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BOUNDARY ISSUES IN GENESIS 19.1-38

Lyn M. Bechtel

In the traditional interpretation of Gen. 19.1-11 the main issues are the practice of homosexuality¹ and hospitality toward men taking precedence over the protection of women.² Many exegetes assumed that homosexuality is the cause of the destruction of Sodom, despite the fact that none of the biblical references to Sodom's destruction mention homosexuality as the cause. The destruction is mentioned numerous times in the Hebrew Scriptures as an example of God's judgment, yet the crime that is associated with the judgment varies. In Isa. 1.10 the crime is social oppression; in Jer. 23.14 it is adultery, lying and criminality; and in Ezek. 16.49 it is pride, excess of food and prosperous ease (see Westermann 1984, after W. Zimmerli and E.A. Speiser). The assumption of homosexuality overlooks many important dimensions of the text, particularly the fact that if sexual activity had taken place, the central issue would have been *rape*. The potential rape of Lot's daughters is largely overlooked because the focus is on the men of the story. But when this story is read from a group-oriented perspective, where boundary issues are determinative, the interpretation of the text can shift significantly.

Because of the importance of boundary issues, it is essential to

1. Scholars who focus on condemnation of homosexuality: e.g. Alter 1986: 30-38; Brueggemann 1982; Carmichael 1979; Westermann 1984.

2. Scholars who focus on hospitality over protection of women: e.g. Lasine 1984: 37-59; Carmichael 1979: 55-56; Westermann 1984: 301; Coats 1985: 113-32. For a discussion of the connection of hospitality and righteousness, see Alexander 1985: 289-91. Others decry the fact that hospitality protects only males: e.g. Block 1990: 325-41; Tribble 1984: 65-91. Other exegetes question Lot's character as a way of making sense of Lot's outrageous offer: e.g. Jeansonne 1988: 123-29; 1990: 31-42; Turner 1990: 86-101.

establish the position or status of the characters in the story, so that their function can be determined. First, there are two *mal'ākîm*. Many exegetes assume that the *mal'ākîm* are 'angels', spiritual beings sent from the divine world, who should be easily recognizable to righteous folks (e.g. Gaster 1962: 129; von Rad 1961: 217; Speiser 1964: 138)³. But the concept of an angel as a non-human representative from the divine world enters Israel's tradition in the Hellenistic period, so it would be inappropriate for the interpretation of this story, particularly since it adds a degree of Christian spirituality. In ancient Israel *mal'ākîm* are human messengers who may represent either a king or God. In 19.1 there is nothing to indicate that the messengers are anything more than ordinary human messengers and nothing to suggest specifically who has sent these messengers.

But there are a variety of clues as to the identity of these messengers imbedded in previous texts. In 14.1-16 there is a coalition of powerful kings who have made war against Sodom, plundered the town and taken Lot captive. If they are messengers of a king, they would be recognizable as such through their dress. This guarantees that they are recognized and treated with the honor and respect due the king. But since messengers are commonly sent as spies, these messengers could also be spies for the coalition of powerful kings in preparation for another attack. In light of the previous attack, the presence of the messengers could definitely raise concern in the town. Lot and the men of the town would be keenly aware of the grave danger they pose to the continued welfare and existence of the community.

To heighten the ambiguity concerning their identity, in ch. 18 there are three men (*'anāšîm*) who are associated with an announcement that God *may* destroy the city of Sodom *if* the outcry against its injustice is corroborated (18.16-33).⁴ So the messengers could simultaneously be spies for God. But Lot and the townsmen are not aware of this development. Are the two messengers in 19.1 related to the three men in ch. 18? If so, why the change in number? Are messengers of a king also recognizable as messengers of God? Did Abraham honor and give them

3. In contrast, Brueggemann would rather call them 'strange men' (Brueggemann 1982: 162).

4. The major catastrophe that hits Sodom is assumed to be an earthquake and eruptions of petroleum gases underground (e.g. Speiser 1964: 142). The possibility of military destruction with accompanying burning is seldom considered, which is strange in light of the coalition of powerful kings.

hospitality because he recognized them as messengers of a king or messengers of God? The text gives no answers.

