‘Hospitality’, Hostiles and Hostages: 
On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1-9

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Abstract

Opinion has been divided over Gen. 19.1-9: whether the inhabitants of Sodom are condemned for immorality, or for their violation of ‘hospitality’. Moreover, Lot’s offering of his daughters to the crowd has been viewed as the worst sort of abuse. Both events must be evaluated against ancient juridical practices. The Sodomites’ request ‘to know’ (יִדְע֑ו) the patriarch’s guests is non-sexual in nature: they want to ascertain why the men have come to the city. Lot objects to the proposal: he, as an official, has pledged legal protection to the travelers, vouching for their character. To ensure that the envoys pose no danger to the town, he formally offers his daughters as ‘hostages’ in their stead. They are to be held in protective custody until the detainees leave the next morning. The rejection of Lot’s plan represents Sodom’s abandonment of the rule of law, providing justification for its divine punishment.

Few episodes in the Hebrew Bible have aroused such differing interpretations or responses as the account of the events leading to the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19.1 The story itself is well-known: how Lot allows heavenly messengers—unrecognized by him as such—into the town, taking them under the protection of his household. A delegation of ‘men of the city’ insists that the guests be delivered over, that they might

1. For a brief but convenient overview of the history of interpretation, see M. Mulder, ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’, in ABD, VI, pp. 102-103.

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'know' them. The beleaguered host rejects the demand, presenting in the visitors' stead his two virgin daughters, 'to do with as you please'—as the RSV gingerly translates it. The locals—now enraged—attempt to do violence to Lot, but are hindered by supernatural intervention.

Opinion has been divided over the major emphasis of the vignette: whether the denizens of Sodom are being condemned for aberrant behavior, or for their violation of a universally 'sacrosanct' code of 'hospitality'. It is generally assumed, however, that the biblical writer is criticizing some sort of moral impropriety—homosexuality or gang rape. Likewise, Lot's 'offering' of his daughters to the populace has been the subject of much analysis. Among certain circles, the action is viewed as confirmation of the inequities of an oppressive system of patriarchy.

Despite firmly held views on the matter, a number of questions still need to be addressed:


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1. What is Lot’s precise role within this entire affair? The Genesis account notes that the patriarch is seated ‘at the gate’ of the city when first approached by the envoys: what does this mean within the narrative context of the Lot–Sodom cycle?

2. What significance is to be attached to the Sodomites as the ‘men of the city, from the young to the old’? Is this merely a general designation for ‘all’ the male inhabitants, or could the specification be indicative of a social or legal category that has gone unnoticed?

3. While it is frequently asserted that ‘hospitality’—once offered—could not be revoked, was this always the case? Were there circumstances in the ancient Near East in which individuals housing strangers could be required to give up guests to authorities? Clearly related to this is the nature of the men of Sodom’s demand: is it merely a frenzied desire to vent sexual passions or to exercise violence, as often asserted?

4. Finally, why would Lot attempt to turn over his daughters to the crowd? Certain critical schools hold that this action testifies to the ‘worthlessness’ of women within a now-discredited ‘ideology’. The characterization of Lot’s children as ‘unmarried’ would seem to point in the opposite direction. Rather than being without value, their status makes them exceedingly valuable—somehow equivalent to the strangers whose place they are to


8. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p. 75. Cf. the attempted justification on the basis of ancient cultural practices in Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 136, citing the concept of patria potestas. Yet paradoxically, Sarna notes: ‘The Mesopotamian law codes make it clear that betrothal was as sacrosanct as a consummated marriage’ (p. 136). The disparity between Lot’s supposed offer of his daughters for abuse and the protective attitude towards women throughout the ancient Near East suggests that a different rationale be sought for the action. The redactor’s silence is telling, inasmuch as other episodes of questionable ethics are criticized within the action and speech of the narrative of Genesis (e.g. Gen. 12.17-19; 20.3-18; 21.11).

9. Rashkow, *Phallacy*, p. 81, cites Exod. 22.15-16 and Deut. 22.23-27 and rightly exclaims, ‘Lot’s offer to the mob is incredible!’

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take. Although stupidity and panic might be a factor in explaining outrageous behavior, perhaps this problem should be viewed in a slightly different manner. Assuming that Lot’s daughters were precious to him, is it logical that he would turn them over to be abused and shamed—particularly in light of the subsequent information that they were betrothed?¹⁰ Or does Lot expect that this ‘exchange’ will satisfy both the request of the crowd and—at the same time—preserve the safety of his offspring?

These points are interrelated, and will be addressed in turn below.

1. *Lot as the ‘Man in the Gate’*

Scholars have long pointed out that the epithet of an individual ‘sitting in the gate’ is well attested throughout the Near East.¹¹ In Ugaritic and Hebrew literature, for example, ‘the gate’ was a juridical locale. It is the site of judgment, or the area where legal disputes occur. Those situated therein were often engaged in ‘decision-making’, acting as ‘judges’ for the community. Clearly, the description of Lot as ‘sitting in the gate’ is not gratuitous or incidental to the narrative of Genesis 19. For an Israelite audience, the epithet would have led people to infer that the patriarch is an individual of influence and standing within the social order of Sodom: he is one who—on some level—has been empowered to adjudicate for the populace-at-large.¹²

Yet, even given these important legal implications, the literal, spatial connotations evoked by the action of ‘sitting in the gate’ should not be overlooked, either. While excavators have not found Sodom,¹³ it is not

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¹⁰. The incongruity has been noted; cf. Coats, *Genesis*, p. 144; Driver, *Book of Genesis*, pp. 198-99; Steinburg, *Kinship and Marriage*, p. 71 n. 75. Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, I, pp. 499-500, is critical of Lot: ‘[He] devises...an unlawful remedy... he should have endured a thousand deaths, than have resorted to such a measure...’


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unreasonable to posit that the term ‘(city-)gate’ would have conjured up certain images for an ancient listener. Typically, a Syro-Palestinian city-state of the Bronze and Iron Ages would have been surrounded by walls marking boundaries. These structures would have been constructed primarily for defensive purposes—walls being the major fortifications against invading armies.\footnote{R. Thomas Schaub, ‘Bab edh-Dhra’, in E. Meyers (ed.), \textit{The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East} (5 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), I, pp. 248-50.} In circumstances of attack, the citizenry and denizens of the nearby countryside would retire behind such strongholds for protection.

