters her society has established as “normal,” the deeper the oppression she will suffer.

In our context in particular, the ideal seems to be:

- to be male
- To have Anglo-Saxon ancestors, or at least European; otherwise, to be blond and blue-eyed
- Socio-economic status reflected in possession of means of production (land) and, subsequently, home, car, vacations (if abroad, all the better)
- To have an “ideal” physical figure –for women, this means anorexic and in the late teens (Maturity for men?)
- Psycho-physical “normality”
- Heterosexuality (and if married, all the better if by the predominant Church)
- For women, to have some education, to be able to carry on a conversation
- For women, virginity and fidelity in marriage

Here it is important to remember that these ideals are not universal and that they vary greatly among groups according to age, geography, social background and other factors. But the principle remains: the closer a person is to what his/her milieu determines as ideal, the less s/he

will be discriminated against, and vice-versa.

One of the main issues in gender theory has been that of the subject. Who is a subject and what is its opposite? A first approach can be done from the opposition agent // non-agent of actions, or at least of words. At the risk of stating the obvious, I want to remind us that a biblical text is not a philosophical text. This is important, for it would be as if wanting to compare apples with eggs. Gender theory rests strongly on Western philosophy; the biblical text, born in the East, on myth. Gender theory is in the making; the biblical text is already fixed, even though it is always open to new interpretations. Furthermore, the biblical text is not intimist, so that there are usually several questions for which we do not find answers –for example, whether its characters would see themselves as subjects or objects in the stories they take part in.

How could the biblical subject be defined? It is, in the first place, a literary person, not a real one; even if reflecting real subjects of history, it does so according to its own literary conventions.

In biblical literature, the degree of “subject-ness” accorded to a character is determined by at least two conditions. First, individuality, represented by name, pedigree, race, nationality, family status, citizenship, characteristic physical and psychological data, and others. A second condition is the degree of autonomy of the character, indicated by elements such as handling her/his own resources (money, inheritance, property), access to the “(external) world,” one’s own voice, direct access to the divine, with no need of intermediaries, possibilities of manoeuvring to turn adverse circumstances into favourable ones...

## II. Looking at the text

We are so used to focussing the beginnings of the history of salvation of Abraham, that it seems natural that all other figures get out of focus. Here I want to take one story from the Abraham cycle and read it asking myself how gender theory could help in reading it in a new, liberating way. No reading of a text is universal, value-free, and neutral. In fact, the more it claims to be neutral, the blinder it is to its own androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and classism, as it uncritically confuses its own particular situation with “the universal.” As our standpoint changes, so does our perspective. This is important to remember, in order not to expect an all-encompassing treatment of the biblical text, or even an “orthodox” reading of it, as the standpoint is concerned with women, especially with those forgotten or mistreated by the text itself or by tradition.<sup>1</sup>

I have chosen the Lot family. I will look at it asking what elements or characters in the story could be assessed differently from a reading informed by gender studies and a feminist stance.

In this story, Lot and his family are alien residents (Hebrew *ger*) in Sodom (Genesis 19). We only know the man’s name: wife and daughters are anonymous. This is already important for gender analysis, as anonymity makes it more difficult for us to recognize ourselves in their actions. Furthermore, focus stays on named people, especially if they can exhibit a genealogy. Finally, there is another difficulty in identifying them. How can we treat them as subjects if we

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<sup>1</sup>See Paul Tonson, “Mercy Without Covenant: A Literary Analysis of Genesis 19” *JSOT* 95 (2001) 95-116 for an analysis of the chapter that gives Lot a prominent and rather positive (albeit also ambiguous) assessment; on the structure of the whole chapter, see p. 96-97.

can only recognize them according to their bond to a male, as “wife of” or “daughter/s of”? For the time being, let them be “Lota” and “the Lotitas,” my Spanish nicknames for the feminine and the diminutive of “Lot.” The problem remains partly unresolved, as they still derive their identity from the only named male!

### *The beginnings*

Where does the story of this family start and end? The beginnings are Lot’s belonging to Terah’s family, and leaving Haran with Abra(ha)m’s household to go to a new land (Gen 11:31). About the other members of the family, we do not know anything. The end of this family is not easily perceived. Lota remains “till today” a pillar of salt; their daughters’ offspring, the Moabites and the Ammonites, get lost somewhere along the way. The mother’s disappearance from the story, however, is fundamental for the development of the events that follow, and thus, even though the family as such does not disappear, its composition changes dramatically.<sup>2</sup>

### *Genesis 19: reviewing the story*

Genesis 19 has two distinct parts. The first one is the visit to Sodom by two divine messengers in order to try it and eventually destroy it. At Lot’s insistent requests, the visitors accept his hospitality. At night time, “the men of the city, the men of Sodom, from the dependent to the leader, the whole city, from (every) quarter surround the house” (19:4) requesting to “know” them.<sup>3</sup> Trying to be both a good host and a good guest to the inhabitants of Sodom, Lot leaves the house and offers his two daughters, “who have not known man,” to do to them “as (it seems) good in your eyes”(kattob be’enehem, v. 8), an expression understood to mean “whatever you please.”<sup>4</sup> The divine visitors finally deliver Lot from the mob. In the morning, they tell Lot why they are in Sodom, and urge him to flee from it with his family. Lot still goes out and tries to convince his sons-in-law to join him –to no avail. Finally, urged by the messengers, Lot, Lota and the Lotitas leave the city, which is utterly destroyed, together with Gomorrah and their surroundings.

Two people are said to watch its destruction: Abraham from afar, and Lota from a short distance. While nothing happens to him, she becomes a pillar of salt.