So the messengers are clearly outsiders, who in a group-oriented society, would be perceived as threatening once they cross the boundary of a group by entering a city gate. In group-oriented societies clear-cut group boundaries must be well articulated and highly valued because they define the limits of the group. Boundaries are powerful because they protect the group, but dangerous because they can be violated, threatening the existence of the group. To protect a close-knit community from incursion by outsiders, boundaries and entrances must be carefully guarded (see Barth 1969; Lifton 1967), and the categories of insiders, outsiders and marginal figures carefully observed. Insiders are generally considered good, contributing to the life of the group, and outsiders are generally considered threatening, contributing to the dissemination and possibly destruction of the group. Likewise, there is protection, cooperation and mutual assistance inside the group and threat or possible death outside the group.

Will Lot and the townsmen simply assume these men are recognizable messengers of a powerful and threatening king? Even the audience only suspects that they *may* also be spies for God who are testing the behaviour of the people of Sodom. Consequently, if the potentially threatening messengers are treated well, they will not be able to verify the outcry of injustice against the city, and God may not destroy Sodom. Yet if they are well treated, they may be able to spy for the coalition, and the coalition may destroy Sodom. But if they are ill-treated, God may destroy Sodom. Yet if they are ill-treated, they might not be able to spy, which could save Sodom. The issue of the treatment of potentially threatening messengers is extremely complex, ambiguous and ambivalent! It will require a great deal of discernment.

In contrast to the outsiders, there are the insiders, the men of the town. There are specific roles and clear boundaries related to insiders and marginal people, roles and boundaries that have to be carefully observed. It is stressed that the townsmen are mature adults; they are described as *na'ar* (young adult males) and *zāqēn* (old adult males), so the maturity of the group is emphasized. As mature adults they should have the capacity to discern 'good and bad'—a capacity that the situation clearly calls for (see Bechtel 1993: 77-117; 1994b: 152-73; 1995: 3-26). As adult insiders, they have the legal right to 'judge' at the gate for the 'good' of the community. But since their town has recently been

plundered and Lot and others taken captive (14.10-16), these townsmen are, no doubt, extremely cautious and defensive of their community, families and property.

Finally, there are the marginal people, Lot and his two daughters. Because of the inside/outside differentiation in group-oriented societies, status is extremely important. The closer to the center of the group people are, the more secure they are; the closer to the boundaries people are, the more marginal and threatened they are (see Barber 1957; Lenski 1984; Mead 1937; 1953). This means that sojourners, who are marginal in status, are less secure and more threatened. The text stresses that Lot and his family are sojourners; they are outsiders who are allowed to dwell and have full protection, but limited political rights within the town. Since Lot might be able to recognize the messengers from his captivity, the audience would expect Lot to react to the messengers with extreme caution and defensiveness.

How will the potentially threatening outsiders be treated by the insiders, who are responsible for the welfare of the community, who are mature enough to discern 'good and bad' and who have the political right to 'judge' for the community? How will their reaction differ from the treatment by the less secure marginal character, who is mature enough to discern 'good and bad, but does not have the political right to 'judge' for the 'good' of the community (see Rowlett 1992: 15-23)?

Hospitality (19.1-3)

(19.1) Two messengers (*mal'ākīm*) come to Sodom. Lot is sitting in the gate of Sodom. Lot sees, arises to greet them and bows down to them with his nose (*'ap*) to the ground (*'ār'sā*). (19.2) He says, 'Now, my lords (*"dōnay*), turn aside please to the house of your servant, spend the night, wash your feet and start going on your way early in the morning.' They say, 'No, for we will spend the night in the square'. (19.3) But he strongly urges/presses (*pšr*) them, so they turn to him and come to his house. He prepares for them a meal (*mišteh*), bakes unleavened bread and they eat.⁵

5. Some scholars condemn Lot for his inferior meal (e.g. Alter 1996: 85). They assume that baking unleavened bread makes the meal less desirable. But although unleavened breads are quicker, they are definitely not inferior! From the perspective of some people, Middle Eastern unleavened breads are far superior to many commercial, leavened breads. And Lot's meal (*mišteh*) is a substantial one (see Est. 5.6; Dan. 1.5; Jer. 16.8; Job 1.5; etc.; see Turner 1990: 92).

