

**What Must the 'Judge of All the Earth' Do Exactly?**  
**A Critique through Praxis**  
**of the Canonical Approach of Brevard S. Childs**

by

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## Summary

The aim of this work is to attempt to read the text of Genesis 18-19 in line with the canonical approach of Brevard S Childs in order to critique his programme through its actual praxis. In chapter 1 a historical introduction to the discipline of 'biblical theology' and its texts provides a background against which to contextualise Childs's own work and its historical development. A detailed description of the approach in terms of its historical justification and its actual praxis appears in chapter 2. There certain common criticisms are encountered and refuted. It is also suggested that Childs's approach is often the target of unwarranted criticism based upon an assumed foundationalist view of hermeneutics. In chapter 3, this is developed further and it is argued that the non-foundationalist hermeneutics of Stanley E. Fish provide a heuristically powerful way of understanding the canonical approach and its 'community of faith'. Two aspects of the praxis of the canonical approach form the core of chapter 4: the necessary role of narrative presuppositions and the potential role of diachronic studies of biblical texts. A description of presuppositions necessary for understanding Genesis 18-19 are drawn from Genesis 1-17 and outlined, and the diachronic studies of H. Gunkel is used as an exemplar to test the illumination which diachronic studies may provide to readers of the canonical text. In chapters 5 and 6, a detailed exegesis is provided of the canonical text of Genesis 18 and Genesis 19. A short section on the effects of this exegesis on subsequent Old Testament texts completes chapter 6. In conclusion, the experience of reading the texts in this way is used to point out certain aspects and implications of the canonical approach which are missed when the approach is considered in purely theoretical terms.

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To

Katie and Hannah

## Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible Commentaries
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. D. N. Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
ANQ	<i>Andover Newton Quarterly</i>
Ant.	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ATR	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
BDB	Brown, F., Driver, S.R. and Briggs, C.A. (1979): <i>The New Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> . Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur ZAW
CBET	Contribution to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CR	<i>Critical Review of Books in Religion</i>
CSR	<i>Christian Scholar's Review</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
EvT	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
GK	Gesenius-Kautzsch (1910): <i>Gesenius Hebrew Grammar</i> . 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JPT	<i>Journal of Pentecostal Theology</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSNTS	Journal for the Study of the New Testament—Supplement Series
JSOTS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament—Supplement Series
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KD	<i>Kerygma und Dogma</i>
KTR	<i>Kings Theological Review</i>
<i>LitTheol</i>	<i>Literature and Theology</i>
LW	Luther's Works; St Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
NAC	<i>New American Commentaries</i>
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library

<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RelS</i>	<i>Religious Studies</i>
<i>RRT</i>	<i>Reviews in Religion and Theology</i>
<i>SABH</i>	Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SBT</i>	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>SBTS</i>	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
<i>SFSHJ</i>	South Florida Studies on the History of Judaism
<i>SNTSMS</i>	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studia Patrologia</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>SVT</i>	Supplement to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>TJT</i>	<i>Toronto Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich
<i>TNTC</i>	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
<i>TQ</i>	<i>Theologische Quartalschrift</i>
<i>TSFB</i>	<i>Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WBC</i>	Word Biblical Commentaries
<i>WTP</i>	Wesleyan Theological Perspectives
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

## What Must the 'Judge of All the Earth' Do Exactly?

### A Critique through Praxis of the Canonical Approach of Brevard S. Childs

#### Introduction

In approaching [the subject of the canonical approach], I have to begin by expressing my gratitude to my friend Professor Brevard Childs for the stimulus that his thinking has been to me in the entire field of biblical theology. Though I have come to disagree with almost everything in his proposals about the subject and in the values with which he has approached it, I realise how very much I owe to him, in that his thinking has been the catalyst for much that has become my own.

J. Barr (1999:378)

There can be little doubt that Brevard S. Childs has been one of the foremost 'movers and shakers' in Old Testament study over the last forty years. The development and expounding of his canonical approach during almost all of that period has taken up much of his academic life, and pushed him into areas foreign to many Old Testament scholars (the New Testament, for one!) In so doing, he has earned the approbation of some and the appreciation of others and, as Barr shows, these feelings are often mixed and combined in the same respondent. Perhaps, this is to be expected because pushing at the boundaries is often both a risky and a thankless task. Such exploration is almost bound to 'fail', either going too far for some, not being adventurous enough for others or some combination of the two and this may well serve as a summary of the experience of Childs and his interpreters.

This thesis is essentially the story of one such 'mixed' response—my own. Though I can identify with the feelings expressed by Barr's comment above, I see very different pros and cons in Childs's work. With many of those who have begun to expend time and effort on the canonical approach (or versions of it), I have been alternatively intrigued by Childs's work on the canonical approach, recognising in it something more than the *dicta probantia* approach recognised by Barr, yet frustrated

by its lack of a degree of clarity which would allow me to get a firm grip on its practices. As only a recent member of a church community I found my early experience of biblical studies as a discipline fascinating but distant. When I was either told or encouraged to find out ‘what the text really meant’—and Sheffield is by no means a ‘fundamentalist’ university—I was interested but it did not seem to touch the text of my experience. Was I really destined for a sort of textual dual personality, the fate which P.R. Davies has suggested should await ecclesiastical users of the biblical text within the academy (1995:50-51)?

As I completed my undergraduate course, however, I discovered Childs’s work and wondered if here perhaps was a possible answer (though, even at that stage, I did not believe that his was the only way in which the Bible should be studied within the academy). Opportunities for further study led me to make an initial exploration of the possibilities of Childs’s work. At that stage, I did what almost everyone seems to do, carrying out a theoretical appraisal of the canonical approach. But it soon became obvious that such appraisals—and the reconstructions they usually involved—lacked credibility *precisely* because they were purely theoretical. Theorising about the canonical approach is fine so far as it goes, but it almost seemed that actual exegesis was being avoided (with notable exceptions such as Moberly and House). How could any approach be critically considered if no-one actually carried it out? And in the light of Childs’s own rhetorical aim—describing, validating, and gaining acceptance for a confessional canonical approach to these texts—the relative lack of what R.W.L. Moberly has termed ‘memorable exegesis’ seemed to be a potentially fatal flaw (1993:373-4; 1994:273-74; echoed by Barr, 1999:405).

It was with this in mind that I began this present project, an attempt to investigate a particular aspect of the canonical text aimed at the provision of ‘memorable exegesis’. My first supervisor, A.T. Lincoln, on being asked for a suitable topic for a biblical theology in the Childs mould, suggested among others ‘God as judge’. Since, as G.B. Caird notes, this forms one of the five most common metaphors used to express God’s relationship with humanity (with king, husband,



father, master, 1980:177), his suggestion seemed eminently suitable. When the time came to choose texts, two naturally came to mind: first, the question of Abraham to YHWH in Gen. 18:25, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?', and its narrative setting in the story of Sodom and Gomorra. Second, the passion narrative in John 18-19 in which Dr Lincoln was then himself outlining what he terms the 'cosmic lawsuit' motif (1994). But two factors led to my exclusive focus on the former: the relentless march of time and my discovery that the canonical approach applied to the story of Abraham and Sodom had very unexpected results, resulting in an unforeseen rejection of all other readings of this text. The implications of this unexpected discovery of a new reading of the Sodom narrative form the conclusion to this work.

In chapter 1, the history and definition of the discipline of biblical theology and its constructions of the biblical text are considered. The historical development of Childs's own approach is in turn detailed and contextualised within both the history of biblical theology and its present (and future). In chapter 2 a necessary distinction between Childs's biblical theology and the canonical approach is made, before a detailed outline of the canonical approach is provided. 'Canon' for Childs is a rubric which includes four connected notions, the acceptance of each of which is, he believes, vital for the canonical approach in its attempts to justify the use of the final form. First, Childs takes the position that the concept of the canon is implicit in the formation of the final form of the text, the 'canonical process'. This historical process extends into the period during which the canonical text was stabilised and the canon completed, a period which forms the second element of the rubric 'canon' and which he terms 'canonisation proper'. As the third element of his rubric 'canon', he argues that the stabilised canon was (and is) received and acknowledged as authoritative by two communities of faith, the Church and the Synagogue. The fourth element of the rubric involves the assertion that these communities of faith read the final form of the text in line with what Childs calls the text's 'canonical intentionality'. Each of these four elements is taken in turn, with the first three being critically considered in terms of their justification. Criticisms of the fourth element, termed here the 'praxis' of the canonical

approach, are also considered, but the main aim of this section is to lay a foundation for the subsequent exegesis. In light of this, two aspects of praxis arise which clearly should be dealt with before exegesis can be carried out. First, the narrative presuppositions necessary to read the text in its place within the final canonical form must be described and understood prior to exegesis. Second, in the discussion of the role of diachronic studies in the canonical approach, I.W. Provan's suggestion that they may provide a useful source of information on the final form (1997:35) is taken up for further investigation. Strictly speaking, such studies do not need prior description but a critical answer to Provan's suggestion is best acquired through the detailed description of a single diachronic study, here that of H. Gunkel, and a subsequent attempt to use it—and all of its claims—as a source of illumination (the sheer complexity of their justification also tends to militate against an easy incorporation of their detail into exegesis, though certain of the results of the diachronic studies of von Rad, Ben Zvi, and Westermann do prove highly useful in defining the canonical reading proposed here).

The hermeneutics of the canonical approach are deliberately left to one side until chapter 3. There, the occurrence of two distinct types of language within Childs's work forms the basic material for a discussion of foundational and non-foundational reconstructions of the canonical approach, with the former represented by P.R. Noble's and the latter by my own proposal involving the work of S.E. Fish. Criticisms of Fish, primarily by A.C. Thiselton, are then considered before certain implications of a non-foundationalist canonical approach for its self-description and apologetics are outlined.

In chapter 4, the two aspects of canonical praxis which must be treated prior to exegesis—mentioned above—are dealt with. In chapter 5, a detailed exegesis of Genesis 18 is carried out in the style of a commentary, followed in chapter 6 by an identical investigation of Genesis 19 (the sheer size of these exegetical chapters is the only reason for their sub-division along traditional lines). Chapter 6 closes with a brief exploration of the Old Testament in the light of the exegesis of Genesis 18-19

presented here. Finally, critical conclusions which have arisen as a result of carrying out the canonical approach are detailed.

## Chapter 1

### The History of Biblical Theology and Its Text(s)

#### I. The Development of Biblical Theology Through History and its View(s) of the Biblical Text

##### A. Introduction to Biblical Theology: The Problem of Definition

Biblical theology is the only discipline or sub-discipline in the field of theology that lacks generally accepted principles, methods, and structure. There is not even a generally accepted definition of its purpose and scope (McKenzie, 1974:15).

Historically, the discipline of biblical theology has been plagued by an often unacknowledged lack of consensus about almost every aspect of its theory and praxis. J.L. McKenzie's sentiment is echoed by P. Tribble: 'Biblical theologians, though coming from a circumscribed community, have never agreed on the definition, method, organisation, subject matter, point of view, or purpose of their enterprise' (1991:53). This lack of agreement means that any attempt to define biblical theology through an investigation of its historical development must be able to account for the diverse expressions of critical enquiry which have earned themselves the name 'biblical theology';<sup>1</sup> from the use of the scriptures by the Church Fathers, Medieval exegetes, and the Reformers through the eighteenth-century 'biblical theology' of J.P. Gabler to the 'non-ecclesiastical' version of W. Wrede and the various twentieth-century attempts by such as G. von Rad and W. Eichrodt. But, perhaps most importantly, any

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<sup>1</sup> Since the earliest known use of the term 'biblical theology' itself was in the *dicta probantia* approach of seventeenth century scholars such as W.J. Christman (*Teutsche biblische Theologie*, 1629), its application to any 'study of the Bible' before this date is a relatively modern conceit. Nevertheless, the decision of modern scholars to call certain early works 'biblical theologies' raises the question of the definitional criteria in use and returns us once again to the need for a definition which can encompass this aspect of 'biblical theology'.

definition must be able to cope with the present state of flux as biblical theology enters the twenty first century.

C.H.H. Scobie has proposed a broad definition of biblical theology which is able to take into account the apparent disjunctions between the various historical definitions of the term (1991a:35-6). According to Scobie, there are three components within a 'biblical theology': first, the area of study defined by the adjective *biblical*, he suggests, is that of the books accepted by the Christian Church as their canonical scriptures, the Old and New Testaments (of course, those with a different Bible, such as adherents to Judaism, would alter this element accordingly). Second, theology has as its subject, God, *theos*, and a biblical theology should have as its subject what Scobie describes as 'God as he [sic] has revealed himself in the biblical tradition' (1991a:36) or perhaps, in somewhat different terms, the Bible's portrait (singular) of the (Christian) deity.<sup>2</sup> Third, the term *Logos* denotes a rational, systematic, study of a given area. Though some have argued that there is little or no 'theology' in the Bible (e.g., Ritschl's chapter titled 'The Fiction of a Biblical Theology', 1986; cf. Barr, 1988:19), Scobie rejects such arguments as presupposing too rigid and narrow a conception of theology. Instead he argues that the Bible does give 'expression to an understanding (or understandings) of God in his relation to the world and humankind',

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<sup>2</sup> Sailhammer distinguishes between two definitions of 'theology', one based on 'revelation' and one based on 'religion': first, theology as normative, being based upon the Bible as the divinely revealed word of God ('revelation'). Second, theology as descriptive, being based on an understanding of the Bible as recording human thoughts about the divine ('religion'; 1995:11-15). On the basis of this distinction, he might perhaps see Scobie's definition of theology as taking up the language of the former, and my alternative as using the language of the latter, effectively polarising them.