The second episode deals with new beginnings. Verse 30 explains why this new beginning requires such an extraordinary measure as incest. Lot is afraid of (his? their?) life in Zoar and takes his daughters to live with him in the mountain, in a cave.<sup>5</sup> Thus, each of the

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<sup>2</sup>This is Israel’s theological construction of their neighbours; it does not mean to reflect historical events. Ammonites and Moabites disappear from the Bible after 587 b.c.e.

<sup>3</sup>All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. This translation varies from most in that it takes the term *na’ar* in its meaning as a dependent, a man who is not the father of his own family, and thus, it takes *zaqen* as the other extreme, the elder but in his capacity of leader. See Carolyn Leeb, *Away from the Father’s House: the Social Location of Na’ar and Na’arah in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 301; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>Lyn M. Bechtel, “A Feminist Reading of Genesis 19.1-11” in *Genesis. A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Athalya Brenner, ed. 2<sup>nd</sup> series. Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 108-128 (125-126) shows this story’s connections with the theme of knowledge of good (and evil) in Genesis 2-3: the verb “to know,” *yada’* and the Sodomites’s blindness as counterpart and symbol of non-knowledge; the “evil” they want to do to the messengers and the offer of doing to the daughters “as (it seems) good in your eyes,” an expression that occurs often in the book of Judges (for ex., 19:24). See below for more connections between both stories.

<sup>5</sup> See David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic

neighbouring people of Moab and Ammon are said to be originated from incest between Lot and one of his daughters.

*Genesis 19: reviewing some of its interpretations*

This chapter has been understood in very different ways, depending on factors such as whether the whole chapter is considered or only a part of it; whether incest is seen as a major issue or rather as a last resort for the sake of life; whether Lot is compared to Abraham (especially in relation to Genesis 18-19) or seen in his own light, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> While several commentaries are adamant in condemning him and his daughters for incest, others seek to “redeem” Lot from any wrong behaviour or to take an “objective” stance.<sup>7</sup>

As Carol Smith points out, however, what if the story has been set precisely to induce its readers to react and not to an intended objectivity? That is, even in the unlikely possibility that a text could be read objectively, it would not be this one!

When only chapter 19 is taken and not the whole Abrahamic saga, while still different views are possible, the overall picture of Lot seems to be somewhat more positive.<sup>8</sup> The chapter itself merits a careful study of its structure, in which at least two major sections mirroring each other are visible.<sup>9</sup> While in the first part the daughters are sexual victims of their father and potentially of the other men of the city, in the second part the father is the sexual victim of his daughters. In the first half of the story the daughters are mute while in the second half they are the ones to speak and organize events, with no conscious –even less, consented, according to the narrator– participation by the father. In the first part there is a frightening concentration of males (all, from the dependent to the leader, Lot, the angels) while what originates incest is precisely the assessment that there are no men left. The first part ends with massive death, while the second opens the way to two peoples.

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Press, 1980), 93-94, on the term *me'ara* “cave” as euphemism for the female genitals. Quoted by Randall C. Bailey, “They are Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives” in *Reading from This Place, I. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Fernando F. Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert, eds. Minneapolis, Fortress, 1995), 121-138 (128-129).

<sup>6</sup>I cannot get into a detailed examination of its connections to Genesis 9:20-27, where the Canaanites’ origin is also portrayed as derived from incest; however, it is worth remembering that often sex and politics went and go together. In many biblical stories, sexual innuendos or allusion to the mother are used in naming the opponent; Judges 9, where Abimelech’s lower-class mother is mentioned, is just one example. Genesis 19 has also been studied in relation to mythic influences, either as a new beginning after (almost) total destruction (parallel to Genesis 8-9) or in relation to sexual relations between divine beings, which are not condemned.

<sup>7</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, Word Books, 1998), electronic version. Wenham, like other commentators, notes parallels between this story and the deluge, where one family is saved from total destruction because of one righteous person. Even though he calls Lot “righteous,” he also acknowledges that the text itself never uses this word for Lot, but rather presents him as disobedient and selfish, and that he is saved because of Abraham and not on his own merits.

<sup>8</sup>Tonson, 95-96 shows that in the structure of this chapter, the reference to Abraham in 27-29 is a secondary addition that adds nothing to the story itself.

<sup>9</sup>Carol Smith, “Challenged by the Text: Interpreting Two Stories of Incest in the Hebrew Bible” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible. Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (Athalya Brenner & Carole Fontaine, eds. London & Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), 114-135, 127. Tonson, on the other hand, divides the chapter into two acts (act one, with six scenes and act two with three), and an interlude composed of the added verses that connect this story with Abraham (19:27-29).

## *Genesis 19: assessing responsibilities*

### *1. Lot*

Social anthropology of the Mediterranean tells us that, in gender-based role ascription, the male was responsible for those aspects of family life pertaining to the outside world, and the female, to the domestic world. The protocol of the *paterfamilias* established that:

To protect and provide for his land and children, the father of the household is authorized to:

- adopt or excommunicate sons and daughters
- recruit workers and warriors
- negotiate marriages and covenants
- host strangers
- designate heirs<sup>10</sup>

Note that political manoeuvring is done in order to protect family continuity and land, by protecting sons and, to a lesser extent, daughters (who became members of another family).<sup>11</sup> The particular measures, such as acting as host to strangers, were intended to protect the family in their land and not the other way around. I will compare this protocol with Lot's movements.<sup>12</sup> There are three items with very little relation to Genesis 19; I will deal first with them.