Lot's marginal status is stressed by the fact that the only place that Lot functions in the story is on boundaries: at the *entrance gate* of the city and at the *entrance* of his house. An entrance gate to the city is a point of danger because of incursion from outside, so it is a place where there is general awareness of who comes and goes. It is also the location of the judicial system, so it is where the community (the insiders) make judgments during the day. But being of marginal status, it is *not* Lot's place to judge, despite the fact that the situation clearly calls for careful discernment of very complex issues.

Because of his marginality Lot would normally be expected to be more open to interaction with outsiders. Yet since his position in the community is less secure and since he has already been taken captive by the kings that these messengers *may* represent, the audience would expect Lot to be resistant to interaction with these particular outsiders. Consequently, his response is surprising. He honors them in a manner in which an ordinary person would act before a king: he humbly bows down with his nose (*'ap*) to the ground.⁶ Does this point to his assuming that they are the messengers of a king? Shame and honor, which are part of the predominant social control system of group-oriented societies, are ways of maintaining and manipulating status.⁷ Shaming decreases status and emphasizes inferiority and marginality, while honoring increases status and emphasizes superiority and centrality. Inferior and marginal people are expected to express their low status through shameful body positions, such as lying flat on the ground in an extremely vulnerable position. Thus Lot's bowing down demonstrates his marginality, vulnerability and need for protection in the presence of the superior messengers. Lot also honors the messengers by calling them, 'my lords', and offering them protective hospitality. But in light of his previous experience, his hospitality and openness contradict normal human defensiveness because it risks bringing threatening outsiders inside (see Malina 1985: 408-409).

In a shame/honor culture the messengers respond appropriately: they refuse the hospitality.⁸ Hospitality involves the crossing of a household

boundary by an outsider, so appropriately they refuse. Then, typically, Lot strongly urges/presses (*pšr*, v. 3) them to accept his hospitality. At this point it would be shameful if the messengers refused. So they accept. This pattern of behavior is part of the normal dynamics of a group-oriented shame/honor society (see Gen. 33.6-11; Judg. 19.7; 2 Kgs 2.17), and it shows that there is mutuality in their interactions. In honoring the messengers and risking hospitality, Lot accepts the difference between himself and the outsiders and creates bonding with them. Accepting difference is one way of diminishing the threat that outsiders may pose. But is he protecting both himself and the community? Or is he protecting himself at the expense of the community? If these men are messengers of a coalition of kings, Lot's hospitality may in the long run benefit Lot, as did Rahab's (Josh. 2 and 6), but allow the violation of the boundary of the community so that the messengers can spy on the defenses of the community. His hospitality could contribute to the downfall of the town. But if the messengers are messengers of YHWH, then Lot's hospitality may in the long run benefit Lot as well as the community—providing the community responds in a similar way. But what if the messengers represent *both* the coalition and YHWH, what will the consequences of Lot's hospitality be? And how will Lot's hospitality be perceived by the men of the town? Will they view this boundary violation positively or negatively?

Inhospitality: Shaming (19.4-5)

(19.4) Before going to bed the men (*'anāšîm*) of the town, the adult men (*'anāšîm*) of Sodom surround the house, from the young adult men (*na'ar*) to the old adult men (*zāqēn*)—all of the people (*'am*) to the last.
(19.5) They call to Lot and say to him, 'Where are the men (*'anāšîm*) who came to you tonight? Bring (*yš'*) them to us so that we may know (*yd'*) them.'