His labelling of Scobie's 'theology' as normative and my 'theology' as merely descriptive is problematic, however, because there is no reason why a religion-based theology could not also be normative; after all, Barth's criticism of 'religion' was not that it played no role in people's lives, but rather that it was normative for them. Projectionist views of the deity are essentially descriptive since there is no revealer, but it would be a mistake to say that they are not normative (cf. e.g., Cupitt and the 'Sea of Faith', 1988). Such a 'God' may only be the best that humanity can come up with but is no less real in terms of affecting people's lives. Therefore, there seems little practical difference between Scobie's definition of theology and my alternative phrasing when actually doing biblical theology. This said, I do not personally see my formulation as projectionist or at odds with Scobie's. But even if it were, nothing actually changes, normativity remains 'the norm'.

and that 'it is the testimony of the community which accepts the Bible as canonical scriptures that this understanding, though diverse and culturally conditioned, nevertheless is based on the revelation of God'. For Scobie, then, the task of biblical theology should be defined as the 'ordered study of the revelation of God contained in the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments' (1991a:36).<sup>3</sup> It is in placing this definition alongside a study of the historical development of biblical theology that the accrued nuances which have allowed such diverse enterprises to be called by that term will become clear.

#### B. 'Integrated Biblical Theology': From Irenaeus to the Post-Reformation Period

In placing his definition over against the history of Christian use of the Bible, Scobie notes that in Irenaeus of Lyon (c130-c202 CE) there was 'a Christian writer who in defending the Christian faith in the face of the Gnostic threat turn[ed] to the Church's scriptures and [sought] to understand them in an ordered way' (1991a:37). Irenaeus wrote his great work *Against Heresies* in confrontation with a bewildering number of heresies. Foremost among them was the form of Gnosticism derived from Valentinus, a Gnosticism which claimed apostolic authority and interpreted the scriptures in such a way as to cause its adherents to deny the unity of the Creator God of Israel with the Father of Jesus Christ (cf. Danielou, 1973:224).<sup>4</sup> Here Irenaeus describes the effect of the Valentinian exegesis:

By combining and distorting fragments and so changing their original meaning they deceive many with their ill-constructed phantasms, made by

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<sup>3</sup> On the arguments of Barr, Downing, and Gottwald that religions based on the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible have no revelation, see Childs, 1985:20-27.

<sup>4</sup> Another who split the biblical texts apart was Marcion. His decision to elevate Paul above the other apostles involved dismissing the Old Testament and the rejection of a number of the books which would eventually form the New Testament. Irenaeus' response to Marcion's truncated canon matched that which he offered to the Gnostics. There was no conflict between the writings of the apostles because 'Peter was an apostle of the very same God as Paul was' (*Adv. Haer.* III,13.1. cf. Pelikan, 1971:113).

twisting the Lord's words. It is as if someone should take a portrait of a king, which an artist had carefully fashioned out of precious stones, break up the mosaic, and reassemble the stones to form a picture of a dog or a fox—and badly done at that—and should then claim that this was the fine picture of the king which the clever craftsman had made, pointing out that the stones were indeed the very ones which had been arranged by the first artist to make the king's portrait (*Adv. Haer.* I,8,1; cf. also Childs, 1984a:28).

The response put forward by Irenaeus to the heresies of Valentinus and others contained two important elements. First, he argued for a theological view of history in which there was an essential unity within God's salvation which proceeded from creation to its fulfilment in Christ (II,9,1; III,9,1; III,12,11), thus denying that there was any split between the Creator God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ (III,1,2). Because of this unity it was essential that both the Old Testament and the texts which would become the New should be seen as one harmonious witness to the singular purpose of the one God. The difference between them, according to Irenaeus, came from their relationship to Christ; the Old typologically foreshadowed him whereas the later Christian texts witnessed to his actual appearance in the flesh (e.g., IV,26,1; IV,32,2; IV,34,1).

Second, Irenaeus, having safeguarded the texts from dismemberment, utilised the concept of a 'rule of truth' (I,9,4; I,10,2), also called a 'rule of faith' (in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 6), in order to provide the proper interpretive context for the two testaments. This was necessary because the Gnostic use of interpretive methods such as allegory was identical with that of the churches, rendering the notion of what could be considered 'false' or 'arbitrary' problematic. Irenaeus needed a way of ruling out certain interpretations which were producing what he considered to be 'a synthesis alien to the Christian faith' (Danielou, 1973:225; cf. Lawson, 1948:103-4). The exact contents of the 'rule of truth' he used are unknown to us, but it was a polemical formulation—perhaps almost a creed—of unchanging 'apostolic' church tradition (*Adv. Haer.* III,2,2). It had, Irenaeus claimed, always been publicly proclaimed within each and every church (I,10,2) and he intended that it

should be set over against the Gnostic appeal to secret traditions. The effect of the rule was to show that Gnostic interpretation was ‘wrong because it [was] novel. It was not known in apostolic churches before the arrival of the heretics’ (Minns, 1994:119). The rule of truth was not a form of tradition over and above scripture, however; both were the ‘apostolic teaching’. In J. Lawson’s words, for Irenaeus ‘the truth hangs by two cords... apostolic tradition is not an independent quantity over against Scripture. Nor for that matter is Scripture an independent quantity over against apostolic tradition’ (1948:103). It is the identical nature of the ‘rule’ and the scriptures which enabled Irenaeus to suggest that the Church could survive without the latter (III,4,1-2; cf. Pelikan, 1971:116).

These formulations constitute a powerful attempt to view the biblical material in a theologically ordered way, and Childs’s conclusion that ‘Irenaeus was indeed a biblical theologian’ seems fully justified in the light of Scobie’s definition (1992:32; cf. also Lawson’s title, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus*). There also seems little doubt that this form of biblical theology can also be found among the later Church Fathers (e.g., Augustine), the Medieval Church (e.g., Aquinas), and the early Reformers (e.g., Luther, Calvin).

It was during the post-Reformation period (seventeenth to eighteenth-centuries) that one of the most common definitions of biblical theology, that of the discipline as a discrete historical task set completely apart from the dogmas of the Christian tradition, arose (cf. e.g., H.D. Betz 1962:432; Childs, 1992a:3; Ebeling, 1955:214; Ollenburger, 1985:39; Moberly, 1992b:142). Although the Bible was studied before this, it is usually argued that it had previously fulfilled only a subservient role, functioning within a dogmatic ecclesiastical framework in order to support various theological systems. The Reformation of the sixteenth century began a move towards freeing the Bible but complete independence only came two centuries later with the Enlightenment (though how independent it has ever actually been is highly



debatable; cf. Levenson, 1987).<sup>5</sup> With Scobie's definition in mind, it can be asked how biblical theology defined in this way differs from that of Irenaeus and all other pre-seventeenth-century biblical theologians.

According to Scobie, the principal distinguishing feature of the earlier biblical theologies is not that they were necessarily subservient to ecclesiastical dominance but rather that no explicit distinction was made between biblical theology and dogmatic theology; the teaching of the Bible was not clearly distinguished from the teaching of the Church.<sup>6</sup> Rather the two were moulded together in a form of biblical theology which he designates 'integrated biblical theology' (1991a:37-8). It is with the (relatively) modern distinction between these two disciplines that biblical theology as defined by such as Betz arose, causing the disjunction between pre-eighteenth-century 'integrated biblical theology' and what Scobie terms post-eighteenth-century 'independent biblical theology'.

The sources of the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology can be found in two intertwined historical processes; the first is the more general, the rise of a 'modern historical consciousness'. This is a complicated phenomenon which has been briefly summed up by H-G. Gadamer as an awareness 'of the temporal distance separating us from antiquity and of the relativity of different cultural traditions'.<sup>7</sup> The primary consequence of this awareness is, as Gadamer puts it, the appreciation 'that something distant has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now' (1976:23). J.P. Langan suggests that developments in five broad areas are responsible for the growth of modern historical

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<sup>5</sup> On defining this important phase in history, see Porter (1990:1-11), and Outram (1995:1-13).

<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps the reason why the earliest known use of the term 'biblical theology' was in the *dicta probantia* approach of seventeenth-century scholars such as W.J. Christman (*Teutsche biblische Theologie*, 1629) and H.A. Diest (*Theologia Biblica*, 1643); cf. Hayes and Prussner, 1985:15-19.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer notes that '[s]omething of this awareness was contained in the theological claim of Reformation Biblical exegesis... but its true unfolding only came about when a "historical consciousness" arose in the Enlightenment...and matured in the Romantic period' (1976:22-23; cf. Thiselton, 1980:51).

consciousness: (1) critical historical scholarship; (2) the modernist fascination with two 'normatively weighty periods', the apostolic church and classical antiquity; (3) the Romantic movement; (4) the development of Science; and (5) revolutionary politics (1989:137-40).<sup>8</sup> The net result of sweeping intellectual changes in these areas was the development of an awareness of the 'pastness of the past' (Thiselton, 1980:53-63). Before the rise of modern historical consciousness, attitudes to history had been very different, as A.C. Thiselton notes:

From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century history was viewed very differently from the conception of history held by most modern historians. Alan Richardson underlines the profound consequences which followed from viewing history under the dual headings of "history sacred and profane." Sacred history was valued highly as a source of knowledge on the basis of divine revelation, and its traditions accepted uncritically. Secular history was valued as a source of knowledge only by a small minority.... This "sacred history"... spoke to the present with divine authority (1980:63).

The rise of modern historical consciousness in effect inverted the relationship between sacred and secular history, and produced an awareness of historical distance based upon the acceptance of a more secular understanding of history.

The second historical process leading to the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology is a more specific one: the rise of an independent biblical theology out of the ecclesiastical disputes of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. In the later seventeenth century, the pietist movement rejected what it perceived to be the dogmatically oriented theology of a dead Protestant orthodoxy and turned towards the development of theologies which were to be based solely upon the Bible (e.g., P.J. Spener's *Pia Desideria*, 1676; C. Haymann's *Versuch einer biblischen Theologie in*

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<sup>8</sup> Alongside these factors, Langan places four more specific reasons for historical consciousness to impact upon Bible and theology (1989:136-37): (1) the pioneering seventeenth-century work of the French Catholic priest R. Simon (1638-1712) and the Jewish philosopher B. Spinoza (1632-1677) on historical biblical criticism; (2) the rationalistic and anti-supernaturalistic critique of the biblical materials by writers such as Voltaire (1694-1778); (3) the philosophy of Leibniz (1646-1716), which stressed the dynamic nature of the individual over against the notion of passivity under the control of the divine; and (4) the work *New Science*, a theologically inspired interpretation of history by Vico (1668-1744).

*Tabellen*, 1708; and J. Deutschmann's *Theologia Biblica*, 1709; cf. Hayes and Prussner, 1985:38-62). This challenge to produce a 'biblical theology' was taken up from a different quarter in the second half of the eighteenth century by rationalists such as K. Bahrdt (*Versuch eines biblischen Systems de Dogmatik*, 2 vols., 1769-70), G. T. Zechariä (*Biblische Theologie oder Untersuchung des biblischen Grundes der vornehmsten theologischen Lehren*, 1771-1786), and W.F. Hufnagel (*Handbuch der biblischen Theologie* 1785-9). The rationalists sought to discard the dogmas of the Church, calling for a return to a simple and historical biblical religion which could then be mined for timeless and universal truths which accorded with reason (cf. Scobie, 1992:4 and Childs, 1992a:4).

With such emphasis upon the Bible as the source of truth, biblical theology became increasingly a discipline formulated apart from the control of Church authorities. The work of scholars such as A.F. Büsching (*Gedanken von der Beschaffenheit und dem Vorzug der biblischdogmatischen Theologie vor dem alten und neuen Scholastischen*, 1758) and J.S. Semler (*Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung de Canon, Vols. 1-4*, 1771-5) pointed the way towards the idea of biblical theology as a purely historical discipline (cf. Hayes and Prussner, 1985:55-60; H.D. Betz, 1962:432). The necessary methodological clarity to truly launch the new discipline would, however, only arrive with the theoretical work of Gabler (cf. Childs, 1972d:22; Reventlow, 1985:3-4).

But this growing change in the status of biblical theology in the late eighteenth century was also accompanied by a change in the status of the biblical text. H. Frei, in his study *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, demonstrates how increasing historical study of the text resulted in a shift away from a perception of revelation through the words of the text towards an emphasis on revelation through the historical substance *behind* the text (1974:51-65; cf. also Sailhammer's distinction between 'text'/'event' based theologies; 1995:36-85). As Childs puts it, the exegetical task lay in 'working out the true historical reference since revelation no longer consisted in the words, but exclusively in the subject matter to which the words referred' (1977b:89). This

subject matter could be either the actual historical events themselves or the psychological beliefs of the authors of the texts. Previously, exegetes had attempted to derive meaning from the text itself, and had generally understood the text to have had what has been termed a *sensus literalis*. (This *sensus literalis* was not, however, a ‘literal sense’ but rather was the plain sense of the text which could be non-literal in form.) Of course, some early critics did define other senses of the text (e.g. Origen, Nicholas de Lyra), but it was still the case that these approaches consisted in moving beyond the *sensus literalis* when it was perceived to be inadequate rather than replacing it with a purely extra-textual historical referent (cf. Scalise, 1988). This altered view of meaning is clearly discernible from the latter half of the eighteenth century, and by the mid-nineteenth century it provided the ‘normal’ text for interpretation. The developing ‘independent biblical theologies’ would not only differ from the ‘integrated biblical theologies’ that preceded them by distinguishing between dogmatic and biblical theology but also by this turn to what is essentially an alternative object of study.

### C. Towards an ‘Independent Biblical Theology’: From Gabler to Wrede

On the 30th May, 1787, Gabler delivered his much celebrated inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf under the title ‘*De justo discriminae theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*’ (on Gabler, see Hayes and Prussner, 1985:62-6; Ollenburger, 1985; Sailhammer, 1995:161-2; House, 1998:15-19). He argued that biblical theology should be wholly separated from the ecclesiastical dominance of dogmatic theology, defining these two disciplines in the following manner:

There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand, there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things, according to the measure of

his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors (1980:137).

But, and contrary to popular belief, Gabler was not interested in producing a biblical theology which was simply a historical description of ‘what the holy writers felt about divine matters’. His eventual aim was rather the provision of a Christian biblical theology which was both fully contemporary and firmly founded upon biblical truth (cf. Ollenburger, 1985:39). In the remainder of his address, he explicated his view of biblical theology as a three-stage process. First, each of the texts was to be studied carefully and classified according to historical-critical and linguistic categories. Second, a comparison of the different authors should follow, with agreements and disagreements being noted (1980:140-41). Third, and finally, an attempt should be made to discern the universally true from the husk of the time-bound texts through the use of reason, the universally true then forming a purified ‘biblical theology’ suitable as a foundation for dogmatic reflection (1980:142-4; cf. Ollenburger, 1985:43).