That walled-cities were effective against enemies is proven by literary accounts of the great difficulties in taking such places by siege.\footnote{Y. Yadin, \textit{The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in Light of Archaeological Discovery} (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963), pp. 19-20; A. Herzog, ‘Cities (Levant)’, in \textit{ABD}, I, pp. 1033-34; and ‘Fortifications (Levant)’, in II, pp. 844-45; de Vaux, \textit{Ancient Israel}, I, pp. 233-34. Regardless of the historicity of the account, a ‘gate’ would presuppose the existence of ‘walls’.} Military endeavors of this magnitude would often prove so irksome to the offensive forces that they would break off operations completely and go home. The time, logistical demands, and cost accompanying siege-warfare were considerable obstacles to military planners. Fortifications not only defended—they deterred and dissuaded—and were crucial in the expulsion of invading troops from one’s territory.

By the same token, written records also provide evidence that well-fortified sites could occasionally be taken by infiltration and subterfuge. The Greek legends surrounding the capture of Troy,\footnote{C. Herzog and M. Gichon, \textit{Battles of the Bible} (London: Greenhill; Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), pp. 218-19; T.R. Hobbs, \textit{A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament} (OTS, 3; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), pp. 177-78; J. Keegan, \textit{A History of Warfare} (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 150-51; E. Bleibtrau, ‘5 Ways to Conquer a City’, \textit{BARev} 16.3 (1990), pp. 36-44.} an Egyptian text of the Ramesside Period known as the ‘Taking of Joppa’,\footnote{Homer, \textit{The Odyssey}, IV.271-89; VIII.433-520; XI.523-37.} and, more pertinently, the capture and destruction of the Canaanite city of Bethel/Luz by the Josephite clans during the Israelite Conquest (Judg. 1.22-25), are indicative of the phenomenon. The difficulty was getting a force—a handful of men at the most—into the town, to open it up to their armies

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ensconced outside. Spies, such as those employed in the biblical story of the destruction of Jericho, or collaborators, as at Bethel, were the agents by which such activities could be accomplished: individuals who were able to get past entrances and check-points, rendering defensive-works vulnerable.

Those guarding ‘city-gates’ would have been most attentive to such problems. The responsibility for keeping vigilant at one’s post for potential hostiles must have been a keen one. Undoubtedly, in times of actual warfare, there would have been heightened awareness about who, and what, was allowed behind fortifications. Particularly suspicious would have been strangers whose appearance marked them off from the normal scope of commerce within the environs of the city-state.

In this regard, Genesis 14 apparently preserves a tradition about Sodom which held that it had been at war, being part of a coalition that had rebelled against its overlord in Elam (Gen. 14.1-4, 8-11). Whether the compiler of Genesis 19 was aware of this source or not is difficult to determine. That it appears in the final redaction of the biblical book is not insignificant to our discussion. Indeed, Genesis 14 provides us with information that renders more pointed the subsequent reference to Lot ‘sitting in the gate’. Given the possible, wider, context that Sodom was engaged in, or had just been in a conflict makes the patriarch’s appear-

18. Note, for example, the Hittite ‘Instructions for Temple Officials’ (trans. A. Goetze, in *ANET*, p. 209): ‘...there shall be watchmen employed by night who shall patrol all night through. Outside the enclosure guards shall watch, inside the temple shall the temple officials patrol all night through and they shall not sleep.’ The attitude of caution expressed here should be regarded as normative throughout the ancient Near East (cf. Isa. 21.6-8).


21. Even without a specific reference to warfare in Gen. 19, the concern for security and the need to guard the city against unwanted intruders would have been understood. See O. Borowski, ‘5 Ways to Defend a City’, *BARev* 9.2 (1983), pp. 73-76.
ance at the entrance to the city of crucial importance within the story. Such a detail helps to explain how and why events unfold as they do.

In the received tradition of Genesis, Lot is to be seen as no casual observer—his presence at the aforementioned locale is no accident. The impression given is that he is a functionary of considerable import. On this fateful evening, Lot has been assigned—or has assumed—the task of determining who may or may not come into Sodom, a city which is in a heightened state of awareness because of its recent history of warfare.

These circumstances suggest why Lot’s granting entry to the two visitors would have caused suspicions and roused widespread attention: there is a fear that potential enemies have gained access to the site. Lot, ‘at the gate’, is—in effect—on ‘guard duty’. He is the last line of defense against spies and saboteurs: it is Lot who has offered ‘legal’ sanction to these unknown travelers behind the barricade of the town.

2. ‘The Men of the City—Both Young and Old’

Positing a state of anxiety over infiltrators as background to Lot’s admission of the strangers, the sudden appearance of the male inhabitants of Sodom seems—at first—less like the gathering of an undisciplined mob, than a purposeful delegation concerned over the events currently unfolding. Until their identities are evaluated properly, and their credentials vouchsafed, these ‘foreigners’ might represent a threat to the welfare of the city-state. An ‘official’ nature of the group is supported by the twofold designation that it is composed of ‘men of the city’—namely, ‘from both young and old’ (גוי צא ציון גוי צא ציון, Gen. 19.4). On the surface, the epithet ‘men of’ would seem to be a nondescript term for ‘inhabitants’. However, in the ancient Near East, ‘men of (Geographical Name)’ also had juridical dimensions, and was used as a technical reference to ‘citizens’: those who were holders of a particular civic-status and authority within the body-politic.22

Unfortunately, we are in no position to ascertain the precise nature of the ‘government’ of Sodom. Still, it is significant to note that elsewhere in the ancient world, ruling bodies of city-states were sometimes divided up into two major constituencies. The differentiation between governing councils was often marked by a group called the ‘young’ or ‘youths’, counterbalanced by the ‘old’ or ‘elders’—quite close to what we find in Genesis 19.

That the phrase ‘the men of Sodom, both young and old’ is intended to have a more specific reference than just to ‘the entire male populace’—as traditionally understood—is further supported by Gen. 19.12. There, the heavenly envoys ask of Lot if he ‘has anyone else here’, among which are listed ‘sons-in-law, sons…or anyone else you have in the city’—possibly servants or individuals attached to Lot’s household.