In light of the ambiguity about the messengers and the consequences of hospitality, is the mention of the time just before going to bed indicative of a period of increasing darkness and, therefore, lack of clarity? Next it is stressed that it is all the adult men (*'anāšîm*), the young men (*na'ar*) and the old men (*zāqēn*), that surround the house. The term *'anāšîm* (men) indicates adult men and this is emphasized by the terms

shame/honor etiquette (e.g. Turner 1990: 90; Speiser 1964: 138; Jeansonne 1988: 126).

6. Bowing down is the behaviour of courtiers before a superior, such as a king (Speiser 1964: 138).

7. See Bechtel 1991: 47-76. Cf. Abu-Lughod 1986; Ausubel 1955: 378-90; Dodds 1951; Horney 1950; Hsien-Chin 1956: 447-67; Isenberg 1950: 329-49; Lynd 1958; Piers and Singer 1953; Riezler 1943: 457-65. Scheff 1988: 402-34.

8. Most scholars do not understand the messenger's refusal as an element of a

na'ar (the young adult men) to the old men (*zāqēn*). As adult men they should have the maturity to discern 'good and bad' in all its complexity. They should normally be able to have some clarity. But this is a time of growing darkness, of increased lack of clarity, so that issues are obscured and 'good and bad' are harder to discern, although the audience is already privy to the complexity of the issues.

The townsmen want to 'know' (*yd'*) the messengers, which is intentionally *ambiguous*. 'Knowing' covers broad intellectual, experiential and sexual knowing. Do the men only have intellectual knowing in mind? Do they just want to 'know' who the messengers are and what they are doing in the town? Or do they have sexual knowing in mind? If *all* the adult men of the town want to 'know' the two men sexually, it would be aggressive homosexual *rape*.⁹ But at this point there are *no* clues in the text about the intentions of the townsmen. The *ambiguity* of the men's *intention* is important to discern.

It is also important to distinguish between a desire for sexual pleasure and rape. Sexual pleasure is not a community activity; it is private and requires mutuality. But in this scene, 'all of the people' (*'am*) of Sodom are present and mutuality is absent, so the desire for sexual pleasure, homosexual or heterosexual, can be ruled out. In contrast, rape does not entail a desire for sexual pleasure. Both heterosexual and homosexual rape are forceful, non-consensual *boundary violations* (see Bechtel 1994b: 19-36). Heterosexual rape is rape of a woman and homosexual rape is rape of a man. Both are rape; one is not better or worse than the other. Is the boundary violation of rape an appropriate response to the messenger's boundary violation of the town? Rape of either males or females is deeply shameful, dehumanizing and status reducing, so it would strip the messengers of their dignity and honor and would have lasting harmful, psychological and physical effects. After being raped the messengers would probably be incapable of spying and certainly in their shamed condition they would be incapable of reporting their information to their community. The use of shame as an incapacitating device is seen in 2 Samuel 10 where the representatives of King David are shamed by Hanun, king of the Ammonites, because they are suspected of being spies. After having one side of their beards shaved off, their garments cut off at the hips and being paraded out of town,

9. See Niditch 1982: 365-79. Some exegetes become preoccupied with the morality of homosexuality and miss the implications of rape (e.g. Coote and Ord 1989: 127-28).

they are too shamed to return to Jerusalem and must remain in isolation until their shame subsides. Compared to this shaming, the shame of rape is of a different magnitude; it is lifelong. So as immoral as it is, rape could have a protective function for the community of Sodom. And in a group-oriented society 'sin' is behavior on the part of an individual or a group that violates the well-being, social bonding or continued existence of the group. It is a failure to respond to social need or a failure to carry out mutually beneficial action. So the interpreter's focus needs to be on the ability of the act to respond to social need and be mutually beneficial.