Recruitment of workers and warriors is not an issue here. Also adoption or excommunication of sons and daughters, and designating heirs do not seem to apply to this story. Even though the messengers urge Lot to take away with him "son(s)-in-law, sons, daughters, everything that belongs to you in the city" (19:12), Lot leaves with only his wife and two daughters. While the marital status of the daughters is ambiguous<sup>13</sup>, it is still worth asking why the narrator chooses to present Lot as so little worried about offspring, especially since his separation from Abraham and his household had been attributed in Gen 13:5 to their large possessions, which would go to some heir.

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<sup>10</sup>Victor H. Matthews & Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250-587 BCE* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1993), 8.

<sup>11</sup>Although canonically the time of the patriarchs is earlier than the giving of the land by YHWH, these stories are dated to the time of the monarchy, when the land had been distributed among the tribes and, in many instances, it had already been lost to that same monarchy.

<sup>12</sup>A precautionary note on models based on modern anthropological studies is in order here. By making explicit certain cultural elements, which are very different from ours, they are very useful in explaining behaviours or reactions; but as any model, they tend to generalize and do not take into consideration situations or people that do not fit that model. They can be applied to Lot's family precisely because that is the kind of family taken to design that model! In "Little Women": Social Location of Female Labor in the Deuteronomistic History (The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1999, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation) I have dealt longer with these models, for their application has to do with a social stratum of free people, who fit the model of gender distribution of tasks, for example; something that very poor people, and especially indentured and slave people, could not do—at least, not at free will or on their own.

<sup>13</sup>Since no other daughters are mentioned in the story, while sons-in-law are mentioned, possibilities are that the two daughters were already engaged and thus the sons-in-law mentioned would be their fiancées; or that Lot had other daughters, already married and living outside their home. These daughters, however, do not appear in the story.

## Marriage

In the society mirrored in the Genesis narratives, marriage is an exchange of women between men of different families, clans or peoples for mutual economic, social, political, and in many cases also religious benefit. It is not difficult to imagine that in extraordinary circumstances, women could have influenced a family decision concerning their own marriage, but surely at a very high cost.<sup>14</sup> We may suppose, then, that deciding marriage conditions for the Lotitas with men from Sodom had been Lot's responsibility.

What kind of covenants had Lot attempted in Sodom? We do not know, but what we do know does not speak very well of him. Apparently, his (future) sons-in-law would have been among "all the males."<sup>15</sup> Otherwise, they would have been with Lot and his family at home and there would have been no need to prevent them from the coming danger.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the most coherent assumption is that they were amongst "all the men" who were assaulting Lot's door. I conclude, therefore, that Lot had been unable to ensure marriage covenants that would have protected his daughters.

## Defending the family

Also concerning this aspect, Lot fails. This is another area that, according to the protocol seen above, was the father's responsibility.<sup>17</sup> One could argue that his leaving his home closing the door behind him (19:6) to mediate with the men of the city indicates an interest in protecting his household. His words immediately following, however, prevent such a reading –unless he regarded his household as only his own wife and the divine guests. In this regard –always following the biblical thread– Lot was walking in his uncle Abra(ha)m's footsteps, protecting his own life by giving away women who were close kin (Gen 12:10-20).

## Defending the family's honour through preservation of the daughters' virginity

In the Bible –and unfortunately still today– human bodies, particularly female human bodies, are battlefields and, often, battle trophies. That makes it very difficult to separate physical defence of the family from preservation of women's virginity. In the ANE, as in today's many peoples and cultures, female fidelity, represented firstly by their sexual virginity, is symbolic of the agnatic family's honour.<sup>18</sup> Thus, by offering his daughters instead of his guests, Lot was neglecting his

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<sup>14</sup> Michal daughter of Saul would be one case of such influence, see 1 Sam 18:20.

<sup>15</sup> Here *merismus* is used. "When a totality is expressed in an abbreviated form, we are dealing with merismus. ... The significant point is that in merismus, of whatever form, it is not the individual elements themselves that matter but what they amount to together, as a unit." Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry. A Guide to its Techniques* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995 [1984]), 321.

<sup>16</sup> This supposition is supported by Wenham, who presents a chiasmic structure for 18:16-19:29, in which the Sodomites' attack on Lot and his visitors (19:4-11) is mirrored by Lot's future sons'-in-law disbelief (19:14). These two sections of the story appear immediately before and after the centre of the chiasm, 19:12-13, where the messengers' mission is made explicit.

<sup>17</sup> The stories of Dinah, daughter of Jacob's vengeance (the destruction of the Shechemites, Genesis 34), and that of Tamar daughter of David (2 Samuel 13), support this gender division of roles to a certain point, since vengeance belongs to the wronged woman's male agnates. However, in both cases the fathers have a very lenient or even void participation, and it is the brothers who take on protagonism. See Naomi Steinberg, "Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle" *USQR* 39,3 (1984), 175-188, esp. 183-185.

<sup>18</sup> Agnatic relates to one's own, blood-family, as contrasted to the marriage family. The laws of Dt 22:13-

responsibility as *paterfamilias*; furthermore, he was squandering the family's future. The divine messengers are the ones to give these women any possibility of a future. Supposing the Lotitas had survived gang rape (and disregarding the trauma of such an assault, which the text does not consider at all!), their fate would have been set. They would have had to remain in their parent's home, never getting married, or they would have become concubines (secondary wives), slaves in someone else's home or prostitutes with no honour or rights whatsoever.<sup>19</sup>

### Acting as host to strangers

At the risk of being repetitive, I want to emphasize that acting as host to strangers is included in the protocol of the *paterfamilias* seen above, but always within the wider frame of protection and care of one's own family and lands, and not for its own sake. As several commentaries note, these messengers, unlike those visiting Abraham, show a strong resistance to accepting Lot's hospitality.<sup>20</sup> The text describes Lot as strongly pressing the messengers (Hbr *psr... me'od*). Perhaps they were expecting the Sodomites themselves to show hospitality. Perhaps they intended to save Lot from a situation such as the one described in this chapter.