It might be argued that such an observation is overly literal; still, the Genesis text is quite explicit that the convocation around the patriarch’s house is not composed of every single, solitary male. There are those...
who do not participate in the gathering, and who are not struck blind in divine retaliation for threatening Lot. Instead, the delegation is to be seen as the official members of the community—the ruling elite—whose assembly has been precipitated by Lot’s reception of the travelers. Their meeting is to determine the basis on which he has allowed strangers into the city-sanctuary.

3. ‘Hospitality’ and Hostility

As commented on above, an interpretation that has gained currency is that the sanctity of ‘hospitality’ is being threatened by the Sodomites. This disregard for an apparently widespread—if not universal—code of behavior furnishes a cause for the eventual condemnation of the inhabitants.

It needs to be stressed, however, that even Lot’s admittance of the guests is not unbounded, but quite restrictive. To be sure, he is deferential in his greeting of the arrivals. Yet, their stay with Lot is highly conditional. They are to lodge with the patriarch, and then—immediately following breakfast—‘go on their way’: they are to leave Sodom completely. A less-idealistic understanding of the offer leads one to conclude that the visitors are to be under the supervision of their erstwhile patron—under surveillance—until they are escorted out the gates first thing in the morning. While Lot’s entreaty that they not spend the night in the street is sometimes taken as an expression of ‘lavish’ kindness, a more realistic view is that the individuals are being prevented free access to the town. Lot has taken it upon himself to keep a close eye on his guests. By granting them sanctuary, Lot, in his official capacity as a ‘gate-keeper’, has assumed responsibility for his charges’ welfare, and for their activities within Sodom itself. Their movements and actions are to be monitored—


they are placed under a kind of temporary 'house-arrest'; an implication being, lest they pose a danger to the community.\(^{29}\)

As raised earlier, this leads to a related—and a crucial—question: contrary to frequent assertions, were there circumstances in which individuals might legitimately be required to withdraw their 'protection' from guests, and turn them over, if so requested by responsible bodies? For some commentators, the answer would be an unqualified 'no'. But it must be stated that the character of 'hospitality'—even in the biblical tradition—is itself quite uneven.

In the Joseph story, Joseph deals harshly with his brothers upon their arrival in Egypt, justifying his rough treatment of his siblings by accusing them of being spies (Gen. 42.5-14). In a close parallel to Genesis 19, the authorities of Jericho demand that Rahab turn over her guests, an Israeliite reconnaissance team, on the similar premise that they are enemies in disguise (Josh. 2.2-3). Likewise, a royal delegation, the 'servants' of David, are mistreated by the Ammonites; once again, the reason cited being the suspicion that the men are engaged in espionage.\(^{30}\)

These examples demonstrate that the realities surrounding the extension of 'hospitality' are far more complex than is sometimes assumed. Strikingly enough, a common denominator in all these cases is that the privilege is withdrawn or curtailed because of fears of enemy infiltration—a telling similarity to Genesis 19.\(^{31}\)

This less sanguine attitude would seem to be the norm, rather than the exception, throughout the ancient Near East. Treaties often contain a stipulation for the immediate extradition of fugitives and enemy refugees seeking protection from their suzerain.\(^{32}\) The Amarna Letters preserve

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29. Note the criticism levied by the prophet Isaiah, when Hezekiah allows the envoys (מַלְאָכָיו) of Merodach-Baladan access to the royal armory and treasury in Jerusalem (Isa. 39.1-7//2 Kgs 20.12-18). The practice of limiting messengers to certain areas, or detaining them, seems to have been common; cf. EA 24.40-45 and the ancient Egyptian Tale of Wenamun 1.33-47 (LES, pp. 64-65). See the discussion of Meier, Messenger, pp. 140-41.

30. 2 Sam. 10.4. The Israeliite delegation is degraded by shaving their heads and rending their clothes; on this motif, see P.K. McCarter, Second Samuel (AB, 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 270-71; Meier, Messenger, pp. 139-40.

31. One may offer as a further example Nabal's rebuff to David's messengers (1 Sam. 25.10-11), denouncing them as 'servants who have severed themselves from their master'; that is, they are fugitives.

demands that traitors against pharaoh who claimed asylum at the court of Amurru must be remanded to the royal residence for trial. Elsewhere, there is considerable evidence—that foreigners entering the Nile Valley were closely monitored, their stays restricted in duration, with their movements being confined to designated areas.

Bringing such wide-ranging evidence to our discussion, the response of the ‘men of Sodom, both young and old’—the ruling authorities—would conform to legal practice as attested by both scriptural and extra-biblical material. I would suggest that such a reconstruction of the scene makes quite understandable the subsequent order that the envoys/visitors be produced, ‘so that we may know them’.

In Biblical Hebrew, the verb יָדָה (‘to know’) is a crux within Genesis 19. It has a number of meanings, ranging from simple ‘comprehension’ to the ‘gaining of experience’, with its employment as a euphemism for ‘intimate physical relations’ often cited in this connection. This is clearly the case in Gen. 19.8, in the designation of Lot’s daughters that they ‘have not known a man’, that is, they are sexually inexperienced. I propose, however, that because of its literary proximity, the latter nuance has unduly influenced the interpretative history of יָדָה in Gen. 19.5. While there is


35. The meaning of יָדָה as denoting homosexual intercourse/rape widely accepted for this verse is derived from its usage in Judg. 19.22—the latter supposedly being based on Gen. 19.5! The circularity of the argument is evident.

36. Alter’s remarks, *Genesis*, p. 85 n. 8, are evidence of this: ‘Lot surely is inciting the lust of the would-be rapists in using the same verb of sexual “knowledge” they had applied to the visitors in order to proffer the virginity of his daughters for their

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undoubtedly a play on the word ‘know’ within these verses, it is completely unnecessary to take the Sodomites’ oration as a demand for ‘sexual intercourse’.

also has a juridical implication to it. It is typical of treaty/covenantal terminology in the Near East, referring to ‘formal acknowledgement/ recognition’ of an individual’s identity or status. Within this semantic sphere is the forensic usage of the word to denote the process of ‘legal discovery, or inquiry’, where has the meaning ‘to investigate (a person’s state or actions)’ (so as to make a decision). This understanding fits quite well into our present discussion. ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them’, is not a cry that the parties be turned over for ‘rape’—homosexual or otherwise. The implication is that the men be produced for interrogation: to discover (legally), and to ascertain their true identity—whether they are friends or foes; whether they truly deserve hospitality, or are to face hostility.