It is perhaps significant that biblical theology was first formulated in this way by the rationalist, Gabler. Some of the assumptions which such modernistic thought was eventually to bring to the discipline of ‘independent biblical theology’ have been outlined by A.K.M. Adam, and include

a proclivity for the adjective ‘scientific’,... a pattern of citing newer sources as most authoritative... a reluctance to admit that current biblical interpretations stand in continuity with biblical interpretation through the centuries, [and] the assumption that any interpretation which does not exercise *historical* criticism is ‘uncritical’ or ‘precritical’, as though [this] provides the only legitimate criteria for judgement (1990a:2).

This latter characteristic has often been combined with the claim to objectivity which has been—and indeed still is—a major preoccupation of modernist thought, and these assumptions have been greatly influential in the development of ‘independent biblical theology’.

Gabler himself did not pursue his project any further, and the first attempt to put his approach into practice was that of G.L. Bauer towards the end of the eighteenth-century. Bauer's biblical theology was of great significance because it contained separate Old (*Theologie des Alten Testaments* vol. I, 1796) and New Testament theologies (four volumes—*Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* vols. I-IV, 1800-02). This soon became overwhelmingly the standard model because of both the amount of historical material being generated in the early nineteenth century and the unlikelihood—at least to a rationalist—of finding universal truths in the Old Testament (House, 1998:17-19). Other biblical theologies followed from scholars such as W.M.L. de Wette (*Biblische Dogmatik des Alten und Neuen Testaments, oder kritische Darstellung der Religionslehre des Hebraismus, des Judentums und Urchristentums*, 1813). But with the rise of Romanticism<sup>9</sup> and German Idealism<sup>10</sup> during the period from 1800 to 1880, eighteenth-century rationalism's search for 'eternal truths'—the supposed content of the final part of Gabler's three stage biblical theology—fell out of favour. Lessing's famous ditch between attainable 'historical particularities' and unattainable 'eternal truths' contributed to the transformation of the nineteenth century into what K. Stendahl has called the era of the 'liberal' Jesus, 'the refined teacher of the Golden Rule, the fatherhood of God, and the eternal value of the individual' (1962:418; cf. Rogerson, 1984).

In stark contrast, however, the first two stages of Gabler's project, the historical study of the texts and their critical comparison, developed greatly during the

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<sup>9</sup> Sailhammer defines Romanticism as being 'characterised by an emphasis on (1) irrationality and feeling, over against reason; (2) history as the central category of thought, over against logical propositions; and (3) organic developmentalism, that is, a model of intellectual development that stressed growth and development of ideas, over against artificial systems' (1995:165).

<sup>10</sup> Russell notes certain common characteristics of the German Idealism which initially arose from the work of Kant:

The critique of knowledge, as a means of reaching philosophical conclusions, is emphasised by Kant and accepted by his followers. There is an emphasis upon mind as opposed to matter, which leads in the end to the assertion that only mind exists. There is a vehement rejection of utilitarian ethics in favour of systems which are held to be demonstrated by abstract philosophical arguments (1961:677).

nineteenth century. The increasing application of critical notions of history to the biblical text by scholars such as F. C. Baur and J. Wellhausen revolutionised the study of both Old and New Testaments. Although the questioning of traditional claims about authorship and dating had been around for some time (e.g., B. Spinoza [1632-1677] and R. Simon [1638-1712]), the sheer radicality of their proposals resulted in reconstructions of Israelite religion and Christian origins which accorded with the critical theories of the Wellhausen and Tübingen (Baur) schools rather than with the biblical self-presentation. The meaning of the biblical texts according to these studies was to be found only in the 'ostensive reality' critically discovered behind the text. In 1860 B. Jowett argued that the meaning of the text was not that associated with the history of its Christian and Jewish exegesis but the 'original one: the meaning, that is, of the words as they first struck on the ears or flashed before the eyes of those who heard and read them' (338). This, Childs suggests, means that the *sensus literalis* had been replaced by the *sensus historicus*, a very different creature indeed. The consequences of the replacement Childs defines as follows:

[B]y identifying the literal sense with the historical sense, which is then interpreted within the model of meaning as ostensive reference, any claim for the integrity of the literal sense is virtually destroyed. The explanation of the biblical text is now governed by historical research. The role of the literal sense of the text functions to provide a way behind the text to some historical reality. The literal sense of the text in itself has lost all significance (1977b:90).

This change of approach to the biblical text was followed by both liberal and conservative exegetes and debate shifted from its meaning as text to the veracity of the events it reports.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant approach to the biblical text used in the construction of 'Old and New Testament theologies' was that of the history

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<sup>11</sup> Even those who still attempted to write systematic accounts of Old Testament theology prefaced their works with a large section on such historical-critical matters (cf. e.g., Schultz's *Old Testament Theology. Vol. 1*, 1898).

of religion school (*religionsgeschichtliche Schule*), a loose movement largely based upon the theoretical assumptions of historians such as E. Troeltsch (cf. Brett, 1991:87-88). The aspirations of this school may best be exemplified by Wrede's 1897 essay, 'Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten neutestamentlichen Theologie',<sup>12</sup> perhaps the epitome of this kind of thought as related to biblical theology (but cf. also Troeltsch's essay of 1898, 'Ueber historische und dogmatische methode in der Theologie').<sup>13</sup> For Wrede, the principal problem afflicting the discipline was the inability of its practitioners to carry out even Gabler's first stage—what was to be his discipline's *only* stage—without being influenced by dogmatic considerations; it was just not historical enough.<sup>14</sup> Wrede writes:

Can it... be claimed as self-evident that New Testament theology must be considered and done as a purely historical discipline? Formally and in theory most people would say yes. When the material is contemplated, however, a different view emerges. So long as New Testament theology retains a direct link with dogmatics as its goal, and people expect from it material for dogmatics to work on—and that is a common view—it will be natural for biblical theology to have an eye to dogmatics. Biblical theology will be pressed for an answer to dogmatic questions which the biblical documents do not really give, and will endeavour to eliminate results which are troublesome for dogmatics. The writings which contain the material are burdened with definite dogmatic predicates like normative, which say nothing about their character as documents. So long as this continues to be the case, it is at least psychologically probable that New Testament ideas which go contrary to expectation will be worked on and arranged till they fit those predicates (1973:69).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> References to Wrede's essay are to those of the English translation found in Morgan, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Since Wrede and a number of influential Old Testament specialists including Gunkel and Eichorn had formed a group known as 'the little faculty' at Göttingen around 1890 (cf. Hayes and Prussner, 1985:89), his views may be considered representative of a group who intended to work with both Testaments in their historical context.

<sup>14</sup> Wrede concludes his essay with the words '[New Testament Theology] is not yet in the true and strict sense a historical discipline at all. May it become one!' (1973:116).

<sup>15</sup> With these comments about normativity, Wrede demonstrates his belief that the only valid—or 'normative'—characteristic of these writings is that they are historically defined documents, thus de-legitimising any other concept of normativity. It is this denial of the existence of any other way of reading the texts which is the foremost characteristic of an 'independent biblical theology' in the Wrede mould. Particularly interesting is his comment that the normativity predicated by dogmatic theology means that the texts will probably be massaged to fit dogmatic presuppositions; Wrede understandably is not eager to point out the irony that historical criticism has its own versions of fitting the material to the 'normative' thesis at hand (cf. the questionable exegetical practices of some



For Wrede, the very term 'New Testament theology' is a misnomer: 'The name New Testament theology is wrong in both its terms'(1973:116). First, Wrede argues that the term 'New Testament' is inappropriate because any concept of a limiting canon is illegitimate in the discipline he envisages (1973:70-73), thereby implying that he would not accept Gabler's second stage because any comparison of the texts could not be limited to just the canonical texts as Gabler suggests. Second, he states that the discipline

is not concerned merely with theology, but is in fact far more concerned with religion. The appropriate name for the subject-matter is: early Christian history of religion, or rather: the history of early christian [sic] religion and theology. If anyone protests that this is no longer a New Testament theology, that is a strange objection. The name is obviously controlled by the subject matter, not vice-versa (1973:116).

On the relationship between the results of his work and the task of Christian theology, Wrede writes that how the 'systematic theologian gets on with its results and deals with them—that is his own affair. Like every other real science, New Testament theology's has its goal simply in itself, and is totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology' (1973:69).<sup>16</sup> In the 1920's, H. Gunkel would summarise the arguments against biblical theology in Old Testament study thus: 'The recently experienced phenomenon of biblical theology being replaced by the history of Israelite religion is to be explained from the fact that the spirit of historical investigation has

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historical critical constructs pointed out in recent years by Goulder on the synoptic problem, 1985; and Whybray on the excesses of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> In the formulation of Stendahl, perhaps the most influential defender of a Wrede-style biblical theology in recent years, this means that there must be a complete separation between the two questions 'what the text meant' and 'what the text means' (1962:419-20; 1965:199-202). Answering the former was the province of the biblical theologian, and involved the use of historical criticism. It was a descriptive task that could in principle be carried out by any scholar, regardless of whether the scholar was a believer or not (1962:422; 1965:202). Stendahl was careful, however, not to claim that the project was absolutely objective. As to the question of what a text means today, this went beyond the descriptive task and was not a question which Stendahl's descriptive biblical theology could—or should—answer; that was a task for those offering a contemporary interpretation (1962:424: 'the systematic theologian', 1965:205).

now taken the place of a traditional doctrine of Inspiration' (1927-31:1090-91; cf. Childs, 1992a:6).

It is significant that Tribble has recently characterised the period when this concept of 'independent biblical theology' was in the ascendancy (1880-1920) as the discipline's forty years of wandering in the wilderness (1991:54). Gabler himself would presumably have been surprised to find that the historical features which he had wished to ultimately discard had now become the centrepiece—indeed, the only piece—of an 'independent biblical theology' (so Ollenburger, 1985:48). The logical consequences of a biblical theology as defined by Wrede are clear; the term has stretched its similarity with Scobie's definition to breaking point.<sup>17</sup> As Childs has put it, 'the full problematic of Biblical Theology emerged with great clarity. On the one hand, Gabler's case for the independence of Biblical Theology from dogmatic constraints appeared to... be fully justified. On the other hand, the pursuit of Biblical Theology as a historical discipline resulted in the dissolution of the very discipline itself' (1992a:6).

#### D. Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century: An Initial Rejection of Wrede's project (Eichrodt-Eißfeldt)

The idea of a scientific and objective historical 'biblical theology' based upon the assumptions of the history of religion school have not gone unchallenged in the twentieth century. K. Barth's attack on the scientific dogmatic theology of liberal Protestantism following the carnage of the First World War had its counterpart within the disciplines of Old and New Testament theology.<sup>18</sup> In the 1920's, the shape of a

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<sup>17</sup> Childs would presumably agree with Moberly that such a project is better described as the 'history of religion' with the term 'biblical theology' being reserved for a normative discipline which combines both historical and theological concerns in its attempt to interpret the biblical texts within the setting of—in Childs's case—Christian theology (Moberly, 1992b:142; cf. Childs, 1964:437-8; 1970:99; 1982:6; 1985:28f; 1992:7).

<sup>18</sup> On the impact of new theological developments on Old Testament Theology in the 1920's, see Hayes and Prussner (1985:154-58), Reventlow (1985:13-27), and Childs (1994b).

possible Old Testament theology was slowly being hammered out in the writings of O. Eißfeldt (1926) and Eichrodt (1929), spurred on by the publication of E. König's *Theologie des Alten Testaments kritisch und vergleichend dargestellt* (1922; cf. Sailhammer, 1995:129-31). Eißfeldt suggested that two disciplines should be distinguished: the History of Religion and Old Testament theology. He argued that these two disciplines corresponded to two 'differently constituted functions of our spirit, to knowing and to believing', and that the only choice for the theologian was whether to 'effect a compromise between them, or to recognise and attend to each in its own character and integrity' (Eißfeldt, 1992:24-25);<sup>19</sup> Eißfeldt chose the latter course. In defining these two disciplines, he writes that

[History of Religion] is, as the name implies, a historical discipline. It presents Old Testament religion as an entity having undergone historical development, and treats it with the usual philological-historical tools.... To it belongs the instrument of empathy with the subject, which is especially important in this particular field. But this is then sufficient for accomplishing the historical task: it requires no other means. The historian does not answer the question of absolute value, of the 'truth' of the subject (1992:27).

[Old Testament theology] is a matter of presenting that which, with respect to the Old Testament, has become revelation, God's word, for the interpreter and his religious community.... It will thus bear the character of witness... and its validity will be restricted to the circle of those whose piety is the same as, or similar to, that of the interpreter (1992:28).

For Eißfeldt, the tension produced between these two disciplines should be tolerated by believers because

it is nonetheless finally the case that, seen from a higher vantage point, they form a unity.... [W]e are confident that it is the one identical truth for which knowledge strives and by which faith is grasped. Knowing and believing belong to two parallel planes and they must meet each other in infinity—but only in infinity (1992:29).

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<sup>19</sup> References to Eißfeldt's and Eichrodt's essays are to those of the English translations found in Ollenburger, 1992.

Eichrodt objected to this partition forcefully, however, arguing that historical critical methods were appropriate to the discipline of Old Testament Theology (cf. Reventlow, 1985:49-51). He began by agreeing with Eißfeldt that the question of the ultimate truth of Old Testament religion was beyond the judgement of the historian, but then argued that its actual content was not. For Eichrodt, reducing the work of the historians to a presentation of the growth of Old Testament religion was to deny the historical discipline its 'noblest task'. Historical research suitable for an Old Testament Theology

must lay out a cross section through the developed whole in order to demonstrate the inner structure of a religion in the mutual relationship of its various contents. It would be wrong to see in this systematic task an opposition to the historical method [as conceived by the History of Religion School]. It is an impermissible restriction of the concept "historical" to relate it, as if self-evidently, only to observation of the growth process, to the genetic method; rather, "historical" may be understood as the opposite only of anything normative. Thus, the systematic consideration is to be comprehended completely within the historical (1992:33).