There is another reason, only insinuated in the text. As the Sodomites tell Lot, he is a foreigner dwelling among them. Foreigners lacked rights, and they especially lacked the necessary support to ensure any right they might have thought they had. "Necessary support" were the landowners, the elders, who could use their right as *go'el*, their land, their kinship relations, and their influence.<sup>21</sup> When Lot offers his daughters, the Sodomites answer that as a foreigner he has no right to "judge." It would seem that the right to offer hospitality to passers-by belonged to the local residents, the Sodomites, and not to foreigners living amongst them, as these would already have been guests of the Sodomites and thus unable to offer what did not belong to them. This suggestion would explain the triangle guests-foreigner-local residents.<sup>22</sup>

Lot's dilemma between his daughters and his guests is somehow ours as well: Did he make the right decision? Should he have chosen his daughters? Would he have had that possibility? Or is this a modern question made from a desk, and not outside, with a furious mob around me? And, in supposing I had been gang-raped, what would I think of Lot's actions and words?

At this point we may summarize that the most important points are the following ones:

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<sup>21</sup>presuppose the principle that the daughter's virginity has much to say about her household's honorability. Note that the parallel law, that of the rebellious son (Dt 21:18-21), says nothing concerning his sexuality.

<sup>19</sup>Melissa Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology" *JSOT* 98, vol. 26,4, 2002, 29-46 (30) affirms that Lot's daughters belong already to the biblical category of widows since their fiancées have already perished.

<sup>20</sup>Jeansonne, Sharon Pace, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1990), 31-42; Wenham, "Comment" on v. 2.

<sup>21</sup>This explains why YHWH is the guardian of the widow's, fatherless', and foreigner's rights: they do not have "fathers" to look after their rights.

<sup>22</sup>Bechtel, "A Feminist Reading," 123-124 is of the opinion that Lot's offer was so outrageous that what Lot was intending with it was to divert the Sodomites' attention, loosen the tension and buy time. T. R. Hobbs, "Hospitality in the First Testament and the 'Teleological Fallacy,'" *JSOT* 95 (2001) 3-30 (20-22) shows how hospitality is never offered to certain persons or groups that would entail sure danger, such as soldiers or traders, nor to the foreigner (*ger*) or stranger (*nokri*), but to people somehow related to one's own tribes.

First, the narrator holds an androcentric vision (he looks at events from the stand point of the male, *aner/andros* in Greek), which is evident in these facts: a) he pays more attention to Lot than to the other members of the family, of whom we do not even know their names; b) descriptions of their actions (see below) are centred on Lot. Second, he depicts him as a man who tries to hold his standing between both parties; a man who chooses to live in a Canaanite city instead of staying close to his uncle; a man making desperate concessions in order to save himself; a man who started off very rich and ended up living in a cave, with a numerous progeny he did not produce consciously.

As expected, commentaries do not endorse Lot's giving up his daughters as sexual objects instead of the visitors; few are very strong and gender-minded in their approach. Many attempt to explain away his behaviour by resorting to commentaries such as: "Putting their [the messengers'] welfare above his daughters' may have been questionable, but it shows just how committed he was to being a good host. ... Indeed, his hospitality seems to go too far when he does not simply risk his own life by going out to face the mob alone but offers his daughters to appease their lust;"<sup>23</sup> that "... true to the unwritten code, Lot will stop at nothing in his effort to protect his guests;"<sup>24</sup> that "[t]his was an age in which a patriarch possessed absolute power (*patria potestas*) over the members of his clan, and daughters were held in low esteem. Lot's desperate stratagem reflects this system of values. By the standards of a later age, the nobility of his intentions is dulled by his willingness to surrender his daughters to the fury and lust of the mob;"<sup>25</sup> or that "[the] astonishing offer of his daughters should not be seen through the glass of our Western ideas... However, this behaviour of Lot hardly corresponds to the ancient Israelites' feelings."<sup>26</sup>

More articulated are some evaluations coming from people familiarized with gender theory. Phyllis Trible, for example, is of the opinion that "... Lot tried to mediate between males, giving each side what it wanted. No male was to be violated. All males were to be granted their wishes. Conflict among them could be solved by the sacrifice of females. The male protector, indeed the father, became procurer."<sup>27</sup> Yet another writer affirms: "This narrative declares that all socially approved actions and societal values must be subordinated to the 'higher' obligations of hospitality, but only to male guests (as the brutal story of Judges 19 further illustrates)."<sup>28</sup> Finally, "Lot ... offers his two virgin daughters to the males of Sodom to be gang-raped (Gen 19,8). This seems to him to be the adequate strategy to protect the two *male* guests from violent humiliation through sex."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Wenham, "Comment" on v. 8 and "Explanation" on the same verse.

<sup>24</sup>E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible. Garden City, Doubleday, 1982), 143. It is true that in this affirmation one could read criticism towards someone who does not know where to stop; but this would be interpretation.

<sup>25</sup>Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary. Philadelphia/New York/Jerusalem, JPS, 5749/1989), 136.

<sup>26</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *El Libro del Génesis* (Salamanca, Sígueme,1977), 268.

<sup>27</sup>Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narrative* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984) 75.

<sup>28</sup> Ilona N. Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis. A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Approach.*(Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 83.