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threatened with sexual assault, per se. Of paramount consideration is the issue of honor—both personal and communal. As we have emphasized, the patriarch has exercised his official prerogative as ‘gate-keeper’. His admittance of the visitors amounts to legal permission for their entry into the town. Lot’s decision, therefore, is invested with not only his, but the city-state’s, prestige. To demand the remittance of the guests goes to the heart of Lot’s standing as a responsible dignitary on behalf of Sodom. The act amounts to the revocation of, and insult to, his own authority: it is a denial and rejection of his standing within the society; it brings shame and dishonor upon all parties involved.

The second point—and it is not a minor one—does have a ‘humanitarian’ component to it. While the term means here ‘to interrogate’ or ‘to discover’, such an investigative procedure in the ancient world would have borne little resemblance to modern Western concepts of ‘legal rights’. Official questioning of individuals in the ancient Near East could often be brutal—accompanied by beatings, near-drowning, and physical mutilation. Texts show us that witnesses called before courts were


43. This, in effect, is what happens in Gen. 19.9, when the men of Sodom denounce Lot as one who has usurped authority. I concur with von Rad, Genesis, p. 218, that the epithet ‘my brothers’ (, Gen 19.7) is juridical in nature, denoting Lot’s equality with the rest of the authorities. By overturning his decision to admit the envoys, the authorities of Sodom have chosen opportunism over the honor of their official’s—and by extension, their own—word. In the ancient Near East, this would have been regarded as a breach of an oath made under divine supervision, and sealed by threats of punishment.

44. See, generally, R. Westbrook, ‘Punishments and Crimes: Methods of Punishment’, in ABD, V, p. 555; Lorton, ‘Treatment of Criminals’; de Vaux, Ancient Israel, I, pp. 158-60. Note, too, the mistreatment of Jeremiah (Jer. 20.1-3); and the rough handling of Micaiah (1 Kgs 22.24-27). However Isa. 53 is to be interpreted, the description of the ‘Suffering Servant’ gives us a vivid picture of the rigors of the ancient legal system.
sometimes as mistreated as actual criminals on trial. Such a harsh reality likely lies behind Lot’s protests that the crowd refrain from their proposed—and unjust—course.\textsuperscript{45}

4. Genesis 19.7-8 and ‘Hostage Exchange’

As the Genesis account demonstrates, Lot presents an alternative to the demand that the visitors be extradited into the authority of the town-councils: ‘Behold, I have two daughters that have not known a man; and do to them as you please...’ We have already alluded to interpretative schemes in relation to this passage. If Lot is turning his daughters over to be ‘ravaged’, this is truly a ‘text of terror’. But such a premise must be examined more closely.\textsuperscript{46}

There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Lot regards his daughters’ lives as being qualitatively inferior to those of his guests; to be casually expended to uphold some ill-defined concept of ‘hospitality’ or ‘masculine honor’. Instead, they are to be given in equal exchange for the two envoys: they are not valueless, but exceedingly valuable.\textsuperscript{47} Going on from this premise opens up an entirely different venue towards understanding the episode.

I suggest that Lot’s actions are neither an expression of patriarchal privilege, nor justification for its abuse, but are to be considered within the practice of ‘hostage-exchange’.\textsuperscript{48} Webster’s Oxford Dictionary defines

\textsuperscript{45} If one takes the humiliation of David’s envoys to the Ammonites as a parallel, there might very well be ‘sexual’ overtones to the proposed treatment.

\textsuperscript{46} For an attempt to analyze the incident as evidence of ‘family dysfunction’, see Visotzky, Ethics, pp. 81-82. Vawter’s (On Genesis, pp. 235-36) citation of opinions which hold that Lot recognizes the sexual orientation of the Sodomites, and thus, realizes that his daughters would be of no interest to them, imposes a modern reasoning foreign to the text.

\textsuperscript{47} Especially noting their importance in preserving Lot’s line, a prime concern in the subsequent narrative (Gen. 19.30-38).

a hostage as ‘a person kept or given as a pledge in fulfillment of certain agreements’. Accordingly, individuals are to be held—in safekeeping—until a condition or promise is satisfactorily carried out. Failure to execute the charge or responsibility results in the forfeiture of those in custody, to the party (or parties) holding the individuals. The point of the exchange is not to mistreat those who are held but precisely the opposite: it is to ensure the execution of a prescribed duty; the value of the hostage is regarded as surety for an oath or obligation. The persons are to be redeemed—reclaimed—hale and healthy—at the satisfactory conclusion of the agreement.

The use of hostages is well attested throughout the ancient Near East. Probably the best-known example of the custom appears in the *Annals of Thutmosis III*. The inscription tells how children of vassals were brought...


back to the Nile Valley and kept safely at the pharaonic court, where they were to be housed and educated. They were intended to prevent rebellion back home, and were themselves to be installed in their father’s office upon their parent’s death; hopefully, as dutiful clients of the Egyptian king.

More pertinent are references to these types of exchanges in the Hebrew Bible. Several instances occur in the Joseph narrative. Following the demand of Joseph—now an Egyptian official—that Benjamin be brought to him, the dire news is relayed to Jacob. The aging patriarch despairs that his youngest child will be harmed in a distant land. In Gen. 42.37, Reuben proposes an alternative solution to assuage his father’s anxiety: ‘Slay my two sons if I do not bring him back to you’. Likewise in Gen. 43.9 Judah argues, ‘I will be surety for him [i.e. Benjamin]; it is from my hand that you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me forever be guilty.’ Judah offers essentially the same arrangements to Joseph himself upon the discovery of a silver cup planted among Benjamin’s goods: ‘Now, therefore, let your servant, I pray you, remain instead of the lad, as slave to my lord; and let the lad go back with his brothers’ (Gen. 44.33).