This is Eichrodt's attempt to preserve 'Gabler's legacy', freeing the Bible from dogmatic control (1992:32).

An important part of Eichrodt's recasting of Old Testament Theology was his recognition of the problem of the selection of 'material' in historical study. Eichrodt asks, 'is there a universally valid principle of selection?' He continues, 'work in logic and methodology, in any event, has been unable to establish one' (1992:34). He also notes the related question of how the historian's perception of the purpose of the material affects its construal, and argues that this is principally defined by the historian's own presuppositions. These factors introduce an element of subjectivity into history, and Eichrodt, rejecting those who would quest for an ideal objective starting point, casts his history as containing a legitimate 'subjective' theological component, the faith presupposition of Christian scholars which leads them to see the

Old Testament as culminating in the New. Thus the distinction between Eichrodt's Old Testament theology and a history of Israelite religion only consists of their different subjective presuppositions; both have a place within empirical-historical Old Testament scholarship.

In his *Theology of the Old Testament* (volume 1 of which first appeared in 1933), Eichrodt took a single concept, that of the covenant between God and Israel, and made it the basis of his systematic study of the biblical materials. However, he proceeded to incorporate in his work as a necessity the very history of religion approach against which he had defined his Old Testament theology. He suggested that one should have

*the historical principle operating side by side with the systematic in a complementary role. In treating individual religious concepts the major elements of their historical background must be taken into account. Only so can we hope to do justice to the great unitive tendency that runs through the whole history of Israel and makes it with all its variety a self-consistent entity (1961:32—his italics).*

In his *Theology* this involved an introductory examination of the growth of the concept of covenant within a reconstructed history of Israel, starting with the relationship between the Canaanite and Israelite religions, and then tracing the historical development of the covenant through the JDEP layers of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis (1961:45-69). However, the exact relationship between these two forms of critical history is unclear, the History of Israelite Religion approach appearing only occasionally after the introductory section (for example, on the priesthood; 1962:392-402). This has led E. Martens to conclude that 'history' is thus tangential to Eichrodt's work (1994:315-17, 330-5), a conclusion which fails to recognise that for Eichrodt the systematic task is itself 'history'. More important is N.K. Gottwald's view that Eichrodt tended to confuse normative (for which, read theological) and descriptive (for which, read historical) categories, leading to the conclusion that, in

practice, he was ‘an insufficiently precise historian and an insufficiently precise thinker’ (1970:54).

Nevertheless, Eichrodt’s theology—described by Gottwald as ‘the single most important work of its genre in the twentieth century (1970:25)—was highly influential. Other theologies followed in a series of works on both Old and New Testaments which showed a broad consensus as to their task of combining theology and the historical critical method. By 1958, Eichrodt could write of the situation that ‘there has been a happy revival of theological work on the Old Testament, and such work has now won back its rightful place in academic studies in a field where the religio-historical approach for a long time held well-nigh undisputed sway’ (in his *Preface to Fifth Edition*, 1961:13). But it is important to realise that, despite the explicit rejection of some of Wrede’s assumptions, those involved continued to work within the framework of modernist assumptions about the defining role of the historical critical method and, in general, its understanding of the text as something to be excavated for verifiable ‘facts’. For example, it is noteworthy that, even though traditio-historical criticism is foundational in von Rad’s two volume *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, first published in 1957 and 1960, his partial turn away from ‘event’ back towards the ‘text’ was severely criticised by such as F. Hesse (1958, 1960) for its failure *as a biblical theology* to be sufficiently concerned with historical events (cf. Reventlow, 1985:67-68). This continuing emphasis in biblical theology on the historical Israel behind the formation of the text (even in von Rad’s work on the ‘text’) leaves little contact with the integrated biblical theology mentioned earlier.<sup>20</sup> It is also perhaps significant that the division between Old and New Testament theologies remained firmly in place during this period (cf. Scobie, 1991a:41).

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<sup>20</sup> In the so-called ‘biblical theology movement’ prevalent in the Anglo-American theological world, attention was generally concentrated on the mighty acts of God which stood behind the text, and both archaeology and historical data were considered of the first importance in the formulation of biblical theology (e.g., Wright, 1952; cf. Childs, 1970:13-87; Reventlow, 1986:1-9; Penchansky, 1995:51-70). For the view that the Biblical Theology Movement, as commonly understood, did not exist, see Smart (1979).

## E. Biblical Theology in the Twenty First Century: After the Loss of Wrede's Project, Where to Next?

Recent years have, however, not been kind to these twentieth century biblical theologies. None has gained wide acceptance, the consensus as to their task has been dissolved, and many of their founding historical assumptions challenged (e.g., the very existence of von Rad's credo). Biblical theology—as opposed to Wrede's historical project—has been declared to be in crisis; as Adam has put it, 'the evident problem is not so much that no one wants to do biblical theology as that no one seems capable of living up to the demands of those who theorise about [it]' (1990a:1). Some even gave up completely on the idea as an impossibility. In 1974 J. Barr wrote that the prevailing tendency was to say that 'there is no one theology, either of the Old Testament or of the New, and still less of the entire Bible' (270). This viewpoint remains typical of many today; the work of H. Räisänen is particularly striking, his book *Beyond New Testament Theology* (1989) being essentially a call for a return to Wrede's project (cf. Barr, 1999:530-40).

But the impasse in which biblical theology either dissolves into the history of religion or suffers the persistent failure of any attempt to formulate a normative biblical theology within the framework of historical criticism is now itself being recognised and challenged.<sup>21</sup> The particular tenet of modernism which created the impasse—its objectivism, expressed in its insistence upon the foundational nature of historical criticism—is being questioned and increasingly rejected. The recognition of the role of interpretation in the attainment of human knowledge has given rise to a rather different perspective on the distinction between the objective 'meant' and the subjective 'means' so important to Jowett, Wrede, and Stendahl (cf. Moberly, 1992b:147; Ollenburger,

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<sup>21</sup> In Childs's words, the 'painful lesson which has emerged in the last fifty years is that the many serious attempts at a theological compromise which would build a confessional Old Testament theology directly on the foundation of historical critical methodology have... failed (1995:245)

1986; Watson, 1994:30-33).<sup>22</sup> The ideal objective starting point for the historian which was not available to Eichrodt in 1929 is now increasingly recognised as being absent across the whole of the Enlightenment project.<sup>23</sup> Thus the 'objective' text which once seemed so self-evident has dissolved away and the requirement that all biblical theologies must deal with that text may—at least for the present—be disregarded.<sup>24</sup> F. Watson gives Childs the credit for the introduction of this

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<sup>22</sup> That proponents of independent biblical theology have so far consistently failed to carry it out seems undeniable (cf. Levenson, 1987). Barr, for example, has pointed out that Stendahl himself is not consistent in defining his own account of the distinction between biblical theology and systematic theology. In defining the systematic task, Stendahl writes that the 'question as to the meaning of the Bible in the present—as distinguished from the meaning in the past as stated by descriptive biblical theology—receives its theological answer from the canonical status of scripture' (1962:429; this section is titled 'The Significance of 'Canon' for Biblical Theology, 428-30) But he adds that when 'the descriptive task is addressing itself to the interplay between different parts of the Bible, ... it naturally takes cognisance of the limits of, as well as the very idea of, canon' (428; cf. Barr, 1999:380), a position which Wrede would surely repudiate. If even Stendahl could be 'infected' by dogmatic concerns, one wonders why Wrede's advice has not been taken more seriously and the name of the discipline changed to one which does not have such a deleterious effect on exegetes, perhaps the 'history of religion'.

Though some have continued to insist that provision of a fully descriptive 'biblical theology' is feasible (e.g., Barr, 1988:12), the problem of how 'independent' such biblical theologians can be continues to haunt the independent discipline. The true nature of the problem is not that a Christian's normativity must be swapped for a historian's normativity, but rather that a modern normativity must be swapped for an ancient's normativity. This is, of course, impossible, as Stendahl's acknowledgement that absolute objectivity is beyond the independent biblical theologian shows (1962:422). If the independent biblical theology can never be truly independent, then perhaps it should be asked why it should be given normative precedence over any other reading strategy (in exactly the same way that Barr has asked Childs why the canonical approach should be given priority).

<sup>23</sup> As Fish notes, this argument has been made in a wide variety of disciplines:

[I]n Philosophy by Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Willard Quine; in Anthropology by Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner; in History by Hayden White; in Sociology by the entire tradition of the sociology of knowledge and more recently by the ethnomethodologists; in Hermeneutics by Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida; in the general sciences of man by Foucault; in the history of Art by Michael Fried; in Legal theory by Sanford Levinson and Philip Bobbit; in Literary theory by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Walter Michaels, Steven Knapp, John Fekette, Jonathan Culler, Terry Eagleton, Frank Lentricchia, Jane Tompkins, Stanley Fish, and on and on' (1989:345).

<sup>24</sup> Though some have claimed that an essentialist foundation can never be attained, such an open-ended claim is deeply problematic and leaves them open to the charge of asserting a new truth, a new foundationalism (as Fish's posited critic does, 1989:29-30). A better approach is simply to state that in its continuing absence, people are free to redefine their world-views in the terms of non-foundationalism.



perspective into the biblical theology debate (Childs himself attributes this insight to Barth, 1964:437, footnote 14).

The conventional debate circles round the concept of description, with one side [i.e., Wrede and Stendahl] insisting on its autonomy while the other [i.e., the dogmatic theologians] asserts its inadequacy as an approach to its object. Both sides tend to accept, however, that the term 'description' is a fair representation of historical-critical practice. In his 1964 article, and in explicit opposition to Stendahl [and Wrede], Childs already sees the limitations of this naïve empiricism: "It is commonly assumed that the responsible exegete must start with the descriptive task and then establish a bridge to the theological problem. It is felt that the real problem lies in the second task. Rather, the reverse is true. What is the content which is being described and what are the tools commensurate with this task? This is far from obvious" [1964:437]. To appeal for an autonomous 'description' is to ignore the fact that there is no such thing as a pure description of a neutral object (1994:32-33).

As Childs later put it: 'Can one actually read a text meaningfully without some sort of conceptual framework?' (1992a:12; cf. also Sailhammer on the weakness of a descriptive approach: 'we cannot read the text from a neutral corner', 1995:168).<sup>25</sup>

The removal of the major assumption which had created the impasse has left the way open for new approaches to the problem, though some, like Räisänen, still champion Wrede's solution to it. Continuing interest in the possibility of a biblical theology is signified by the continuing appearance of a series of publications attempting to define and carry out the project: collected works such as *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology* (1991), *New Directions in Biblical Theology* (1992), and *Problems in Biblical Theology* (1997), along with synthetic volumes by Childs (*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament*, 1992a); R. Knierim (*The Task of Old Testament Theology*, 1995), W. Brueggemann (*Theology of the Old Testament*, 1997) and numerous others have appeared but have not yet led to any substantial

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<sup>25</sup> This questioning of a monistic Enlightenment attitude to the biblical texts is taken by Barr to indicate Childs's deep distrust of the Enlightenment itself (1999:423-33). Childs's attitude to this important era in history is not monolithic, however. Though his personal theology is, at many points, contrary to Enlightenment trends, he also considers the recognition of diversity within the biblical texts to be one of the 'great truths' of the Enlightenment (1992a:8).

agreement among those interested in relating Bible and theology. There are fundamental differences of method and approach, J. Reumann listing at least sixteen different possible sources for biblical theology currently being investigated (1991:12-19).<sup>26</sup> In Moberly's words, 'there is still everything to play for' (1992b:141).

Whatever kinds of solution finally gain acceptance amongst theologians—whether academically or ecclesiastically based—it seems unavoidable that a historical aspect will have to be incorporated. Given the rise of modern historical consciousness, there is no possibility of returning to the integrated biblical theologies; the historical method is here to stay in some form (Scobie, 1991:49; Moberly, 1992:142-3). Clearly, biblical theologians must seek to act as mediators of the historical study of the biblical texts to the dogmatic theologians rather than simply as those undertaking a historical task. They should not attempt to provide a purely descriptive biblical theology of what is behind the text, an approach better left to Räisänen, but rather to provide a normative biblical theology. This type of approach Scobie designates 'intermediate biblical theology'.<sup>27</sup>

In section II below, a brief account of the historical growth of one such 'intermediate biblical theology', that of Childs, will be given before a more detailed description of his approach is outlined in chapter 2. The purpose of the following personal history is not that of a detailed introduction to the development of the canonical approach to the biblical texts or of Childs's concept of biblical theology (for which see Brett, 1991:27-75; Hartzfeld, 1989:90-169; and Dyck, 1986:27-73) but is

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<sup>26</sup> Briefly, according to Reumann, the options for biblical theology currently being explored are: (1) the New Testament's use of the Old; (2) the allegorical method; (3) typology; (4) the *sensus plenior*; (5) lectionaries; (6) word study methods; (7) the topical approach; (8) chronological or traditio-historical approaches; (9) credal approaches; (10) heilsgeschichte or salvation history; (11) canonical criticism—Childs's and Sanders's disparate methods are held together here; (12) narrative approaches; (13) sociological approaches; (14) liberation and feminist theologies; (15) rhetorical criticism; and (16) the history of exegesis.

<sup>27</sup> Scobie notes a certain linkage between this conception of the task and that of Gabler's second stage, the collecting, comparing, and digesting of the biblical materials in the search for a 'pure' biblical theology (1991a:51-52). Although the rationalist categories by which Gabler would have carried out this task are clearly to be rejected, it can nevertheless be said that, in a limited sense at least, biblical theology is a discipline which has come a very short way in a very long time!

rather a detailed continuation of this historical survey, and of Childs's place within that history.