<sup>29</sup>Irmtraud Fischer, "Genesis 12-50. Die Ursprungsgeschichte Israels als Frauengeschichte" in *Kompendium feministische Bibelauslegung* (Luise Schottroff & Marie-Theres Wacker, eds. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. Gütersloh, Chr. Kaiser/



My conclusion is that Lot fails in his role as *paterfamilias*, but is saved because he is a male and Abraham's agnate and not because of his own righteousness<sup>30</sup>; that his wife becomes a pillar of salt because of her own decision and not because of divine punishment; and that the daughters' actions may be read (independently of incest, which I do not support) as a new beginning, in which two women cooperate with each other to achieve their goal, rather than following the far more common model of sibling rivalry. Making personal decisions (Lota) against male instructions and designing and carrying out their own plan (the daughters) are actions that belong to subjects, not to objects. They become dangerous to the patriarchal system and thus, are often hidden or passed over.

## 2. Lota

Biblical data concerning Lota are very scarce. We do not know her name, age, and origins. We do not know whether she had come with Lot and his family from Haran or not. We do not know whether she was a Sodomite. What was she? Where were her roots, her identity, and her agnatic family? Some lack of information is typical of stories, because the narrator needs to set apart main from secondary characters. Yet, this choice poses special problems, as it obliterates from history women's contributions, roles, and even their status. Besides, it is the result of, and further fosters, androcentric bias.

Social anthropology helps us once more on this issue. There is also a protocol for mothers:

To protect and provide for their land and children, mothers of households:

- bear children and arrange for other wives to bear children
- manage the household by supervising domestic production, rationing and preparing food, processing and storing beer, grain, vegetables
- teach clan traditions
- mediate domestic conflicts
- designate heirs<sup>31</sup>

When we look at Genesis 19, what can we know of Lota? None of these responsibilities are treated in this chapter, because they are not of interest to the writer; they do not fall into the androcentric focus and thus do not enter the picture at all. Thus, we can only imagine her, at home with Lot, the Lotitas, and the divine messengers. Even serving food to the guests is here assigned to Lot, not to her (v. 3 verbs in 3<sup>rd</sup> masc. sing.).<sup>32</sup> Even if mediating in domestic

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Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998),12-25 (21).

<sup>30</sup>Tonson, 112-114 rightly corrects mainstream commentaries on the issue of the occurrence of divine *hesed*, mercy, in favour of Lot in this chapter, levelling him with other figures who received such an unmerited treatment, such as Noah, Moses, Gideon, and David.

<sup>31</sup>Matthews & Benjamin, 22.

<sup>32</sup>Hobbs, 16-17 makes a distinction between preparing food (i.e., butchering), and cooking food (i.e., transforming it) and affirms that the former belonged to the men and the latter to the women. While I agree with this distinction, I do not agree with his argument that this is due to the former belonging to the public realm, the male turf, and the latter to the domestic, private realm pertaining to women. To me the reasons for this division of roles are more related to the use of heavy tools, which are often put in men's hands. Hobbs himself quotes studies in Greek villages in which

conflicts belongs to the mother's protocol, she is not given any word when Lot offers his daughters to the mob. Was that his only idea? Couldn't he have discussed the issue at home, looked for another solution before offering the women?

Her feelings are not recorded either. Supposing she was from Sodom, there would have been kin amongst the men outside her own home, in the mob; there could have been brothers, nephews, even father and uncles amongst them. Where were her affections in a marriage that was not out of love but out of convenience, as it was and still is customary in many traditional societies? What was her relation to her daughters? We will never know.<sup>33</sup>

When in the end Lot, Lota and the Lotitas are taken away from Sodom by the angels, so that they can proceed to its destruction, the one to receive the order not to look back is Lot: do not look back, do not tarry ... (verbs in 2<sup>nd</sup> masc. sing. person) We are not told whether Lota was by him and heard the angels' instructions or not. We do not know whether, having heard the messengers talk to her husband and being they themselves immersed in a patriarchal society, she assumed the prohibition was also directed to her, even if only her husband was directly addressed. Or, we could suppose, with Cardoso Pereira,

The world coming to its end in fire and ire and she ... chooses to look behind her. The husband well-informed and organized and she ... ill-informed or illiterate: she looks back. The neck turns in an almost imperceptible torsion. ... What is she looking for? Who knows...? Neither her nor we will ever know, because nobody has ever wanted to know what moved that body in that tiniest moment of decision. ... Deserved punishment. Statue of salt.<sup>34</sup>

But could someone have just walked away leaving behind her or his story, and not look back once more? What does it mean to look back? Could she not be trying to reach other women, friends and neighbours, her support web, who remained in the city? Interestingly, the text only states "and his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt" (v.26). It does not speak of her lack of faith, of punishment or of fondness to immoral behaviour on her part. The narrator does not get into her motivation, stating only the bare facts.

This story shares some characteristics with Genesis 2-3. In neither case, is the prohibition issued explicitly to her, which however does not exonerate her from the consequences of her action. While in the case of Lota she is (apparently) close to her husband as they all leave Sodom to its fate, in Genesis 2 humanity had not yet been split into husband and wife, there was only an undetermined "*ha'adam*" who received the command. In both stories the woman exercises her right to decide on her own, and her action brings about consequences for herself (and for all humanity in the case of Eve); in neither case is there mention of punishment, sin or curse on her.

Notwithstanding centuries of tradition, neither of these women sinned. They made a conscious decision. A costly decision.

Sometimes we decide consciously and bear the consequences. Other times, we decide

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not only cooking, but also serving food to guests belong to women's protocol.

<sup>33</sup>Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (Pennsylvania: Innisfree, 1988), 129-140 has a very nice midrash on these women ("My daughters, my self").

<sup>34</sup>Nancy Cardoso Pereira, "La danza inmóvil. Cuerpo y Biblia en América Latina" *Concilium* 295 (2000) 241-249 (244).

more unconsciously and bare consequences anyway. Sometimes, some “miracle” happens that saves us from what would be logically expected.