The plan offered by Reuben and Judah is obviously expected to be met: Benjamin will be restored to his waiting father with no harm done. In the interim, Reuben’s own children, and Judah himself, are to stand as guarantee that their brother will meet with no mishap—a firmly anticipated result. Through the testing of Joseph, the arrangement has gone awry, and Judah’s life is technically forfeit in Benjamin’s stead.

A similar juridical situation underlies 1 Kgs 20.39-40. In this episode, a prophet—his face bandaged and hidden from king Ahab—gains the monarch’s attention as he winds his way back to Samaria from Aphek, in triumph against the Syrians:

52. Joseph’s insistence that Benjamin be transported to Egypt, while his other brothers remain imprisoned (Gen. 42.16, 19-20), is somewhat comparable to the New Kingdom custom, although the confined siblings are to stand in surety of the promise to carry out Joseph’s command.

53. On the legal term בָּנָּה (‘surety’), see the comments of Sarna, Genesis, p. 298.


Now, as the king was passing by, he [the prophet] cried out to the king and said: 'Your servant marched into battle. Now a citizen turned aside and brought a man to me! He said: "Guard this man, for if he should be missing—then it shall be your life in place of his, or you shall pay me a talent of silver!" Now your servant was busy here and there—and that man was gone!'

The Israelite king is to render a verdict on the case; in so doing, he passes judgment on himself. The incident, however, seems to refer to a legal practice, whereby a person holding a prisoner offered himself as security for the captive until the latter could be safely turned over to the original claimant.

Closely related to this is the command of Jehu to his guards in 2 Kgs 10.24, concerning adherents to Baʿal. Following a religious purge in Israel, the latter are being held in custody, awaiting disposition of their sentence: 'Whoever allows any of the persons whom I have brought into your possession to escape: his life in place of that life!' The priesthood of Baʿal is to be safeguarded on pain of death: the jailers are to act as replacement for their charges if they somehow manage to elude punishment.

Another parallel often cited in discussion of Gen. 19.8 is the incident of the rape of the concubine at Gibeah in Judg. 19.22-30. This shall be addressed more fully below. At this juncture, I would state that the same principle of 'legal exchange' is in effect there, too. Events, however, go horrendously wrong, a judgment clearly enunciated by the biblical re-dactor.

The point I am stressing is that by offering to hand over his daughters to the authorities in place of his charges, Lot is acting within the purview of a generally humane, legal practice. The patriarch expects that all of the assumed conditions of the custom will be observed by the men/officials of Sodom. The women—technically, legal detainees/captives—are to be held safely overnight, and are to be released, unharmed, when the two visitors vacate the premises in accordance with Lot's assurance. The temporary

56. On 'laws' of warfare in the ancient world, see the comments of D. Lorton, 'Terminology Related to the Laws of Warfare in Dyn. XVIII', Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt 11 (1974), pp. 53-56. See EA 252, where Lab'ayu vows to protect prisoners in his charge—in accordance with the king's command—even though they have wronged the former (Moran, Amarna, pp. 305-306 n. 1).

57. Severe punishments are stipulated in Mesopotamian law-codes against persons who would harm those held in pledge; cf. Eshnunna 24 (ANET, p. 162; cf. R. Yaron, The Laws of Eshnunna [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1969], p. 33); Hammurabi 116 (ANET, p. 170); see Driver and Miles, The Babylonian Laws, II, p. 47.
exchange of his unmarried offspring—betrothed to other inhabitants of the city—emphasizes how seriously Lot regards his duty as ‘gate-keeper’. More importantly, it is to be understood that he proceeds in this course, fully anticipating that no harm will be done to his children. By offering his daughters as hostages—*not sacrifices*—Lot demonstrates his good faith to his fellow-officials, and the gravity by which he regards his legal obligations to his guests under his watch.

Such a contention is further attested by the terminology employed by the patriarch when he declares: ‘Act towards them according to what is good in your eyes; only to the men, don’t do a thing: for they have entered into the sanctuary of my roof’ (Gen. 19.8). The phrase, ‘to do good to (one) according to (one’s) eyes’ (יִהְיֶה מַעֲבֹד בֵּיתְךָ) is idiomatic. It refers to the assignment of personal responsibility to an opposing party, which has an advantage in terms of opportunity or power. The individual or group is entrusted to act properly, as dictated by acceptable custom or oath. While the RSV’s ‘do whatever you want’ conveys something of the reality of the situation, the phrase is not to be understood as a blanket formula of ‘permission’, but as a plea for self-restraint. It is a concession that an opposing party has the ability to act in its self-interest, if it so desired. But it is also a reminder that ethical constraints are in effect, the implication being that the authority is to answer for any misdeed that is committed against the innocent or helpless in its care.

Interestingly, the phrase also appears in the Amarna Letters, where a vassal seeks the help of pharaoh in a critical situation. In his plea, the

58. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p. 89 n. 43, notes the appearance of the phrase in episodes of sexual abuse, with a tendentious reading of the context.

59. Cf. particularly its usage by the Gibeonite delegation submitting to vassalage: ‘But now, behold, we are in your hand; according to what is good (לָכוּ) and right (רְשָׁע) in your eyes to do to us, do!’ (Josh. 9.25). In Jer. 26.14, the prophet—after speaking against the Temple—says to the authorities: ‘But as for me—behold, I am in your hand! Do to me according to what is good (לָכוּ) and right (רְשָׁע) in your eyes!’ Judg. 10.15 contains the cry of Israel to Yahweh after its rebellion: ‘We have sinned; you do to us according to all that is good (לָכוּ) in your eyes—only (לָכוּ) deliver us today!’ The phrase is characteristic of Deuteronomistic writings; cf. M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), p. 335.