And in this type of society sexual intercourse should create the kind of bonding of difference (male and female) that is essential in keeping the group together. Rape is the antithesis of bonding. It is a boundary violation that eliminates bonding and is the opposite of hospitality. Finally, rape creates the illusion of power, control and superiority for the perpetrator, so it could help silence the townsmen's feelings of vulnerability, inferiority and lack of control in the face of the threatening messengers/spies.¹⁰ The townsmen may consider it an appropriate counter-boundary violation to the boundary violation of the messengers. Thus, it would be a way of protecting the community that the community might consider mutually beneficial. Homosexuality is not the issue. But of course, the intentions of the townsmen are ambiguous; rape of the messengers may not be their intention.

As the behavior of Lot and the townsmen is examined, it is seen that they are both trying to respond to social need by diminishing a threat to the community. Both the townsmen and Lot respond with boundary violations. Lot is open to outsiders and tries to secure favor through hospitality, but in doing so he risks the community by housing potentially threatening 'spies' within the community. The townsmen may be closed to outsiders and at worst they may be trying to protect their community from a boundary violation by a counter-boundary violation, which is intended to prevent the messengers from spying.

Lot's marginal status is again stressed by his functioning on a boundary—at the *entrance* of his house. Although the entrance is a point of danger, there is now a reversal. The threatening outsiders are inside being protected by Lot's hospitality and the insiders are outside

10. My definition of rape is a composite of the work of Beneke 1982; Bouque 1989; Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1977: 26-35; Chappell, Geis and Geis (eds.) 1977; Horos 1974; Tomaselli and Porter (eds.) 1986; Sanday 1981b.

forming a threatening boundary around the house. The marginal figure has moved to the entrance of his house to mediate between the insiders and the outsiders.¹¹

Rescue of the Messengers: Lot's Offer (19.6-8)

(19.6) Lot goes out to them at the entrance and he closes the door after him. (19.7) He says to them, 'Please, my brothers, do not act badly (*r'*). (19.8) Since I have two daughters who have not known (*yd'*) a man (*'iš*), let me bring them forth (*ys'*) to you. Do to them what is good (*tôb*) in your eyes, only to these men (*'nāšîm*) do not do (*'šh*) anything for they came for safety under my roof.'

Lot's hospitality and his honoring of the messengers by calling them 'my lords', has already bonded Lot to the outsiders (the messengers). Now he calls the townsmen 'my brothers', which establishes bonding between himself and the insiders (the townsmen). Again Lot accepts difference, this time between himself and the insiders and creates bonding with them. Then in his role as mediator, the position of a 'judge', Lot takes control of the situation and begins to discern good (*tôb*) and bad (*ra'*). He asks his brothers 'not to act badly' (*r'*), but 'to do good (*tôb*)' in their eyes.¹² Picking up on the word 'know' (*yd'*), he offers the townsmen, who want to 'know' (*yd'*) the two men (*'nāšîm*), his two daughters, who have not 'known' (*yd'*) a man (*'iš*). Does Lot assume that the townsmen simply want to 'know' (*yd'*) what the messengers are doing in Sodom? If so, offering his daughters to be raped by the townsmen would reflect the ambiguity of the word 'know', but would be completely incongruent and inappropriate to their intentions. It clearly would be rejected.

Or does Lot assume that the intentions of the men are sexual and that the men want to rape? If so he offers his daughters. But the men are attempting to rape two threatening male outsiders. In doing so they are responding to a threat to their community, not trying to fulfill their sexual needs. The homosexual rape of these potential spies would

11. Jeansonne (1988: 126-27) assumes that Lot goes outside and closes the door in order to create secrecy because of his wicked and shameful proposal.

12. The expression 'every person does right in their own eyes' (Deut. 6.18; 12.28; Josh. 9.25; Judg. 17.6; 19.1, 24; 21.25) is a deuteronomistic expression for a community in which there is virtual anarchy and no king to judge and control the community (see Lasine 1984: 37).

deeply shame them and make them incapable of carrying out their mission. So as an attempt to protect the city from danger, this homosexual rape could be effective. But Lot's offer of two non-threatening, marginal women is startlingly incongruent and totally inappropriate under the circumstances; his offer does not address the situation and would clearly be rejected.