At any rate, consequence is not the same as punishment.<sup>35</sup> Yet, biblical interpretation has for centuries condemned and punished these women for their “sins,” thus teaching women to obey, not to risk, even if the command had not been directly issued to them. Is Lota guilty of anything, for which she was punished, or did she make a decision and bear the consequences?

If Lota is guilty of having looked back at some event that, being divine action should not be gazed at, as God’s face at Sinai, then the narrator should have “saved” Abraham from a similar situation just one verse later –or have him pay the consequence as Lota did!<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, Abraham’s looking confirms his righteousness, as he watches the outcome of the divine visit to Sodom, for which he had mediated.

If Lota is guilty of tarrying when disaster is arriving, for whichever reasons, then we have to ask why the text is so much more patient with Lot’s delay.

Looking at the narrative, it is very clear that, were it not for the angels, Lot would not have left the city at all. He was urged time and again to leave as soon as possible, and he was finally taken away by the messengers before Sodom was destroyed. Then, he even bargained to remain at Zoar instead of fleeing to the mountains. The messengers’ patience towards Lot was not based upon his righteousness, but upon his being a man and from Abraham’s agnatic family; for whose sake (Abraham’s), after all, they are saved.

Thus, I conclude that Lota is not guilty and therefore, she was not punished –even if, as a consequence of her action, she became a pillar of salt for ever. Perhaps Lota followed an instinct when she turned her head towards what had been her hometown or homeland. Perhaps she thought there were other women worthy of leaving the city with her. Perhaps she considered what options were available to her and chose consequently. As Cardoso Pereira states, “We (women) are all like Lot’s wife: we suffer from neck pain for not knowing our choices. There we (women) are, immobilized and turned into a pillar of salt.”<sup>37</sup>

In short, Gen 19:1-29 is androcentric (centred on the male perspective), as it presents the situation only from a perspective that considers actions, words, and feelings of males: Lot the foreigner, the Sodomites, the angels, Abraham. Women in this story are sexual objects, disposable, wordless and anonymous.<sup>38</sup> Actions pertaining to the protocol of the mother are omitted or, because these are divine guests, ascribed to the father (the meal). The only conflict is

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<sup>35</sup>Consequence is defined by *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (American Edition, New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996) as “the result or effect of an action or condition;” (p. 298), while punishment is “the act or an instance of punishing,” which in turn is defined as “cause (an offender) to suffer for an offence; 2. inflict a penalty for (an offence)” (p. 1214). At first sight, there is not much difference between these two concepts –except that consequence does not need an offender.

<sup>36</sup>The verb *šaqap*, used for Abraham, means to look down, overlook. The verb *nabat*, used for Lota, means to look, regard. Both are used for a wide variety of subjects, such as kings, angels, Abraham, the woman of the Song of Songs, and God.

<sup>37</sup>Cardoso Pereira, 244.

<sup>38</sup>Other women, like Sodom and Gomorrah’s wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and widows are not even considered.

not domestic but involves other people and thus, it is not in the women's realm of action. The only action done by a woman at her own will is an action forbidden by divine word and turns her into a statue. The text itself does not condemn her explicitly but the message of the story discourages decision-making (except in the domestic realm, of course) by women, lest they face ugly consequences and, even worse, are immobilized.

Since there is no explicit condemnation of this action, a reading informed by gender theory allows us to open the possibility I have proposed, that her transformation into a pillar of salt was not punishment, but the result of her own choice. To make decisions and take responsibility for their consequences is, after all, part of what adulthood means, both for men and for women. What interests lie behind denying her (and any person who would look at her) her right to adult decision-making?

### 3. *The Lotitas*

The remaining verses of this chapter (30-38) will be evaluated very quickly. I cannot get into a thorough discussion of the moral aspects of this action; not even on the question whether they had other options or not. With several scholars, I believe this story has the purpose of making people think by using the literary genre of the comedy or short story.<sup>39</sup> The narrator uses the figure of the trickster, a person of lower rank or social condition who, by a well-designed plan and with some dose of deception, yet legally, manages to get his or her goals. These goals cannot be obtained openly or directly, because of the system's or the tricked person's injustice, or because of power imbalance.

This second episode does not have temporal adverbs that would indicate how long after Sodom's destruction they moved to the cave. We don't know either why the Lotitas thought there were no men left, since, presumably, there were men in Zoar.

Perhaps, after the experience in Sodom, Lot had decided not to give them away to strange men.<sup>40</sup>

As several scholars have pointed out, the issue here was most probably levirate in a situation in which, by having been engaged, they were already widowed, even if never married.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Jackson, 29-30. This is one of her arguments, together with their ability to turn an unfavourable situation into one favourable to them, and the use of "trickery," that makes certain scholars believe this is, like the stories of Tamar, Judah's daughter-in law (Genesis 38) and Ruth and Naomi (Ruth), a comedy or comic story.

<sup>40</sup>Comparing Lot's attitudes with Abraham's with regard to seeking in-laws for their children immediately shows that, for the narrator, Lot should have sought other possibilities within his own kin, as Abraham does later. See S. D. Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), unavailable to us; Jeansonne, 32-33 on narrative parallels between Abra(ha)m and Lot.