60. *Damāqū ana pānī* (‘whatsoever is good in the presence of’)/*ša damqā ana pānī* (‘whatever is good in the presence/sight of’); EA 74.57-62; EA 84.10 (‘Is the activity of Abdi-Ashirta...pleasing in the sight of the king; and so he has done nothing in his lands?’ In other words: Is this what the king thinks is proper, and does he really want to do nothing about an outrage? [Moran, *Amarna*, p. 155]). EA 137.63-64 contains a
client will state, ‘Do what is right in your eyes, but…’, the adversative particle (or subsequent wish/command) pointing to the actual focus of the request. The inferior party acknowledges that it cannot force the king to act on its behalf; all it can yield is moral (and legal) suasion: ‘Yes, you have the capability and the power to neglect the legitimate cause of your loyal servant; however, the right thing to do is’ the course of action offered by your trusting subordinate.61

This, too, is the thrust of Gen. 19.8. In presenting his children as hostages, Lot is presumeing that those into whose charge they are to be conveyed will act honorably within the ethical parameters implied by the custom itself.62 That the rule of ‘law’ is duly rejected by the governing bodies, who react to Lot’s proposal with the threat of violence to his person, testifies that the earlier ‘outcry against Sodom’ for its ‘grave sin’ (Gen. 18.20-21) has been entirely justified. The attempted attack on Lot validates the divine casus belli against the city, ensuring its destruction.63

similar expression: ‘Let the king do to his servant as he will, but may he give [the city of] Burusilim for me to live in’ (Moran, Amarna, p. 219). EA 366.28-34: ‘So may it seem right in the sight of the king, my lord, and may he send Yanhamu so that we may all wage war and you restore the land of the king, my lord, to its borders’ (Moran, Amarna, p. 364).

61. This is typical of Rib-Hadda’s correspondence to the king; on the ideology represented, see Moran, Biblical and Related Studies, pp. 178-81. As Moran explains, this is the language of the arad kitti (‘the faithful servant’). One should point out the exaggerated rhetoric used by a vassal in professing loyalty; for example, EA 186.10-11 (Moran, Amarna, p. 267): ‘[No]te that [we would] die beneath the feet of the king’; EA 252.23-27 (pp. 305-306): ‘If you [the king] also order, “Fall down beneath them so they can strike you,” I will <do> it’; EA 254.41-45 (p. 307): ‘How, if the king wrote to me, “Put a bronze dagger into your neck and die,” how could I not execute the order of the king?’ Tābātu, tābtu, tōb, dumqa (ēpēṣu) (and related terms) have the implication of ‘friendship’, and maintaining ‘amicable/treaty relations’; cf. Moran, Amarna, p. xxiv.

62. Also by the ‘legal relationship’ that exists between Lot as ‘office-holder’ and the other authorities in the community.

63. Commentators often state that Lot comes out poorly in comparison to Abraham. For example, Lot is in the ‘category of a buffoon’ (Coats, Genesis, pp. 143-44). It is further stated that the reason for Lot’s deliverance is solely due to his relation to Abraham (Gen. 19.29; cf. James L. Kugel, The Bible as it Was [Cambridge: Belknap Press; Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1997], pp. 181-83). There is an element of truth to this observation: the bond between Abraham and Lot is surely a factor in the divine protection of the younger man. Nevertheless, I would argue that Lot is not an irrelevant cipher in the whole drama of Sodom’s destruction. The author of Gen. 19 (vv. 16, 19, 21) utilizes covenant-like language (בָּלָה, כַּלָּה, ‘compassion/mercy’;
In this regard, we must be careful in evaluating Genesis 19 in light of the proposed parallel in Judges 19. The latter episode, like the Sodom story, has been taken as ‘proof’ of the disdain in which women were held in patriarchal societies. There is no denying that the vignette describes an act of unspeakable brutality, as the concubine of a Levite is raped and murdered by a mob. Nevertheless, the same ‘legal’ dynamic evident in the Sodom story is to be observed in the Judges passage—with important variations; these should be examined in more detail.

Similar to Lot, the estate-owner in Gibeah receives guests for the night, an itinerant Levite and his concubine (Judg. 19.20). Likewise—as at Sodom—the house is surrounded by townspeople. But here, the convocation is composed of ‘the sons of Belial’ (הן הבלתי, Judg. 19.22): a chaotic element is present in the characterization of these intruders at their introduction in the narrative. Although they too ostensibly represent the rank-and-file of the community (בֵית יְהוּדָה אֲנָשִׁי בֵית יְבֵאל), they are designated by the redactor as possible disrupters of order. Their subsequent demand that the visitor be turned over so that they may ‘know’ him should be understood in the same manner as explicated above for Genesis 19: they want to ‘interrogate’ him—undoubtedly in a rough-and-tumble manner.

'Tип בּוּנִי, ‘a servant has found favor in one’s eyes’; תְּשׁוֹא לֵדְבֶר, ‘to give approval to a request’) expressing divine regard for Lot for his risking himself on behalf of the messengers. Indeed, Lot’s actions are wholly characteristic of the arad kitti. The patriarch’s stance is extraordinary within an otherwise lawless/law-rejecting society. For this reason, Lot is rewarded with the grant of life (cf. Moran, Biblical and Related Studies, pp. 180-81). In addition to the examples cited by Moran, the same pattern is to be discerned in the rescue of Rahab (Josh. 6.25), the collaborators at Bethel (Judg. 1.24-25), and the elevation of Ittai the Gittite for his loyalty to David during Absalom’s revolt (2 Sam. 15.19-21)—strikingly enough, all in situations in which a city or society is in extremis.

64. Trible, Texts of Terror, pp. 65-91.
66. The suspicion expressed towards the sojourner is partially dependent upon inferences to be drawn from the surrounding literary context. In Judg. 18.3-6, 14-30, a Levite plays a conspicuous role in the overthrow of Laish by the Danites. The implication to the reader is that such events could also transpire in Gibeah. Again, xenophobia is a crucial element in the behavior of the interrogators.
67. Although R. Boling, Judges (AB, 6A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 276, interprets the passage as involving a homosexual demand, he notes that בּוּנִי is
The 'master of the house' denounces the intruders: he will not allow them
to harm one under the shelter of his roof. Instead, he too makes an offer of
hostage-exchange: ‘Let me bring out my marriageable daughter, and his
concubine to you’ (Judg. 19.24).