And as abhorrent as the homosexual rape of two threatening outsiders would be, the heterosexual rape of two non-threatening marginal women who are, no doubt, engaged to men of the town, is even more abhorrent in a group-oriented society. Although the homosexual rape of the threatening outsiders might qualify as 'good' for the community, the heterosexual rape of the daughters would be clearly 'bad' for the community. So his offer is as jarring as the fact that many modern commentators disregard the potential rape of the women and concentrate on the protection of the men and the issue of homosexuality.¹³ But this disregard for and devaluing of women does not fit into the assumptions of a group-oriented society. In group-orientation the continuing process of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth of nature is the pattern for the household and society. Each individual has a sense of continued existence through the biological continuation of life through children. This guarantees the continued existence of the household and, in turn, the society as a whole. So the production of children is essential. In addition, in small agrarian societies such as ancient Israel, children are essential to carry out the heavy work in the fields when parents become old. Physical survival and longevity depends on children. Thus sexual intercourse functions in two critical ways. First, it produces progeny. And second, it creates the kind of strong bonding, allegiance and obligation that is essential in keeping the community and the household together. It is a woman's sexual power of productivity that produces children in partnership with her husband and YHWH. Since women's sexual power leads to the continued existence of both the

13. See Alexander 1985: 291; Skinner 1930: 307. Other exegetes are sympathetic to Lot (Vawter 1977; von Rad 1961: 218-19) or see Lot's action as an act of despair and hopelessness, but suggest that today's standards should not be imposed (Westermann 1984), or suggest that the offer would not be shocking to the ancient sense of proprieties (Vawter 1977), or see Lot as a tragic buffoon (Coats 1985: 121). Jeansonne (1988: 128) considers Lot to be a cruel exploiter of his daughter's welfare, a procrastinating, ungrateful dweller in a sinful city, a self-centered, incompetent, disobedient, insincere and disrespectful man that God saved (cf. Turner 1990: 95).

household and society and functions in the realm of YHWH's creating and sustaining life, it must be used carefully and properly *inside* the household (see Foucault 1980; Goody 1983; Rosaldo and Lamphere [eds.] 1974; Sanday 1981a: 5-27; Whyte 1978; Meyers 1988; 1989: 265-78). Thus women in this type of society are central, not marginal, and the idea of women being disregarded or devalued is inconceivable (contrary to Lerner 1986). In the story Lot's two daughters have the potential of 'building' a household and thus the community as a whole. Since they are still under the protection of their father, Lot has an obligation to the community to protect them—particularly since they are engaged (v. 14), probably to men of the community (Alter 1986: 33). So Lot's offer seems strange. Lot makes the offer in order to protect the messengers who may 'destroy' the community, but in doing so the offer appears to violate his own community responsibility and the ideals of the community (see the prohibition against the violation of an engaged woman in Deut. 22.25-27). Lot's offer protects the 'potential community destroyers' (the messengers) and threatens the 'potential community builders' (his daughters).

In both cases, the offer is totally inappropriate and thoroughly offensive. It would be easy to judge what is 'good' and what is 'bad', so the offer would be *rejected*. And of course, that is the point. Lot's offer responds to the ambiguity of the townsmen's intentions by presenting something that contradicts both possible intentions. In such a tense situation the function of an incongruent, totally offensive offer is to defuse the tension, stop the action and prevent possible aggression. Lot's 'bad' offer crosses the boundary of decency in order to have a 'good' outcome. Lot says, 'Do what is *good* in your own eyes.' What is 'good' in their eyes is to reduce the threat to the community, *not* to rape two non-threatening women—that would threaten the community. So contrary to the opinion of some scholars, Lot does not offer his daughters as a way of being the perfect Near Eastern host (e.g. Alter 1986: 307), or as the desperate act of a wicked man (e.g. Lasine 1984),¹⁴ or as a father doing what he has the right to do (e.g. Lerner 1986: 173; cf. Tapp 1989: 157-74). Lot presents an offer that protects both the messengers and his daughters.