<sup>41</sup>Cardoso Pereira, "La danza inmóvil," 245 understands v. 31 to refer to sex and v. 32 to procreation. Athalya Brenner, "On Incest" (*A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 113-138 (116) comments that despise of the father, evident in his being made drunk by his daughters, is as abject in this story as incest itself. Shlomith Yaron, "Sperm Stealing" *Bible Review* XVII,1 (2001) 34-38, 44 (36) notes that the expression *nehayye me'abinu zara'* (19:32) means, as the Jewish Publication Society translation renders it, "let us keep life through our father." As she points out, the expression "to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth" (v. 31) does not use the prep. "to" ('el), very common with the verb *bo'*, but "over" ('al), which, when used with sexual connotations, otherwise appears only in case of levirate. See also Norbert Lohfink, "Deuteronomy 6:24: WnteYOx;l. 'To Maintain Us'" in "*Sha'rei Talmon.*" *Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and*

Here I want to propose yet another reading, which does not contradict the ones mentioned so far. I only intend to take advantage of the text's "reserve of meaning" and explore other possibilities, without even claiming much probability for them. Perhaps, after the experience in Sodom, these women's "there is no man on the earth" meant "there is none outside the patriarchal model we experienced at Sodom—only our old father." This would mean not the physical, but the qualitative absence of husbands. Theirs would be a preoccupation with what we would call today "quality of life." They would have assessed that there were not "a helper as (their) partner" (NRSV), to use the well-known expression of Gen 2:18.20, to make marriage alliances with them, to be partners. While YHWH's intent in Genesis 2 was to create humanity as people fit for each other (or only women fit for men?), the Lotitas did not find their helpers as their partners and took what they considered the only possible action. This reading, which may or may not have been in the narrator's intention, allows us to imagine the Lotitas as more than producers of sons; it allows us to start to imagine what a broader protocol would look like, even if still within the traditional patriarchal framework in which a woman is worth her fertility.

In the first place, it would be the protocol of the sisters and not of the daughters, thus making the other each one's referent, rather than the father. Their status would be almost equal to each other, although there is a difference between being the old one (*habbehira*) and the young one (*hasse'ira*): the initiative and its wording are put in the older one's lips. Secondly, and contrary to several other stories, these sisters work with each other and plan together instead of competing with one another for a man's favour or for his seed.<sup>42</sup> Thirdly—and perhaps just *because* they work together—these sisters, unlike the matriarchs of Genesis and other women, are not barren, but they conceived on their only sexual encounter; in that sense they are similar to Tamar (Genesis 38) and Ruth.<sup>43</sup> In short, the protocol I propose would say that in order to protect and provide for their well-being as women, sisters:

- Assess the existence of prospective husbands and reject them because they are not "helpers as their partner"
- Make covenants between them instead of allowing for the typical enmity and competence
- Make plans and carefully realize them
- Use any method available to them
- Ensure their future by bearing sons even where "our father is old and there is no man..."

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*the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Michael Fishbane & Emanuel Tob, eds. Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 1992), 111-119.

<sup>42</sup>Most notably, Leah and Rachel. In the laws, Lev 18:18. Note also Mary and Martha from Bethany, who, according to John 11 are profiled according to this model of sisterly collaboration, while in Luke they compete with each other. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Practice of Biblical Interpretation: Luke 10:38-42" in *The Bible and Liberation. Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Norman K. Gottwald & Richard A. Horsley, eds. Revised ed. Maryknoll/London, Orbis/ SPCK, 1993), 172-197 (185-187).

<sup>43</sup>Both Brenner, "On Incest," 117 and Yaron show that the three stories have in common the use of alcohol by the men as a means for women to carry on their plans (in the story of Judah this is implied in the shearing party, it is not explicitly stated) and the fact that the three are king David's ancestresses.

Other elements could certainly be added to this proposed protocol.

### **III. Concluding –that is, going on**

#### *Subjects and objects*

We have revised this family's story. Lot is the subject of several actions in the first part of the chapter and he is the sexual object of his daughters in the second part. We have seen how the texts raise doubts about Lot's character and faithfulness; how he failed to observe some basic aspects of the protocol of the *paterfamilias*, even though, it is true, some of his actions can be attributed to his interest in protecting his guests. Some of his attitudes are tolerated and even resolved by the divine messengers. I note that the biblical text never affirms that Lot's and his family's deliverance from destruction is due to his behaviour or qualities, but to the fact that "God remembered Abraham and took out Lot..."

Now, why remembering Abraham is only remembering the male and his seed? Is it because the mother is necessary for procreation, but she is disposable once the child is grown?

We have also seen there is but one action that is attributed to Lot's wife, whom we have named Lota in order to avoid always giving her an identity through her husband. This action, performed at the time of the city's destruction, brings upon her paralysis and death. Even aspects of the protocol of the mother, such as feeding, are taken away from her and ascribed to Lot. Thus, Lot becomes an intermediary between his wife and the divine, depriving Lota of an important element in being a subject; an element that would be important, as there are very few elements in this story that confer her any degree of autonomy or individuality, the two characteristics expressed above as basic for a character to be a subject.

Finally, we have seen that the Lotitas are passive in the first episode and active (subjects) in the second one. They do not have much individuality in the story, but at least they have a large degree of autonomy, within the circumstances imposed by the plot, of course. They are a foil to their father's actions. While the father's offer of them would only have been for sexual pleasure (and if so, only for the men of the city; surely not for the Lotitas!), for violence and even for death, the Lotitas' action is for life.

#### *Double standards*

Biblical commentaries usually exonerate Lot's behaviour, despite the text itself. And, even worse, they often attribute to him a degree of virtue proportional to the degree of evil they ascribe to his wife and, sometimes, also to his daughters. It is as if one could be righteous only at the expense of those around him or her! Could they not all have been righteous or have failed?

In patriarchal formulation, this is not possible, since it is built on mutually excluding or at least hierarchically ordained binaries: male, culture, values, decision, rationality, subject as opposed to woman, nature, transgression, indecision, sentimentalism, object. Thus, it does not matter that there is no match between equal "crime" and equal "punishment" –or to stay away as much as possible from a "criminal" reading of this story– that there are equal consequences to equal actions, since there is a presupposition that we are not all equal.