The rhetoric of the בִּילְלָה, in this instance, while generally parallel­
ing Lot’s, is more exaggerated in tone: ‘Humble them, 68 and do to them
what is good in your eyes, but to this man, you shall not do this forbidden
thing!’ 69 I reiterate that such loaded language is not atypical with the
transfer of legal captives to authorities, signifying: ‘Yes, I recognize that
you hold these hostages completely in your power, but it is up to you to
act properly!’ The owner of the estate would place the women’s safety in
the undependable hands of ‘sons of Belial’—those who show themselves
willing to overstep acceptable standards of behavior as it suits them.
Nevertheless, the extreme imagery employed makes it clear that the dire

problematic here, commenting that the instances where it supposedly has this meaning
(Gen. 19.5; Judg. 19.22) are ambiguous. Boling points out that the supposed idiom for
homosexual intercourse is דָּנֶס דָּבָר (‘to lie with a male’, Lev. 20.13). Again, Gen.
19 has been used to interpret Judg. 19, and vice versa. (Cf. also K. Stone, ‘Gender and
87-107; M. Carden, ‘Homophobia and Rape in Sodom and Gibeah: A Response to Ken
Stone’, JSOT 82 [1999], pp. 83-96.)

68. See the remarks of Seow, Homosexuality and Christian Community, p. 26 n. 2.
On דָּנֶס (‘to humble, humiliate’), see Sarna, Genesis, p. 367 n. 6. For a slightly different
view, note also Wyatt, ‘The Story of Dinah and Shechem’.

69. Judg. 19.24. In the Levite’s plea for justice (Judg. 20.5) he states that the ‘lords
of Gibeah’ had intended to ‘murder him’, the language indicating that the aforemen­
tioned ‘sons of Belial’ were the civil authorities. However, there is no indication that
the actual offense against his person was considered to be ‘sexual’ in nature. For דָּנֶס, see A. Phillips, ‘NEBALAH—A Term for Serious Disorderly and Unruly Conduct’,
VT 25 (1975), pp. 237-40; McCarter, 2 Samuel, pp. 322-23. The lexeme applies to
sexual offenses (rape, Gen. 34.7; 2 Sam. 13.12; fornication, Deut. 22.21). However, it
is also applied to covenantal crimes (violation of בָּלָה, Josh. 7.15; ‘adultery’ in the
sense of ‘idolatry’, Jer. 29.33; breach of ‘treaty’-obligation in Nabal’s refusal to deal
rightly with David, 1 Sam. 21.25; treason/sacrilege, Isa. 9.16). The basic meaning of
the term would seem to denote harming a person or thing protected by oath, or
touching/profaning something/someone forbidden by Law. The use of דָּנֶס in Judg.
19.23 probably refers to violation of a hostage. Subsequently, following the death of
the concubine, it has the specific charge of ‘rape’, where it is also linked to אָדָם,
referring to sexual impropriety (cf. Lev. 18.17; 19.29; 20.14). Neither דָּנֶסמ nor דָּנֶס
seems to be applied to homosexuality, which is specified as מְשָׁפִּים— ‘a cultic violation’
(Lev. 20.13). On the latter, see Tigay, Deuteronomy, p. 91; Weinfeld, Deuteronomy
and the Deuteronomic School, p. 226.

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allusion contained therein—'humiliation'—is precisely what should not occur. Though a possibility, owing to the group's advantage in force and number, its members are to refrain from injuring innocent parties in their care—a responsibility they clearly show themselves unwilling to assume.70

The immediate sequel demonstrates that this is the case. The Levite ejects his concubine to the waiting mob, which sexually abuses her all night, culminating in her death. However, the band's action becomes the excuse for a declaration of war against the tribe of Benjamin, when they refuse to extradite the miscreants for justice, a vivid indicator of just how wrong the treatment of the concubine was. By the same token, it points out that the principle of 'hostage-exchange' which is forwarded, is not intended to result in bodily harm to the individual(s) transferred under its provisions. As a result, one should evaluate the passage and the proposal of the estate-owner, not by the shameful—and illegal—deeds of the 'sons of Belial', but by the response of Israel to their crime: it is a capital offense resulting in a near Sodom-like extermination of the tribe of Benjamin.71

5. Conclusions

I reiterate that the episode of Lot's confrontation with the men of Sodom is not to be understood as a case of 'sexual misconduct', but is to be explained against a background of ancient juridical practice. The men of Sodom—'the young and the old'—are the two governing constituencies of the city-state. They have come, not in orgiastic frenzy, but initially to investigate the credentials of the strangers whom Lot has allowed into the town. Their concern to ascertain the identities of the guests is comprehensible within the broader context of Genesis, and its prior mention that Sodom had been engaged in conflict. The patriarch, acting in his capacity

70. The text states that the men were 'unwilling to listen/agree' with him (Judg. 19.25). The 'legal' proposal of hostage exchange is rejected. The dangerous mood of the crowd is obvious: the house/estate-holder does not turn over his daughter to them, according to the proposed arrangement.

71. Note the specific language: 'What is this evil/crime which has occurred among you? Now give up the men—the outlaws (lit. "the sons of Belial") who are in Gibeah—and we shall kill and purge (גַּרְעָה) evil from Israel' (Judg. 20.12-13). The implication is that the offenders will be executed by burning, suggesting some sort of affinities with גַּרְעָה. Interestingly enough, the fugitives—given sanctuary by the Benjaminites—are to be remanded to the authorities for their crime.
as official ‘inspector’, has approved the entrance of the intruders, offering to keep them safely guarded—*restricted and confined*—under his roof. Following a night’s rest, he has reminded them that they must be on their way. Lot’s actions are not casually undertaken, but are invested with the force and sanction of communal ‘law’. By virtue of his status within that society, the patriarch has placed his own personal honor and Sodom’s prestige at risk.

The councils’ demand that the guests be produced for examination draws the reasonable objection that Lot has already guaranteed that the lodgers are no threat: no further *legal* action is required or necessary at this point. Yet, to reassure his fellow officials that he understands the depth of their concern, Lot makes a counter-proposal of ‘Solomonic’ proportions. He will formally offer his daughters as hostages of the government, to be held in safe custody until the morrow, when those under his charge are sent on their journey, supposedly far from Sodom. Surely, this will be satisfactory to all parties.