14. Or Jeansonne (1988: 31-32) stresses the unjust treatment of his daughters; Lot is abnegating his responsibility. Skinner (1930: 307) feels it is abhorrent to Hebrew morality. Lot's offer is simply ignored by Speiser (1964) and Brueggemann (1982).

Rescue of Lot (19.9-11)

(19.9) They say, 'Present yourself (*ngš*)!' And they say, 'Now the one who came as a sojourner is definitely judging (*špt*). Now we will do more bad (*r'*) to you than to them.' Then they strongly press (*pšr*) against the man ('*š*) Lot and come near (*ngš*) to break down the door. (19.10) So the men ('*nāšim*') send forth their hands and bring Lot to them into the house and close the door. (19.11) They strike (*nh*) the men ('*nāšim*') who are at the door with blindness (*sanwērīm*) from the smallest to the largest and they stop finding the door.

So the reaction of the townsmen to Lot's offer is critical. The townsmen do *not* respond to Lot's sexual offer. This should indicate that their intention is *not* sexual pleasure or the rape of two non-threatening women. His offer does not accomplish their goal of protecting the town.

Instead the townsmen ask Lot to present himself (*ngš*). *Ngš* generally means to 'come near', and in some cases it is a judicial term meaning 'to present oneself before a court' for judgment (e.g. Deut. 25.1). Isaiah 50.8 states, 'Who contends with me? Let us stand (*'md*) together. Who is my adversary? Let him present himself (*ngš*) to me.' The context in Isa. 50.8 and Gen. 19.9 is that of judgment. The townsmen are taking Lot to court and they stress Lot's status as a sojourner, which implies that sojourners do not have the right to 'judge'. From the perspective of the townsmen this marginal sojourner is acting inappropriately and is violating the norms of the community.¹⁵ Lot is definitely guilty of 'judging' (*špt*). He has been discerning what is 'good' and 'bad' for the community (see Tribble 1984: 75). Having judged him, as punishment for his improper behavior they now intend 'to do more bad (*r'*) to him than they had intended to do to the threatening outsiders. Does this indicate that they did not intend to do anything more to the messengers than 'know' what they are doing in the town, but they intend to punish Lot for his violation? Or does it indicate that they intended to rape the messengers to protect the community and now they will do worse to Lot to protect the norms of the community? There is no way of knowing. Of course, the irony of the situation is that God is in the background judging both Lot's ability to discern and judge and the

15. In addition, as a marginal member of the community Lot has a responsibility to cooperate, be interdependent and offer mutual aid to the community. Instead, Lot is perceived as adding additional threat to the community.

townsmen's ability to discern and judge (18.25-26; see Alter 1986: 32). Whose judgment is better: the townsmen's or Lot's? Who has the ability to discern 'good' and 'bad'?

As Lot has strongly urged/pressed (*pšr*) the messengers to cross a boundary and accept his hospitality, now the townsmen strongly press (*pšr*) against Lot to break down his door and violate his boundary. The verb *pšr* (urge/press) is used to highlight the two kinds of boundary violation, one that is potentially saving and one that is potentially destroying. And as Lot has protected the messengers, now the messengers protect Lot by pulling him into the house.

Then, at the entrance of the house the townsmen are struck (*nkh*) with blindness (*sanwērîm*).¹⁶ *Nkh* means 'to smite' or 'strike' and it is often associated with legal punishment. The townsmen wanted to punish Lot, but instead they are punished with blindness. But what are the implications of this blindness? Since the townsmen wanted to 'know' the messengers, there may be a connection between 'knowing' and 'seeing' (Coote and Ord 1989: 131; see Alter 1986: 30-38). The connection is seen in the ironic statement in Isa. 6.9c, 'They hear, but do not understand. They see (*r'h*), but do not know (*yd'*).' Furthermore, in 2 Kgs 6.20 people are struck with blindness (*sanwērîm*) and 'their eyes are no longer open'. For mature adults this blindness is the opposite of having the eyes opened after eating of the tree of discernment of 'good and bad' (Gen. 3.5; see Bechtel 1995). So if the townsmen cannot 'see', they cannot 'know'. Their blindness is indicative of the fact that they do not have the mature capacity to judge 'good and bad', which in ancient Israel is part of the wisdom acquired in maturation into adulthood (see Ackerman 1990: 41-60). The emphasis on the townsmen being mature adults who should have this capacity is now understandable.