As in other biblical stories, here a double standard of judgment is perceptible, manifested in several facts. In the text itself, ascribing different results for the same action, when performed by people of different gender/sex: Lot's disobedience results in the angels allowing him to go to Zoar, while Lota's disobedience turns her into a pillar of salt, immobilizing her for ever. Lot

continues to be a subject (even though, it is true, only for a short while); Mrs. Lota, never again. Or, still within the same narrative, the woman's action results in her "saltiness," while Abraham's similar action is interpreted as righteousness, faithfulness, or preoccupation with the fate of humanity.

Beside the text itself, secondary literature also shows these double standards. Judgment by the patriarchal system is not neutral and is not fair. It is androcentric, biased and self-serving. It is always very hard on the weakest segments of society, women, elderly people, children, people with special abilities, people with sexual options different from what has been called "compulsory heterosexuality," imposed by patriarchy as "(the only) normal behaviour." Above all it is unfair because patriarchy does not judge for justice's sake, but in order to keep power in the hands of a few males over many other males and all women.

Judgment by the patriarchal system starts already in the text itself and goes on in many commentaries. When, for example, they assume with no proof that Lot has to be a better character than his wife or daughters, only because he is a male, and Abraham's nephew at that; when they assume the woman's looking back means identification with Sodom's iniquity, while Lot's delay in leaving is not judged; or when the daughters' incest is condemned with much stronger words than their father's offer of them to the mob.

Incest is another issue I have not discussed at length here. Lot's drunkenness exonerates him from an action in which he necessarily took part. Action which, in the vast majority of cases, is initiated and carried out by a male closely related to the victim (father, uncle, grandfather, brother ...) and thus one in whom the victim trusted.<sup>44</sup> This is usually overlooked by the same commentaries that condemn the daughters' action. Patriarchy has a special ability to excuse males from actions against weaker people, especially where violence and sex go together: prostitution, traffic of minors and enslaved people, rape, incest, physical and psychological violence against the family are systematically denied, de-penalized—even by those in authority to defend victims, such as the police— or turned against the victims themselves ("she was asking for it," "she likes or needs to be maltreated"). There are several other stories that show this symptomatic tendency of the patriarchal system to minimize male responsibility and penalize female actions, with the result that gender prejudices are reinforced.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Getting out of a traditional dilemma*

The relationship between female barrenness (always female!) and rivalry between wives—or wife and concubine—for the husband's endearment/respect/love is a common theme in biblical stories. These cases are never resolved while one of them is barren, because the woman's place at her husband's household is not ensured in the patriarchal structure; in fact, rivalry often continues even after both have conceived.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Still in cases where improper sexual relations are initiated by the subordinated person (usually a woman), there is a power issue that does not allow putting equal blame on both parts. See Brenner, "On Incest"; Rashkow, 65-84.

<sup>45</sup>Other stories that confirm this tendency of patriarchy to protect itself, are for instance Miriam's leprosy (Num 12); the different treatment to Abraham's and Sarah's laughter at the announcement of a son (Gen 17:17; 18:12-15); or Eve's responsibility for the world's sin. Negatively, it is often forgotten that John contains Martha's confession of Jesus as the Christ. This is parallel to that by Peter, whose denial of Jesus, by the way, is also forgotten.

<sup>46</sup>Sarah eliminates Hagar (Genesis 21); Leah's and Rachel's rivalry seems to finish with the latter's death (Gen 35:19); Peninah disappears when Hannah conceives (1 Samuel 1). In the Genesis narratives and in those pertaining

Although the relationship, at least literary but probably ideological as well, between the Lotitas' mutual collaboration and fertility deserves further investigation, their action would allow us to state that when one of the elements of the equation is varied, the whole equation varies. Without rivalry, there is no barrenness! When there is no father to decide over the life and future of one son over against the others and over the respective mothers, there is no barrenness to overcome nor rivalry to embitter each other's lives. This is not twenty-first century medicine. It does not speak to women who are struggling today against sterility. It is a (Theological? Sociological? Anthropological?) Principle that may say something to all people, women and men, who today stand against each other for the benefit of the system, which rewards us with the honour of becoming prospective mothers of prospective great men.

*The risk of deciding*

Finally, another issue raised by this story, deserving further analysis, is the risk of making decisions when they bring along consequences, not punishments. To know that if I look back I will turn into a pillar of salt because devastation gives no rest, and not because God punishes me, becomes very liberating. To know that if I am beaten it is because my husband / father / boyfriend is violent, not because I was born with the wrong sex, or because God punishes me, or because I deserve it, becomes not only liberating, but true to God's Word and it is a message the world and the Churches need desperately to hear.

Examples there are many, but the principle has already been stated. We (women and "subjected" men) will start to exercise our vocation of "subject-ness" when we recall that we do not have a God with Damocles' sword in his hand, ready to fall upon us; we have YHWH, the God who in Exodus and in other events, heard and hears cries as well as sighs –God made flesh.

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to a monarch's successor, rivalry is very much connected to ensuring that the "proper" son becomes his father's heir; Steinberg, 182, 185-188. See also Athalya Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm" *VT* 36/3 (1986) 257-273, reprinted in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 204-221 (205-206) classifies the stories of heroes' mothers into four types: 1a) 2 mothers-2 sons but 1 hero (Sarah and Hagar), 1b) 2 mothers-1 son (Naomi and Ruth); 2a) 1 mother-2 sons (Eva, Rebekah); 2b) 1 mother-1 son. 2b seems to be the closest paradigm to the Lotitas.