The solution does not have the intended result. Lot’s argument and plan is rejected out-of-hand. He is threatened with arrest and bodily-harm; his authority and jurisdiction is no longer recognized by the assembled groups—now fomented into a lynch-mob—alarmed over the possible threat to their safety posed by these unwanted guests.

By utilizing analogies from both ancient Near Eastern texts and the Hebrew Scriptures, I submit that these materials furnish us with a plausible backdrop to what has, hitherto, been an episode of seemingly incomprehensible violence. Given that Lot’s treatment of his daughters has been evaluated without recognition of the underlying legal principles involved, it is not surprising that commentators would denounce as ‘cruel’ and ‘unjust’ the patriarch’s actions. However, previous exegetes have misconstrued his intent: the practice of hostage-exchange itself would have been seen as both honorable and humane.

The linkage of the events of Genesis 19 to a specific and well-attested juridical custom has added consequences for the interpretation of the Lot–Sodom episode within the broader biblical tradition. Again, I would completely eliminate any overt ‘sexual’ basis for the destruction of

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72. The scene may also be interpreted against a background of ‘international law’, regarding the safe passage of messengers; cf. the comments of Meier, *Messenger*, pp. 240-42, on the opprobrium attached to mistreating envoys.

Sodom. According to Genesis itself, the locale had long been viewed as a miscreant and rebel before God, prior to the incident under discussion; the sending of the angels/envoys merely confirms the obvious. Accordingly, I argue that Sodom's thoroughgoing wickedness—represented by its abandonment of law for expediency—is the author's primary explanation as to why Yahweh's anger is unleashed upon the city-state. Despite

74. This is not to deny that later tradition associated Sodom with the moral pathologies attached to Canaanite society, denounced in Lev. 18.3-30; 20.10-23. However, I reject that either homosexuality or gang rape is the offense, or the issue originally alluded to in Gen. 19.

75. The punishment of Gomorrah is due to its being bound in treaty to Sodom when they had earlier revolted against their overlords (Gen. 14.1-3).

76. I would state that the popular term 'sodomy' is likely—on the basis of the Old Testament evidence—to be viewed as 'breach of oath'. While some commentators identify Sodom's evil in terms of 'lack of social justice', later prophetic allusions occur within the parameter of covenantal violations—for example, whether the vassal (Israel/Judah) has honored its promise to uphold divine stipulations. However, other derogatory references to the city occur in oracles against the 'nations' (Isa. 13.9; Jer. 29.17; 50.40; Zeph. 2.9), pointing also to an affinity between the destruction of Sodom and the 'Conquest' traditions. This aspect is especially evident in the parallels between Gen. 19 and Josh. 2 and 6. Note the literary correspondences Gen. 19.1, אֶלּוּחַ (['the two messengers/angels came']) //Josh. 2.1, שָׁלוֹם (['the two spies came']); Gen. 19.5, יַעֲנוּאֵנִי ('The men who came to you...bring them out')//Josh. 2.3, יָגוּנָה (Bring out the men who came to you'); Gen. 19.16, יַעֲנוּאֵנִי (Bring out the men who came to you); Gen. 19.23, יַעֲנוּאֵנִי (And they brought him forth and set him outside [of the city']);//Josh. 6.23, אֶלּוּחַ (['Rahab and her clan] they brought forth and set them outside [of the encampment of Israel']); Gen. 19.24, אֶלּוּחַ (fire [from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah])//Josh. 6.24, אֶלּוּחַ (['And they burned the city with] fire'). The similarities between Lot's sheltering of the divine messengers with Rahab's harboring of the Israelite spies (cf. Josh. 6.17 where they are called אֶלּוּחַ//Gen. 19.1), and their respective rescues are obvious. The major differences between the Genesis account and the Joshua text, is that the latter does not include the demand 'Bring them out to us, that we may know them!' However, the lexeme בָּדַאַנֶה is then taken up in Rahab's denial of her involvement in espionage: 'True, the men came to me, but I did not know (בָּדַאַנֶה) where they came from; and when the gate was to be closed, at dark, the men went out; where the men went, I do not know (בָּדַאַנֶה) ...' (Josh. 2.4-5). It is important to note the significance attached to the spies having gained access to the fortress via the city-gate. This supports my contention that the request 'to know' in Gen. 19 refers to a legal, investigative procedure rather than being a salacious cry. The resonance Gen. 19 bears with Josh. 2 suggests that the Lot story is not to be seen as an incidental, one-time event. Sodom's overthrow foreshadows the treatment of the indigenous populations encountered by Israel after it crosses the Jordan. Thus, it should be regarded as a model for, and the opening salvo in, the eventual Conquest of Canaan.

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later hermeneutics, the fate of the place is due not to 'perversity', 'deviancy' or 'immorality'. Rather, Sodom will become the prototype for a faithless and chaotic society. As such, it will serve as a warning to Israel and Judah, lest they too jettison sworn standards of justice out of concern for safety and self-interest.\textsuperscript{77} The annihilation of Sodom, then, is ultimately not to be seen as an isolated and random case of divine judgment, but should be regarded against, and within, the overarching covenantal dynamics which shape the historiography of the Hebrew Scriptures.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{77} The rulers of Sodom's rejection of Lot's assurances is quite similar to what we find in Jer. 34.8-22. The actions of the leaders of Sodom—their arbitrarily setting aside a legal pledge—furnish a parallel to the later faithlessness of the officials of Jerusalem under Zedekiah when they annul an edict of emancipation for former slaves once the Babylonian threat has subsided.

78. Gen. 19 has traditionally been attributed by source-critics to 'J'. However, there is a clear relationship between Gen. 19 and the D-corpus. (1) Gen. 19 shares a common vocabulary with the D-material in Josh. 2 and 6 (not to mention Judg. 19). (2) There is a strong affinity between the rescue of Lot as an \textit{arad kitti} and a type of story found in D, referring to faithful individuals who have been allowed by God to survive catastrophe (cf. Jer. 35; 39.15-19). (3) Weinfeld (\textit{Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School}, pp. 110-12) noted that the description of Sodom's destruction is typical of D-curse formulae. This led him to 'assume that the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah was conceived as the classic punishment of breach of covenant with the Deity...and that the Deity was conceived as employing the conventional means of punishing treaty violators' (i.e. by destroying the land with brimstone and salt).