## II. The Historical Development of the Biblical Theology of Brevard S. Childs and its Canonical Approach to the Biblical Text

### A. Childs's Early Education

Childs's attempt to provide an 'intermediate biblical theology' is the culmination of an interest in the discipline held throughout his academic career. However, the route he has taken towards the formulation of his own solution to the problematic question of biblical theology has been long and somewhat complicated. Childs, an American, was born in 1928. He graduated from the University of Michigan (A.B. and M.A. in History), before pursuing the critical study of both Old and New Testament at Princeton (B.D.), Heidelberg and Basle (Th.D; 1950-1954; 1992a:xv). His move to Europe enabled him to study under many of the great biblical scholars of an era when a certain consensus as to the task of biblical theology existed: H.-W. Wolff, W. Zimmerli, Eichrodt, and von Rad in Old Testament, and O. Cullmann, G. Bornkamm and K.L. Schmidt in New Testament (cf. Childs, 1969:30; 1974:x; 1980a:208; 1985:xiii). However, the need to learn the languages essential for his doctoral work under the supervision of W. Baumgartner seriously curtailed Childs's early interest in biblical theology simply through time considerations (1992a:xv). His dissertation, *Der Mythos als theologisches Problem im Alten Testament*, was completed in 1953, and a book published on the same subject in 1955. An important footnote to his experiences in Europe is that he had the opportunity at Basle to hear many of the lectures of Barth, the Swiss theologian who has become perhaps the greatest influence upon Childs's work on biblical theology.

Childs left Europe in 1954 and returned to the United States, first gaining the post of Professor of Exegesis and Old Testament at Mission House Seminary,

Plymouth, before being appointed to Yale Divinity School in 1958 (1967a:inside cover; 1992a:xv; cf. Tucker et al, 1998:xii). Publications began to appear almost immediately, and a series of monographs and essays utilising traditional historical critical methods helped establish Childs as one of the foremost practitioners of the historical critical method of his day (according to Sanders, 1976:289; and Priest, 1980:260). Alongside his Old Testament work Childs also became involved in other areas of study, learning Akkadian under A. Goetze and studying Jewish exegesis (1992a:xv). His interest in New Testament was also given room to develop with several months of 1964 given up to studies at Tübingen University (in what was then West Germany), at a time when E. Käsemann was at his most influential (1984a:xxiii). In the ten years that followed, he also attended the New Testament lectures of his Yale colleague N. Dahl (1984a:xxiii).

#### B. Realising the Need for a New Approach to Biblical Theology

Alongside these studies, however, Childs began to write about the need for a new approach to the discipline of biblical theology. Elements of his approach began to appear as early as 1958 in an essay entitled, 'Jonah: a Study in Old Testament Hermeneutics'. D.F. Hartzfeld notes three such elements: First, the fully 'legitimate use of biblical criticism'; second, the 'inter-relation of the New Testament with the Old and thus a canon' (though the term is not used); third, 'the interaction of the [Holy] spirit to enable the reader' (1989:93-4). When applying these presuppositions to an exegesis of Jonah, Childs argued that the non-historical text is the true Word of God which calls for a response from those with 'eyes of faith' (1958:60).

In 1964 Childs published one of his most influential essays, 'Interpretation in Faith: The Theological Responsibility of an Old Testament Commentary,' in the journal *Interpretation*.<sup>28</sup> Taking as his starting point the lack of good Old Testament

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<sup>28</sup> In a report commissioned by the Vatican, 'La critique canonique', Barthélemy cited this essay as the first antecedent to the new field of 'Canonical Criticism' (cf. Sanders, 1991:88).

commentaries, Childs attempts to provide an approach to the task of commentary writing which would remedy this situation. Here Childs took explicit issue with the role of historical criticism in biblical theology, claiming that as practised in a descriptive biblical theology such as that proposed by Wrede and K. Stendahl these methodologies rendered the texts theologically mute.<sup>29</sup> Childs wrote that approaches starting from 'a neutral ground never can do full justice to the theological substance because there is no way to build a bridge from the neutral, descriptive content to the theological reality' (1964:438; cf. 1979:79; 1985:17).<sup>30</sup>

According to Childs, one must understand the task as a theologically normative one concerned with the reality to which the text witnesses. Anticipating the criticism that wild subjectivity will result from such a devaluation of the descriptive task, he argues that there are two other controls operative on the hermeneutical process aside from that of 'neutral' description. Hartzfeld writes that:

Childs's solution to this problem appears in two tangible forms. First, he refers... to the framework of faith, which seems to be a synonym for the idea of canon. Hence the scriptures become the rule of faith, the body of information from which normative categories are developed.... Thus he approaches 'reality' within this context and not through any criteria which the exegete would impose. Secondly, he refers to the Church, another tangible form, diverse as it may be! As part of the Church the exegete functions within the fact of God's redemptive activity within that Church and thereby understands 'reality' in light of the Scripture. Childs here introduces another important concept to which he will return, that of the community of faith (1989:111).

This characterisation of the scriptures as a rule of faith in this early article will lead eventually to Childs's characterisation of the canonical shape as the 'rule of faith' (1992a:71). But it is important to note that he has unfortunately also invoked the type

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<sup>29</sup> Barr has noted that Stendahl's article in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* does not so much describe biblical theology as it was being done at that time but rather describes biblical theology as Stendahl thought it *should* be done (1976:106).

<sup>30</sup> In the light of Childs's comments elsewhere within this essay (e.g., 437), it seems clear that he is using the word 'neutral' here in its common usage, rather than suggesting that Stendahl and Wrede's approach is truly neutral.

of 'rule of faith' utilised by Irenaeus, that of an external hermeneutical constraint (1984a:27-33), and so a confusion exists in Childs's work as to the correct usage of this term. In this historical survey, his usage will be followed, but in later chapters, 'rule of faith' is taken to refer not to the shape of the text (for which the more useful term 'arena' will be preferred) but rather only to the hermeneutical constraint operating alongside Scripture from outside, that of Jesus Christ, Lord of the Church.

At some point during Childs's early career—perhaps even before 1958<sup>31</sup>—a significant change occurred in his theological thinking: he began to revise his opinion of the theological approach of Barth. In an essay written the year after Barth's death, he comments upon this change (1969a). He had first encountered Barth's work at Princeton, and remembers spending much of this first encounter trying to come to grips with the density of the theological language (1969a:30). At Basle, he remarks, there existed a tension between the 'biblical people' and the great dogmatician, a tension which led to neither side taking the exegesis of the other seriously. In an anecdote about Barth's response to von Rad's lectures, Childs shows that he was at that time firmly on the side of the biblical scholars, though his admiration for Barth's acumen is also clear (1969a:30-1). But by 1969 Childs was wondering if Barth was not correct after all. The work of von Rad and those who had followed his lead in the so-called 'Biblical Theology Movement' had dated badly, but Barth's work seemed to Childs to be invulnerable to the criticisms which were destroying their work (1969a:31-2). In his 1969 depiction of Barth's normative stance one can see some of the features which had already appeared in his work and which would further come to constitute his own approach to the biblical texts.

Barth came to the Bible, from the outset, from a confessional standpoint. He confessed that the Old and New Testaments were Scriptures of the Church, that they contained the prophetic and apostolic Witness, that this was the normative Witness, and that in this context (as the Church had received it) one remembered how the Church fathers and the Church had

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<sup>31</sup> Scalise notes a similarity between the work of Barth and Childs's terminology in Childs's 1958 Jonah essay, 1994b:61.

heard the Word, and yet waited in expectation that the Word of God would become alive through the Holy Spirit for them. And here Barth stood, of course, in the light of Calvin in stressing very much the Holy Spirit making the Scriptures alive to the people of God (1969a:32).

It is noteworthy that certain reconstructions of Childs's programme have been faulted for their failure to recognise Barth's influence on Childs (e.g., Barr on Brett, 1992:130-40; on comparing Barth and Childs, see Scalise, 1987, 1994a, 1994b; Barr, 1983:142-47; 1999:405-38; and Wharton, 1972).

### C. The Evolution of Childs's Canonical Approach as Foundation for His Biblical Theology

In 1970 Childs published his first major contribution to biblical theology with his book, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Taking further the negative comments he had made about the Biblical Theology Movement in his 1969 essay on Barth, the first four chapters of the book describe the movement's demise during the Sixties. The dissolution of the European consensus concerning biblical theology in which Childs had been trained had also occurred during this period, and it was into this vacuum that Childs offered a sketch of a possible solution to the problems of the discipline. The elements of his previous essays were expanded and combined explicitly with an emphasis on the final canonical form of the text as the authoritative and definitive Word for the Church; according to Childs, the 'Canon of the Church is the most appropriate context from which to do biblical theology' (1970:99).

Childs soon decided that he had not got to the heart of the hermeneutical issues involved, however; he later wrote that he slowly began to realise that 'everything turns on how one understood the [biblical] material being described' (1992a:xv). From this realisation has grown his understanding of biblical theology as the study of two independent witnesses (the Old and New Testaments) to the one reality that is Jesus Christ, witnesses created by a 'canonical process' during which the tradents of the texts altered them with the intention that they be more easily appropriated by the later

community of faith, a process culminating in the final form of the canonical text (1977a; 1978a; 1979:77-79; 1984a:25-27, 42-43; 1985:6-7, 11-13). Historical criticism, on this view, is to be subordinated to the canonical text and is primarily to be used to sharpen the exegete's appreciation of the shape of the final form through a knowledge of its tradition history (1992a:70-1), a position which may be seen as an attempt to combine the insights of Childs's early mentor von Rad with the insights of Barth (cf. Wharton 1972:12).<sup>32</sup> At some point he also began to recognise that the lack of a basic introductory textbook outlining the appearance of the texts when defined by his approach was a serious deficiency (1980a:199, 206). These two elements, how to understand the shape of the biblical material and the need for introductory texts, occupied his biblical theological reflection for the next decade.

During the 1970's a steady stream of essays on topics such as midrash and formal features of the biblical texts such as psalm titles demonstrated Childs's developing understanding of the biblical material. This stream was interrupted only by the publication of a major theological commentary on the book of Exodus. This work was the culmination of an interest in Exodus traced by Childs to a 1952 lecture on Moses by Baumgartner (1974:x), and is essentially an attempt to carry out the project outlined in Childs's 1964 essay. The commentary has proved to be an influential contribution to Exodus studies, if a somewhat flawed one with respect to the developing canonical approach (cf. Wharton's review article, 'Splendid Failure or Flawed Success?', 1975; Brett, 1991:38-47; Barr, 1999:391-2).

*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* appeared in 1979, and was the first that many scholars had seen of Childs's radical attempt to subordinate the historical critical method to the particular use of the biblical texts as the scriptures of the Church. Responses appeared in large numbers, Childs receiving over sixty reviews of the work (1984:xv); two journals, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (16, 1980) and *Horizons in Biblical Theology* (2, 1980), each showcased several reviews

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<sup>32</sup> A similar conclusion is drawn by Sanders, who sees Childs as combining the work of Barth and M. Noth (1976:289).



and a response from Childs. Some reviewers were wholly negative. Barr, who had been cautiously in favour of Childs's work in the early seventies, now rejected the approach outright and has since proved to be one of his most vocal, if not most accurate, critics (1983:130-171, 1999:378-438; cf. 1974:273-4.). R.N. Whybray wrote of the approach that it was a new form of 'obscurantism', and 'a dangerous method of interpretation which ought to be resisted' (1981:29,34). Others, however, were more positive. The Old Testament scholar R. Smend called the volume 'the most important new publication of recent years in our discipline' (1980:45). On reading Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, R. Rendtorff saw a 'promising method' which provided a 'genuine alternative' to the historical critical methodologies then in use (1993:195, 217; cf. also Murphy's 'original' and 'exciting', 1980:40). Most were not fully convinced either way: H. Cazelles, for example, called Childs's proposal 'a profound and—in my opinion—very successful renewed approach' while suggesting that the loss of interest in the theologies of J, D, E and P would mean that the results of the canonical approach would be 'rather obvious', rather than 'fruitful and secure' (1980:29).

But one comment that was consistently made was that the approach was incomplete as it stood; to be complete it must include the New Testament as well as the Old, a point which Childs had already realised (1984:xxiii). The next step was a daring one for an Old Testament scholar—Childs wrote an introduction to the New Testament. His interest in the New Testament had continued during the 1970's, and had included the running of a course on Paul's Epistle to the Romans as seen through the eyes of Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth (1992a:xvi). Between 1980 and 1984 Childs committed his research time to critical issues concerning the New Testament. Alongside his Old Testament teaching schedule, he recalls 'early rising hours, long periods at night and many summers of intensive study' (1984a:xxiii), one of which included a sabbatical at Tübingen in 1981 where he heard P. Stuhlmacher, M. Hengel, O. Hofius, and O. Betz (1984a:xxiii). In 1984 his *New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* was published. Responses were forthcoming but were disappointing for

Childs. Whereas his Old Testament Introduction had caused even his critics to shift their ground this did not happen in the New Testament field. He later remarked that 'the New Testament Guild closed ranks against the book, and it languished in silence, often unread' (1993:xv).

With these introductory texts complete Childs returned to the question of biblical theology, publishing a popularised *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* in 1985. This work was considered disappointing by many (but in contrast cf. Scobie, 1992:6) not least because Childs was deemed inconsistent, his treatment of the relationship between the priests and the prophets seeming to owe more to Wellhausen than to his own canonical approach (House, 1998:47; cf. also W. Brueggemann, 1986:284, 286-87).

Seven more years were to pass before Childs presented the fullest exposition of his biblical theology in his massive *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, published in 1992a; a work which has also received some criticism (cf. the reviews of W. Brueggemann, 1993; Moberly, 1993; 1994; Adam, 1994; Bauckham, 1994; Brett, 1994; Reumann, 1994; and the comments of Watson, 1997:213-19; Barr, 1999:396-400). A large part of this volume was given over to extensive but non-canonical tradition histories of the Old and New Testaments which were, presumably, to be used to illuminate the canonical form of the text by those using the approach. The actual canonical sections included two 'detailed' exegeses of the Akedah and the parable of the vineyard and ten sections under systematic headings such as 'The Identity of God', 'God the Creator', 'Covenant and Election', etc.). Sadly, in Moberly's words (1993:373-74), no 'memorable exegesis' resulted from Childs's canonical approach in his *Biblical Theology*, and though in one sense this large volume is the crowning achievement of his career, one cannot escape the feeling that the central jewel is missing. In subsequent years, Childs has contented himself with producing occasional essays. It remains to be seen whether anything more substantial will be forthcoming.