Who does the striking? Is 'the blindness' of the townsmen something that is imposed as punishment from outside, by God? If God imposes their blindness as punishment, then the townsmen are not directly responsible for the blindness; they become victims. But if blindness symbolizes their immature attitudes, their inability to discern the complexity of 'good' and 'bad' and their lack of acceptance of difference, then their blindness is something that they themselves have caused. And they themselves are responsible for the consequences. Does God

16. Some scholars assume that *sanwērîm* is a blinding light that reveals the messengers as 'angels' (e.g. Speiser 1964: 139-40).

punish humans or do they punish themselves by their attitudes and immature thinking?

This story illustrates that the discernment of good and bad is never easy or clear cut. The lack of clarity is emphasized by having the story take place at bedtime, when there is increasing darkness and vision is more hazy. Throughout the story good and bad have been ambiguous and ambivalent. What seems 'bad' may also be 'good': (1) Lot's risky hospitality (inclusion of outsiders); (2) Lot's incongruous, offensive offer of his daughters, which defuses a hostile situation and (3) the messengers, who probably represent threatening kings and may also represent God. What seems 'good', turns out to be 'bad': the townsmen's potentially aggressive behavior (exclusion of outsiders) which is supposed to protect the community. Because of their xenophobia, their lack of acceptance of difference, the townsmen are 'blind' to the danger they have created and 'blind' to the possibilities of mediation, cooperation and hospitality. The sin of the men of Sodom is *not* their practice of homosexuality, but their immaturity and inability to deal with difference and the complexity of discerning good and bad. Life is far too complex to establish fixed judgments of absolute good and bad. Each situation has to be evaluated and discerned on its own merits, because things are not always the way they appear on the surface.

The book of Deuteronomy advocates utterly destroying outsiders. Do the townsmen represent people who are obedient to this prescription, so they do not think critically about each situation or weigh the ramifications of all possibilities? Does the story challenge these xenophobic tendencies by projecting them onto the men of Sodom—whose fate is proverbial? Is this story set during the premonarchical period of Israel's origins because at that point in time the people of Israel are all outsiders or marginal people who include outsiders in order to grow as a nation? If inclusion of outsiders is part of Israel's coming into existence, does this imply that exclusion of outsiders may contribute to Israel's going out of existence—like Sodom?¹⁷ Inclusion requires

17. The similarities between elements of Gen. 19 and Judg. 19 have been long observed. Some scholars assume that since the two stories share a similar foundation, both stories go in the same direction. But if the two stories are compared carefully, it is seen that there are radical differences in the direction of the two stories. They share a theme of hospitality, but in Judges 19 the main characters are all 'insiders' (tribal folks, though some are sojourning in other tribal areas), so the issue is hospitality among *insiders*, not with outsiders. The only outsiders are the

boundary crossing and violation, but some boundary crossing and violation may preserve rather than destroy. Accepting difference, though threatening, builds and expands.

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Jebusites who are definitively identified as dangerous, supporting the xenophobic, exclusionary tendencies of deuteronomistic theology (compared to the inclusionary tendencies of the Genesis stories). In Judg. 19 'rape' (heterosexual) with all its characteristic motivations is actually carried out among the 'insiders'. The sojourning Levite does the 'judging' at a time when there is virtual anarchy with no king in Israel to 'judge'. 'Judging' without a deuteronomistic king or law leads to inter-tribal civil war. And the concubine is a woman who does not have full status in her husband's household, but returns to the protection of her father's household—thus incorporating a host of Northern/Southern relationship issues.

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