In the following discussion, it is Childs's *Biblical Theology* which provides the basic understanding of the canonical approach applied here, but it will become clear

that, like many others, I have tended to pick and choose amongst Childs's many fruitful suggestions, discarding those which I have deemed unhelpful. Doubtless, others would question the correctness of those decisions and strike out in different directions, but that should be considered in many ways the greatest tribute that can be offered to the richness of Childs's contribution to the discipline of biblical theology.

#### D. Conclusion

In conclusion, Scobie's three-part definition has proved itself capable of accounting for the many different critical ventures which have passed historically under the name of biblical theology. Nuances have emerged which are able to explain the disjunction between the 'integrated biblical theology' of Irenaeus, the 'independent biblical theology' of Wrede, and the hoped-for 'intermediate biblical theology' of the near future. Clearly the relationships of the canonical text to both its component texts and its subject (its referentiality) are of fundamental importance in defining the resulting type of biblical theology, its shape and its content. The seemingly necessary rejection of the objectivist historical-critical text and the inability of modern humankind to return to the state which existed before the rise of historical consciousness serve to define the parameters of future attempts at producing biblical theology. Though Childs's canonical approach to biblical theology falls into this area, it remains to be seen how successful it will be and for whom.

## Chapter 2

### The Canonical Approach to Biblical Theology

#### I. The Canonical Approach and Biblical Theology

##### A. Introduction

In suggesting his own approach to the discipline, Childs has built upon G. Ebeling's influential 1955 attempt to redefine biblical theology (1992a:6-9; cf. Reventlow, 1986:145).<sup>33</sup> Ebeling wrote that in doing biblical theology 'the theologian who devotes himself specially to studying the connection between the Old and New Testaments has to give an account of his understanding of the Bible as a whole, i.e. above all of the theological problems that come of enquiring into the inner unity of the manifold testimony of the Bible' (1955:224). At the core of Childs's proposal for a new biblical theology lies his 'canonical approach' to the biblical texts. In this chapter Childs's development of Ebeling's statement will be taken up and combined with details drawn from his other writings to produce an outline of the canonical approach to biblical theology. In Section I, the historical and confessional basis of the approach will be outlined and defended against some common criticisms. In Section II some of the consequences of the canonical approach for exegetical praxis will be discussed. The question of how the hermeneutics of the approach are best understood will be considered in Chapter 3.

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<sup>33</sup> Ebeling himself did not develop his definition further, and Childs has noted that he would probably have moved in a different direction than the one outlined here (1992a:7).

## B. Two Essential Distinctions: Canonical Text/Biblical Theology and Closed Canon/Open Canon

Before continuing, there are two necessary distinctions which should be noted when considering the justification of the canonical approach. The first is that a logical distinction exists between Childs's canonical approach and his biblical theology in that one does not need to hold to *certain* of the assumptions of his wider theological thought in order to use the canonical approach to the biblical texts. This distinction may be formulated thus:

The canonical approach to the biblical texts may form *either* one part of Childs's theological system *or* one aspect of any number of different theological systems.

The second distinction is that the Christian 'Church' is divided into two broad types, each with a very different attitude to its scriptures. This may be formulated thus:

Church communities typically hold to *either* a closed canon (henceforth, type 1) *or* may use an open canon of some kind (type 2).<sup>34</sup>

The implications of each of these distinction for the study of Childs will be outlined in turn.

The guiding principle of Childs's 'personal theology' is that the witness of the two Testaments, of scripture, is 'the true source of the knowledge of God' (1992a:369; cf. 1979:76, 671). This emphasis also carries over into the way in which he sees his biblical theology relating to its wider theological context. Biblical theology should, according to Childs, operate as a sub-discipline within the discipline of biblical

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<sup>34</sup> In one sense, the use of 'closed' and 'open' to describe these two Church types and their use of (something which approximates) the canonical approach or some other 'canonical text' is problematic. The distinction is not really between being open or closed but is rather between two different kinds of closure (since, by definition, limits always exist on what is 'canonical'). Nevertheless, this terminology is often usefully applied to this situation and will serve here to mark the differences between these two types of Church.

studies which mediates between that discipline and systematic theology. Its aim, and the aim of all of the theological disciplines, is to provide illumination for the canonical scriptures of the Church. For those, such as D.H. Kelsey (1980:395) and Ollenburger (1985:53), who wish to see biblical theology operating in an ecclesiastical setting shaping, ordering and critiquing the continuing life of the Christian Community rather than as a mediating bridge, Childs has only polemic. For him, biblical theology cannot function within the Church before establishing in mediation between the Bible and systematic theology the identity of the 'God who in Jesus Christ calls the Church into being' (1992a:23, 723; cf also the similar formulations of Knierim, 1984:47; and Scobie, 1991a:49-50).

Even for those who would accept such a mediating role for biblical theology, however, Childs's emphasis on the Bible as sole revealer may prove problematic. J. McQuarrie notes that it is possible to create a typology of theologies on the basis of the dominant role given to formative factors such as revelation, scripture, tradition, experience, reason, and culture (1977:4). For some the Bible should only be treated as equal to (or even less than) these factors, it then being the task of the systematician to supply the unity the Christian faith requires by weighing each and deciding what is acceptable language about God (e.g., King, 1983). This formulation would be totally unacceptable to Childs, who rejects the assumption 'prevalent since the Enlightenment that the theological enterprise has other avenues [than scripture] to the truth' (1992a:370). For Childs the task of systematic theology is two-fold: first, to reflect upon the unity of the Christian faith taking account of the creeds and the history of dogma, not in order to create a complete doctrinal position, but rather to create a 'tool which will help better understanding of scripture' (1992a:369); and second, to deal with present day language and questions, including mediating such concerns to the biblical theologians. Without the mediatory work of biblical theology, Childs believes that it would be impossible for systematic theologians to make sense of 'the bewildering exegetical complexities arising from biblical exegesis' (1992a:483). The theological enterprise envisaged by Childs is clearly a complex one which must be set

within the life and worship of the whole community of faith, and requires co-operation between those studying biblical theology, systematics, pastoral theology, patristics, Church history, philosophy, anthropology and many other fields but always with the Bible firmly in the centre (1980a:200; 1977c:359).

Barr, in particular, has raised questions about Childs's claim to be providing 'the' correct understanding of biblical theology and its relationship to the other theological disciplines. Most significantly, he has problematised Childs's definition of systematic theology and has dismissed his assertion that the assumption that there are other avenues to the truth originates with the Enlightenment by pointing to the use of natural theology by classical theologians (1999:414).<sup>35</sup> But a distinction should be made between Barr's arguments against Childs's definition of theology as a whole and his arguments against Childs's use of a final form of the text. In asserting this, I am pointing out that the arguments which have been used to justify the canonical approach to the text are not identical to those which Childs has used—or should have used, if one takes Barr's position that Childs does not actually argue for his view (1999:401)—to justify his theological claims. Childs's tendency to use absolutist rhetoric in defining both of these separate projects must therefore be treated individually; to argue as if scripture is the only way to the truth and to argue as if all exegetes must work on the canonical approach are not the same thing and cannot be refuted as one.

This thesis is concerned only with understanding and applying a canonical approach to the final form of the text *which is capable of functioning as the biblical component within any number of theological systems*. It will attempt to respond to Barr's criticisms as and when necessary, but it is not concerned with defending the claims of theological exclusivity which Childs has advanced. This is because there seems no good reason why those who see the Bible as having a complementary role *alongside* other sources of knowledge of God could not quite happily accept Childs's

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<sup>35</sup> Barr notes that Childs's disparaging comments on the 'free church theology' of Taylor points out his tendency to ask for theological readings but then to disagree with those who offer them, implying that the truth is to be found only in his own formulations (1999:394; citing Childs, 1984:548). For Barr, Childs is thus idealising 'theology', but only his form of it (1999:50).

arguments for the final form while remaining committed to an alternative, perhaps more contemporary, source of revelation. This second source would be allowed to impinge upon the canonical text and revise it in some way theologically.

One such group might be (the less radical) Christian feminists, some of whom do utilise the canonical text alongside women's experience as a source of revelation (e.g. Tribble, 1978). This theological position would probably find it difficult to wholly accept Childs's view that the biblical text as it stands reveals the true relationship between male and female in God's creation (1985:188-195). According to Tribble, his conclusion 'spurns feminist analysis' (1993:35) and could perhaps be challenged by modern thought in the area of feminism, gender studies, or just plain female experience of the world. Such a challenge could lead to the final form being recognised as a true source of revelation but one devalued by patriarchal assumptions, a text in need of de-mythologising!<sup>36</sup>

But here the second necessary distinction outlined above becomes important. Kelsey has noted that the adoption of a certain concept of 'church' by Christians brings with it the concept of an authoritative closed canon of scripture (1975:164). W. Marxsen, however, has argued that the modern Church is free to decide whether or not the judgement of the canonisers was correct and to reject the closed canon in favour of an open one (1971:18). One variant of this position is that implicitly taken by R. Murphy (1980:44) when he asks Childs why other layers of the canonical texts should not be regarded as normative? But some go even further and regard *only* other layers of the text as normative. J. Rogerson, for example, notes that I. Mosala, a black South

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<sup>36</sup> A second group with a similar but distinct position is (the many groupings associated with) the Charismatic wing of the Christian Church. Childs's emphasis on the present Church as containing neither prophets nor apostles (e.g., 1992a:78; cf. also Seitz, 1998:102-109) would certainly not be accepted by these churches and their use of his approach would be altered accordingly.

In J.C. Thomas' essay, 'Women, Pentecostals, and the Bible', he notes that the Bible both affirms and denies the leadership role of women within the Church (1994:53). He goes on to cite as decisive the fact that the work of the Holy Spirit within the contemporary Pentecostal community has led to leadership roles for women; therefore, he concludes that those parts of the scriptures which affirm this should themselves be affirmed (1994:54). In this case the second source of revelation for the Church is not experience of modernity or post-modernity but the witness of the Holy Spirit unmediated by the biblical texts. These 'charismatic' revisionists could use Childs's final form as one pole in their bi-polar hermeneutic.



African theologian, insists on using a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', believing that 'texts which originate from the class of the oppressors cannot be used in the struggle for liberation. If they are, they may undergird the interests of the oppressors even though they are being used by the oppressed' (1991:35). For such theologians, Childs's canonical text could only ever be considered an oppressive text (though some individual 'canonical' segments may eventually be considered ideologically acceptable).<sup>37</sup>

Kelsey's rejoinder to such attitudes is to point out that such moves do not involve a simple rejection of the canonical texts but rather, in analytic terms, involve the rejection of the concept of church adopted by much of the early Church (1975:165). Childs, however, is concerned with those who *do* accept this concept of Church, and his defence of the canonical approach as normative should be understood as being primarily aimed at justifying a prior decision by this particular constituency of the Christian Church (though, his language does tend to assume that this group *is* the whole of the Church).<sup>38</sup>

When combined with the first distinction made between Childs's canonical approach to the texts and his theology, four possible definitions of 'church' arise: first, a type 1 church which uses a closed canon which approximates to Childs's canonical approach to the Old and New Testaments *and* mirrors his personal theology (henceforth, called type 1A); second, a type 1 church which uses something like the canonical approach as its closed canon but which rejects Childs's theology (type 1B); third, a type 2 church which has an open canon, perhaps in the form of layered or

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<sup>37</sup> It will be of great personal interest to see if the canonical text of Genesis 18-19 encountered here and expounded in Chapters 5 and 6 eventually attracts the accusation that it is 'an oppressor's text'.

<sup>38</sup> Barr's claim that Childs is isolated theologically (1999:401) seems to trade too much on the polemical nature of the latter's writing and ignores Childs's wide influence on 'church' theologians (e.g., Moberly, Rendtorff, Seitz). It is, of course, an open question as to whether or not these scholars are responding to Childs's textual work rather than his actual theology. But given my characterisation of churches 1A and 1B as those who have already accepted the early church's definition of 'church', it is quite possible that Childs is in tune with more church members than either Barr, Marxsen, or Mosala. Certainly my own—admittedly limited—experience of churches in England would suggest that this is so.

altered text, but uses Childs's theology (type 2A); fourth, a type 2 church which has an open canon but does not use Childs's theology (type 2B).

Obviously, members of type 1A and 1B churches are—to a degree which perhaps depends upon how closely their particular closed canon approximates the canonical approach—already predisposed towards accepting the canonical approach to the biblical texts as normative. But members of 2A and 2B churches, while not presently viewing the canonical form as normative, may yet come to accept it as such, either through an acceptance of Childs's arguments for canon (especially perhaps the canonical process) or through some other kind of 'negotiation'. But to examine the issues which are involved in this kind of situation would involve dealing with major social, political, theological and ecclesiological issues, a task far beyond the scope of this present work. This thesis will concern itself only with the justification of a canonical approach in the context of type 1A and 1B churches, in the context of those who do already hold to something approaching the canonical form of the Bible.

## II. A Theoretical Justification for the Role of 'Canon' in the Canonical Approach

### A. Defining 'Canon'

The biblical theologian's task, as defined by Childs's interpretation of Ebeling, is to reflect upon the connection between the two testaments in an attempt 'to give an account of his understanding of the Bible as a whole... enquiring into its inner unity' (1992a:8). For Childs, the canonical approach which he has developed provides the 'arena'—the canonical text of the Old and New Testaments—in which biblical theology should perform this task.

In terms of its historical development, the distinctive feature of the canonical approach to the biblical texts is a simple one; Childs argues that the historical critical method should be subordinated to the final form of the text as used by the community

of faith.<sup>39</sup> But the historical criticism dominant in his early academic career has left its mark on his work in that certain aspects of his argument for using the final form are heavily indebted to the historical critical method.<sup>40</sup> Other aspects, however, are primarily confessional in nature, and this combination of the historical and the confessional has led to some confusion about Childs's extended usage of the term 'canon'.<sup>41</sup>

'Canon' for Childs is a rubric which includes four connected notions, the acceptance of each of which is, he believes, vital for the canonical approach in its attempts to justify the use of the final form (1992a:70-71; cf. earlier formulations, e.g., 1979:68-60; 1985:6-7). First, he offers an historical argument against the view of such as Wrede that the canon was a late ecclesiastical decision which is fundamentally irrelevant to the modern interpreter. Rather Childs takes the position that the concept

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<sup>39</sup> With the recent emphasis on literary approaches to the final form it is perhaps hard for younger scholars to appreciate what was once the radicality of Childs's aim. However, in the 1950's and 60's, such an emphasis on the final form was wholly lacking, biblical scholarship being dominated by critical reconstructions of the multiple layers of the biblical texts. Although the rise of New Criticism in the 1940's and 50's, with its emphasis on the autonomous text, has been seen by some as an influential precursor to Childs's work (e.g., Barton, 1984:141-45), he has denied any direct link.

<sup>40</sup> Barr has suggested, on the basis of Childs's polemic against the historical critical method, that Childs has contradicted himself, the canonical approach being so heavily based upon that method that Childs is in effect cutting off the branch upon which he is sitting (1983:132-33). However, Childs's explanations of his approach and its relationship with historical criticism makes clear that he is not denying a very legitimate role for the method but only the insistence that it must be used in a particular 'atomistic' and 'genetic' way. Although his polemic is overstated, it is perhaps best understood as Childs's response to biblical theologians in the Wrede mould who would continue to insist upon that particular usage.

Barr is thus correct in seeing these two approaches as attempting to describe 'as objectively as possible' two very different objects (cf. Childs, 1979:16); each uses historical methodologies in a different way, it being the difference between the objects of description that is of importance here and not the merits of the historical method as such (1983:153-4; later though, Barr was to be less affirmatory of Childs's acceptance of historical criticism, 1999:49). But Barr goes on to note Childs's comments on the impossibility of an objective descriptive enterprise, and suggests that 'this is an obvious confusion and canonical critics have not even tried to think straight on this theoretical issue' (1983:154). In chapter III, on the hermeneutics of the canonical approach, I shall attempt to resolve these so-called 'contradictory' views on the objective nature of canonical exegesis, suggesting that the term 'objective' should not be used in its absolute sense, but that it can legitimately be used as defining the nature of the study of a community of its texts.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Barr: 'Canon in this book [*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*] is vaguely and unanalytically treated' (1980:13; cf. also 1983:78-80). For a response, see Childs's review of Barr's 1983 book (1984b).

of the canon is implicit in the formation of the final form of the text, the ‘canonical process’. This historical process extends into the period during which the canonical text was stabilised and the canon completed, a period which forms the second element of the rubric ‘canon’ and which he terms ‘canonisation proper’. But Childs now changes tack, moving from historical arguments about the ‘canonical process’ and ‘canonisation proper’ towards a more confessional justification of the final form. As the third element of his rubric ‘canon’, he argues that the stabilised canon was (and is) received and acknowledged as authoritative by two communities of faith, the Church and the Synagogue. The fourth element of the rubric involves the assertion that these communities of faith read the final form of the text in line with what Childs calls the text’s ‘canonical intentionality’.

Although there are historical tones in that these last two elements could be held to refer to what has actually happened historically, Childs’s emphasis on readers being part of these communities in order to do biblical theology is purely confessional, is essentially an invitation to read in a faith community with a firmly closed canon (1984a: 38-39; 1985:14-15, 28-29). Since Childs has acknowledged that the present pluralistic intellectual climate is a good thing (1984a:37), he presumably does not intend his historical argument about the canonical process to result in absolutely everyone—whether Christian or not—being forced to read these texts canonically (despite the fact that his language often appears to do just that). He is therefore reliant upon the impact of this third element of ‘canon’ in achieving full acceptance by any individual of his canonical approach.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Watson’s arguments for the use of a canonical approach as normative appear to be based upon the presupposition that because of the ‘canonical process’ and ‘canonisation proper’ the ‘full’ meaning of the biblical text is that found within the Church when it reads it—in Watson’s case, rather essentialist—canonical text (1994:3-6; 1996:95-126). Watson tends to believe, as Childs apparently does, that all Christians read canonically (1994:30-45).

It will be argued below, however, that there is no way to force all exegetes to read the biblical texts canonically. This is partly because the historical arguments for the existence of a canonical process are insufficiently well-founded to command universal assent and partly because in the present pluralistic interpretive environment people are—generally—free to read as they will regardless of their view of the canonical process. On this last point see the debate between Watson (1996a:80-81; 1996b:3-16), Marsh (1996a:76-80; 1996b; 1997:399-414), and Davies (1995:17-55), and the reflections on Watson’s *Text, Church and World* (1994) by Rowland (1995:507-17; with Watson’s

Although the interplay between these four elements has caused considerable confusion for both Childs and his critics, it may also be responsible for much of the strength of Childs's canonical approach. The problems associated with each individual element will be critically considered below and a defence offered. In some cases, however, resolution is best available through an invocation of the interplay between Childs's historical and confessional arguments; of particular note will be the overlap between the 'historical' argument concerning the canonical process and the 'confessional' acceptance of the final form.

### B. 'Canonical Process'

The claim that the formation of the canon involved more than a late ecclesiastical decision and involved a prior canonical process is a historical one subject to the application of the historical-critical method. Developing the insights of von Rad, Childs claims that as the texts were formed, the Old Testament within Israel and the New Testament within the early Church, reflection upon the texts led to them being actualised within those communities, an actualisation which took the form, not of a concern to apply old texts to new existential situations, but rather of a theological concern to loosen the historical moorings of many of the texts in such a way as to render them applicable to future communities of faith (1977a; 1978a; 1979:77-79; 1984a:25-27, 42-43; 1985:6-7, 11-13). Not all of the texts were so formed; Childs notes that some texts were only actualised when accepted in their final canonical form (1979:79; 1980a:206). However, the loosening which did take place was accompanied by the intentional and almost total obscuring of the identities and motivations of those who carried out this process (1979:59, 62-67, 77-79), the sole exception being the very occasionally expressed concern that 'a tradition from the past be transmitted in such a way that its authoritative claims be laid upon all successive traditions of Israel'

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response, 1995:518-23) and Riches (1998:205-34, with Watson's response, 1998:235-42), and on his *Text and Truth* (1997) by Pyper (1998).

(1979:78; cf. Exod. 12:14, 12:26-27; Deut. 31:9-13). This obscuring leads Childs to claim that any attempt to recreate earlier layers of text by the use of historical criticism is 'to disregard the crucial theological intentions of the traditions of the tradition' (1985:11). As E. Dyck puts it, for Childs 'the fact of a community is crucial to understanding the process, the identity of the community is not' (1986:54).

Childs's historical claim about the canonical process has proved problematic for two reasons: First, Childs's couching of claims about the effect of the canonical process on contemporary scholarship in exclusivist terms has attracted criticism. M.G. Brett, for example, sees Childs as having a totalitarian tendency, and suggests that he has two competing attitudes to biblical scholarship: the first is a 'coherent position' which Brett calls 'hermeneutical pluralism', and the second is an 'incoherent position', termed by Brett, 'hermeneutical monism'. Not surprisingly, the pluralistically inclined Brett argues that Childs is at his best with the former (1991:11 cf. 41-2). The monistic 'negative' side of Childs's work has also been attacked by Davies, who sees Childs as trying to 'absorb' all of biblical scholarship (1995:44).<sup>43</sup>

There can be no doubt that Childs's language has the capacity to generate such views but, given his two tendencies, it seems strange—and somewhat ahistorical—to me that Brett and Davies have not taken account of Childs's academic context, and understood his often over-polemical rhetoric *primarily* as an unfortunate side-effect of his career-long difficulty in defining the canonical approach over against what he perceived to be an 'atomistic' and 'genetic' historical-critical method (cf. also Clines's description of historical criticism in these terms, 1978:7-10). Given that the logic of Childs's position favours a pluralist approach to the biblical texts in general but engenders the normativity of a single approach for one specific group of interpreters, it seems likely that these scholars are incorrect in their characterisation of Childs as a monist; rather they should have asked the question, why he has so often used that kind of language. In fact, a monistic position is in no way an essential component of a

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<sup>43</sup> Barr traces Childs's monopolising tendencies to his indebtedness to Barth (1983:132, 146).

canonical approach, as it need not impinge on the right of people to do what they like with these texts. Fundamentally, the canonical approach is a normative one, suitable for use within the Church (or perhaps rather some parts of it). But it is not necessary—or, I believe, even feasible—to insist that it is the only legitimate way to study the biblical texts.

The second reason why the canonical process has proved controversial is that, as Brett notes, Childs has generally been dubious about recovering historical details of this process of canon formation, especially in his debate with the canonical criticism of J.A. Sanders (e.g., 1979:57, 62-67; 1980a:210-204).<sup>44</sup> This has led Brett to argue that one of the key elements of the canonical approach, that the canonisers subordinated their own socio-historical situation to theological concerns, is a conclusion for which Childs can give no evidence. Brett further argues that ‘there is a sense in which there can be no “primary” sources for human motives’, and ‘that one can hardly expect scholarly conjectures to secure a wide consensus when the relevant evidence is almost entirely lacking’ (1991:153).

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<sup>44</sup> Sanders’s canonical criticism is related to the traditio-historical method, and has been on the scene since he published his *Torah and Canon* in 1972. The Bible is seen as the result of a growth-process comprising three elements: the original text, a development of the text through re-application which Sanders calls ‘comparative midrash’ and ‘spontaneous revelation’. He assumes that within the process a consistent hermeneutic, ‘theocentric monotheising pluralism’, was operating; as pluralist material was incorporated into the process it was monotheised more or less successfully by this governing hermeneutic. The whole continued to grow through the use of comparative midrash until an aura of sacredness formed around the text, stabilising it. However, stabilisation did not close the canonical process; it was and is open-ended, and has continued with ‘hardly a pause’ (1984:32). For Sanders, there was no dramatic shift in interpretation towards the final form of the texts. Instead an ontological shift in the understanding of canon (its sacredness) required new hermeneutical methods which then allowed the text to stabilise.

Thus Sanders understands the canonical function/shape of the scriptures as a combination of repetition-ensuring stability and potential adaptability. The stable core is the monotheism exemplified by the first commandment, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me’ (Exod. 20:2-3). Adaptability is provided by the use of a hermeneutical triangle in interpretation; the three corners are provided by the text(ual layer), its original social context, and the monotheistic hermeneutic. Since there is no essential difference between past and present communities of faith, these three elements are always present in a never-ending canonical process. The challenge for the modern reader is to apply the hermeneutic, to monotheise, in order to struggle with and against polytheism within their reading and their modern social context (see bibliography for Sanders’s works, and Spina, 1982, for a comparison between Childs and Sanders.)

Additional criticism of the historical argument for the existence of a canonical process has come from Gottwald and Davies. Although the former accepts that a canonical process existed, he calls attention to the ideological nature of the social matrix in which it must have taken place and questions Childs's assumption that the final form has been 'loosened' from its socio-historical setting (1985:313-5; cf. also the feminist criticism of Sanders by Bowen, 1996:327-52). The latter, an exponent of a materialistic historical criticism, has asked whether or not a historical justification for Childs's canonical process is methodologically available at all (1995:28-35). Davies suggests that in using terms such as 'religious dynamic' to describe the canonical process Childs is introducing into his historical discussion language which is confessional in nature and beyond the reach of historical study. For Davies, it is an uncontroversial fact that these writings were inspired by religious motivations but he does not believe that any more can be said. Instead, Davies gives the impression that there is a discourse available which is open to all because of its materialism, and that it is only the product of such a discourse which can be called 'history'.

These kinds of criticisms have left an impression of 'weakness' in Childs's argument about the canonical process which has led to a number of attempts to reconstruct his approach, the most significant of which are those of Brett (1988, 1991, 1994), Barr (1986, 1989), Dyck, (1986); E.E. Lemcio and R.W. Wall (1992), D.F. Morgan (1987; 1990), P.R. Noble (1991, 1995), C.J. Scalise (1994a, 1996), and Watson (1994, 1997). Despite this appearance of weakness, however, Childs's canonical process is by no means as vulnerable as it first appears, and responses can be offered to Davies, Gottwald and Brett.

Davies's attempt to use a materialistic and positivistic historical method to define what can and cannot be said about history is, at present, philosophically indefensible. As a philosophy, positivism depends upon the reliability of 'empirical observation' and the public availability of 'facts', an availability now under very severe attack (cf. Acton, 1989:255-6). But even if such facts were to become available, there can never be, strictly speaking, a positivistic approach to 'history' because historical



events are not themselves available for empirical verification. Instead a weak form of positivism must be posited in which one has only the *traces* left by historical events available for empirical study. Such 'weak' positivism has, according to P.L. Heath, 'increasingly taken on the appearance of an ad hoc device for the exclusion of an already proscribed class of statements, rather than being in itself a reason for excluding them' (1989:185). Since Childs can only be accused of illegitimately mixing two discourses if one holds to the propriety of a materialistic and positivistic historical one, there is no reason why Childs's claims cannot be evaluated using alternative historical criteria such as the concept of 'reliable testimony' found in the work of Barth (1956a:98-124; 1956b:457-740, especially 457-72, 514-26), P. Ricoeur (1981:119-54), and C.J.A. Coady (1992; on Barth, Coady and testimony, see Smith, 1997).

There can be no doubt that Gottwald's position on the ideological effects of the social matrix on the canonical process and its final product is essentially correct; Childs's process is not a purification process in the sense of producing a context-independent and ideology-free text. But what remains to be seen is how the passage of the texts through a historical series of social settings has altered them, and the resulting effect on the final form of the text. What, for example, is the effect upon their meaning of the insertion of what were once, presumably, socially grounded laws into the narrative setting of Deuteronomy (Childs 1985:55)? Has there been any loosening of these laws, any change in their intended audience? What ideology is now expressed in the canonical text?

It is futile to claim that the final form of the biblical text (or indeed any text whatsoever) is free of societal ideologies (this admission of futility, Barr terms the 'common post-modern way', 1999:549). But it is certainly not the case that the canonical text must be ideology free in order for it to function as scripture. Barr makes much of Childs's castigation of such as Kraus's work as 'ideological' (1999:409; citing 1992a:649) and views Childs as having only a negative view of 'ideology' in contrast

to Brueggemann (1999:549).<sup>45</sup> But, as has already been mentioned (and as will be seen again), Childs has a tendency to over-polemicise, and here that tendency appears to have been combined with the unfortunate, though very common, tendency of a Christian scholar to regard the 'way of Christ' as 'perfect freedom' (and therefore, as a non-ideology) and not as a different form of slavery (an ideology). The rhetoric generated by this 'mixture' certainly gives the misleading impression that the canonical text is ideology free. Substantively, however, it is the exact form of the ideological nature of the canonical text which is important. Investigation of that nature, however, must await the results of exegesis, before its grain can be examined by those wielding a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'.

Brett's argument, that Childs's assertion that the process cannot be recovered means that no evidence exists for his claim that the canonisers subordinated their socio-historical situation to theological concern, is also problematic. For the assumption that all details of the canonical process are beyond recovery is not shared by many of the scholars working in this area. Although he acknowledges that Childs's claim for the historicity of the 'canonical process' lacks incontrovertible evidence, R.W.L. Moberly has noted that there is an 'inherent plausibility' about Childs's depiction of historical tradents forming and passing on these texts (1988:107). His view is supported by the work of G.T. Sheppard and others on 'canon conscious redactions,' these being defined as attempts by 'editors to relate one canonical book or part of a book to some other canonical book or collection of books' (1982:23). As examples, Sheppard cites the use of psalm titles to relate psalms to the depiction of David found in the books of Samuel, the redaction of the books of Amos and Joel so that they are not ordered historically but rather 'ordered and redacted with a hinge between them on the theme of the Day of the Lord', and finally the epilogue to Ecclesiastes which sets the book in the 'broader context of solomonic wisdom and

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<sup>45</sup> It is somewhat ironic that, despite Barr's view that Brueggemann is more open to the use of term 'ideology' than Childs (1999:549), I have also heard the latter's use of the term 'advocacy' described as a cloak behind which to hide his own 'ideology'.

identifie[s] this wisdom with Torah' (1982:23-4). These redactions and the development of collections of material demonstrate, Sheppard argues, the canonical process at work (cf. also Rendtorff, 1993:64).

Provan has also argued that to limit evidence of canon consciousness to explicit references between biblical books alone as Sheppard implicitly does—and as Barr insists must be done (1983:12-23 cf. Provan, 1997:8)—is essentially arbitrary. He draws attention to the 'extraordinarily high' levels of intertextuality amongst Old Testament texts as providing support for the existence of a canonical process. He writes that such intertextuality

is not a trivial or marginal matter, this reality of cross referencing. It is rather a central matter. It is, for example, an intrinsic feature of the nature of our OT narrative texts that they have come into their present form in relationship with each other and with Torah and prophetic texts, the very form in which they are written inviting reference time and again to these other scriptural texts. If I may simply write of the narrative text I know best, the book of Kings, it is evident in that book that the whole way in which the story is told is designed to get readers thinking about the broader context of the story in Torah, especially in Deuteronomy; to cause them to reflect on the way in which earlier events and characters in the story of Joshua-Samuel illuminate the events and characters of Kings; and to bring to mind also prophetic perspectives on the story (1997:8-9).

Surprisingly, perhaps, Childs himself has also written that '[c]ritical historical research can provide evidence to show that this canonical shaping is not the creation of the Persian period. Rather the decisive forces of canonical shaping extended throughout the whole of Israel's history' (1980a:200). This positive attitude to such proofs can also be seen in many of Childs's essays, notably in his article on the Reed Sea tradition (1970b), and in the 227 page traditio-historical account included in his *Biblical Theology* (1992a:95-322). Why then has Childs occasionally shown such a reluctance to admit that the process can be seen at all?

In answering this question, it once again seems significant that this reluctance has tended to appear in polemical discussion with Sanders and his 'canonical criticism' (e.g., 1979:57, 62-67; 1980a:210-204). In fact it is my contention that Childs's

reluctance on this point should be understood as an unfortunate defensive response to the work of Sanders (and, indeed, of historical critics in general). Given that Brett is usually a fierce critic of Childs's tendency to over-polemicise against his opponents (e.g., 1991:41-42), his one-sided characterisation of Childs as someone who believes that the process cannot be seen has the unfortunate air of one who has chosen—on this occasion—to over-emphasise the agnostic strand of Childs's rhetoric. By ignoring Childs's positive comments concerning the canonisers's intentions, Brett avoids calling attention to Childs's double-mindedness on this point and resolving it. And given Brett's own belief that—and this despite the hermeneutical difficulties—'historians can and do give plausible accounts of the intentions of historical individuals' (1991:143), the obvious resolution to this problem is that Childs can make use of our—admittedly limited—knowledge of the canonisers's intentions in order to establish the existence of the canonical process.<sup>46</sup>

For many scholars, Childs included, there does seem a certain amount of evidence that the canonical process took place, and they can discuss it without caveat.<sup>47</sup> It seems unlikely, however, that any attempt to prove this can ever move beyond Moberly's 'inherent plausibility'. The indicators seen in the text by Sheppard and Provan do not demonstrate Childs's thesis beyond all doubt; Sheppard's explicit references are relatively rare, and certain aspects of Provan's intertextuality are open to the criticism that they are readerly constructions rather than authorial ones. In a certain sense then, it could be argued that Childs's view of the canonical process can be *plausibly* accepted by an exegete (*contra* Brett and Davies), though that there is insufficient historical-critical evidence to compel all readers to do so.

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<sup>46</sup> This admission lessens the bite of Brett's attempt to criticise Childs's canonical process on the grounds that the 'pure intentions' of the canonisers are not available for our perusal (1991:153). Brett's own acknowledgement that plausible accounts of intention are provided by historians regardless of the hermeneutical difficulties involved does allow Childs the same freedom to postulate historically respectable 'intentions' for a canonising community.

<sup>47</sup> Goldingay, for example, cites this conclusion several times in his *Models of Scripture* (1994:106, 164, 326).

What Childs's approach loses in his historical argument for a canonical process, however, it more than gains in its invocation of the confessionally-based third aspect of the rubric 'canon', the reception of the canon by communities of faith. Even if the effects of the former were to be considered minimal, the effect of the latter was and is massive, fixing the texts, however disparate and disjointed, into the canonical shape of a final form or, to be more precise, forms, which can be seen even by those who do not accept the existence of the canonical process (who might then choose to read canonically on this basis alone). Perhaps surprisingly, what for Childs is only a minor point—that some texts were only actualised when accepted in their final canonical form (1979:79; 1980a:206)—effectively ends the discussion about the existence of the canonical process, since *every* text was actualised at that point regardless of its origin, its intended usage, or any anti-hermeneutical forces at work in its transmission (1979:79, 259; 1980b:55). But, of course, this is exactly the decision to canonise the biblical texts which Wrede once characterised as a late ecclesiastical imposition before rejecting it as necessary for interpretation—a value-laden characterisation which Childs seems unwilling to reject as ultimately irrelevant.<sup>48</sup> As an interpreter trained during a period when the hold of historical-critical research is somewhat looser, I do not find Wrede's complaint as compelling as Childs does, and so am not inclined to insist upon a 'canonical process' in order to refute it. It seems to me rather that a canonical reading can be pursued that is based on the simple recognition that a canonical shape now exists on one's bookshelf. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that the existence of a canonical process is 'inherently plausible',<sup>49</sup> and merely note here that its 'invocation'

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<sup>48</sup> Smend, implicitly drawing aspects from the positions of Childs, Sanders, and Wrede, describes what Childs calls 'canonisation proper' as the killing of a living process (1980:47). Childs's invocation of canonisation proper as a necessary part of canon means that he would acknowledge the living canonical process (with Sanders) but reject such a negative image as its killing by stabilisation (against Wrede).

<sup>49</sup> The relationship between Palestinian history and the biblical presentation is the subject of much debate at the moment, view ranging from those who see the biblical text as very faithful to historical events, the so-called 'maximalists', and those who see biblical history as a late fiction created by the Hasmonaeans, the so-called 'minimalists' (cf. e.g., Provan, 1995; Davies, 1982, 1995b; Whitlam, 1996; Grabbe, 1997). But the canonical approach, at least as I understand it, should be unconcerned with this debate, and Childs's concern over the possibility that Deuteronomy was

will allow canonical exegetes with Childs's sensibilities to avoid the charge that the canon is a late and massive ecclesiastical imposition and suggest that much of it was moulded to allow its availability to later generations.

### C. 'Canonisation Proper'

With the stabilising of the text comes a further difficulty for the canonical approach, namely, that concerning the exact extent of the canon itself. There are a number of different canons: those of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles and those of the Eastern and Western traditions to name but four. Childs's initial work in this area was concentrated upon the Old Testament texts (1979:84-106). His argument that the Old and New Testaments were the products of two distinct traditions, and thus completely independent, led him to make the theological judgement that the 'canonical Old Testament text' is that which was first stabilised within the Jewish community around the end of the first century CE (1979:96-99; cf. 665). The Massoretic text, he argued, provides the vehicle by which the text has come down to the present day, and it is the task of textual criticism to provide us with this text (1979:100-101). This decision also took into account Childs's view that Christians and Jews shared a common text, and that this link between the two communities of faith is theologically important. A cautionary note was sounded concerning the possible inclusion of the apocryphal texts, however, but at that point in time Childs was not convinced that the larger canon would provide the link to the Jewish community which he deemed necessary (1979:666).

In his New Testament introduction Childs included an appendix in which he discussed the need for a canonical textual criticism (1984a:518-30). Rejecting as inadequate the attempts of textual critics since Westcott and Hort to get back to the original text, Childs suggested that two principles had been at work in the copying of

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originally propaganda (1985:148-49) is therefore misplaced. On the stabilisation of the canon itself, see Carr, 1996b.

texts (1984a:529). Firstly, there was an attempt to keep the texts as free from corruption as possible. But, secondly, there was also an attempt to critically include variants from other textual traditions. In order to do justice to these two principles Childs concluded that one must begin working with the *textus receptus* and work within the textual traditions in an attempt to find the text which reflected the true apostolic witness found in the Christian scriptures, the best received text (1984a:528).

Childs approach to the Old Testament canon in particular has been widely criticised (e.g., D.A. Brueggemann, 1989:317-19; Barr, 1980:22; Murphy, 1980:40-41; cf. also Childs, 1992a:55-69). In his *Biblical Theology* he has, however, moved away from these positions, arguing instead for a canon which moves between an inner limit (the Hebrew canon as he had previously defined it) and an outer limit (that of the larger canon of the Septuagint), and which is defined by its relationship to the 'scope' of the texts, Jesus Christ (1992a:67-68). This flexible approach has also been urged on Childs by Scalise (1994a:64-67) and, somewhat more pragmatically, by Wall, who comments that God can work through different canons (1992b:185). Provan, however, continues to argue that Childs was originally correct and that a canonical text claimed to be a discrete witness from its tradent, Israel, cannot be called either 'discrete' or 'from Israel' if it is made to contain different LXX readings unknown to the Hebrew writers (1997:11-16).

Perhaps, as Morgan has pointed out, the most important point about the canon is not the exact extent of it but rather that it exists at all (1986:87). Morgan's conclusion seems valid in the light of the relatively slight importance attached to the question by Childs—'[it] remains a minor issue' (1984b:68)—and another leading canon critic, Rendtorff (1993:37). Because of the relatively slight importance attached to the actual size of the canon and the time-consuming nature of the text-critical undertaking envisaged by Childs in and of itself, the exegesis at the heart of this thesis will simply use the text of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart, 1967/77), principally Eißfeldt's *Librum Geneseos* (1969).

#### D. 'Reception of the Canon'

According to Childs, the canonical process eventually slowed and the texts stabilised into their final canonical forms. These canonical texts were eventually received as authoritative by two communities of faith, the Synagogue and the Church. This was not a case of previously unrecognised texts being declared authoritative but rather a recognition of the authority of the texts as they were already being used within the community. The final form of the text is regarded by Childs as the sole witness to the 'full history of revelation' (1979:76), and as presenting what Rendtorff has described as a 'theological message' in its canonical shape (1993:126). Some parts of this final text were deliberately formed so as to allow their actualisation, though others had to be placed in positions which facilitated their actualisation by the canonisers of the texts (which ones and how are obviously open to question). But if, as noted above, Childs's historical argument as to why any exegete should ignore earlier textual layers and accept the final form of the canonical texts is only 'inherently plausible', the question arises: Why should the final form be accepted as normative for investigation over any other text?

Childs's answer is to look towards the confession of 'the Church' that these texts are those accepted as sacred scripture in this form and to insist that biblical theologians must identify with this tradition (e.g., 1972a:711-14; 1974:xiii; 1977a:69; 1980a:201; 1984a:38-39; 1985:14-15, 28-29; 1992a:7-9). As noted earlier, Kelsey has noted that the adoption of a certain concept of 'church' by Christians brings with it the concept of an authoritative canon of scripture (1975:164). To those who argue that the modern Church is free to decide whether or not the judgement of the canonisers was correct, Kelsey's points out that such moves involve the rejection of the concept of church adopted by much of the early Church (1975:165). Childs, however, is concerned primarily with those who *do* accept this concept of Church and who are therefore already predisposed to accept the final form of the text. In answer to Barr's



(and many others') question as to why anyone should accept the canonical approach to the texts as normative over the historical-critical method (1980:14), he writes:

In my judgement, the acceptance of the canon as normative does not function initially as a derivative of reasoned argument. The canon is the deposit of the religious community's sacred tradition which one receives as a member of that body. The acknowledgement of a normative rule functions confessionally as a testimony to one's beliefs. Earlier attempts to ascribe to the Hebrew canon special qualities of excellence, as if it had the best text, or reflected a superior form of literature, or possessed a unique claim to historicity, seem to have been misplaced. Does this mean that the relation to the canon is irrational and beyond the scope of all reasoned argument? Certainly not. The issue at stake is the classic theological problem of the proper relation of faith to reason. The testimony of faith and not reason establishes the canon. Yet there is an internal logic within the framework of confession (1980b:56).<sup>50</sup>

For Childs—and those who accept Kelsey's definition of church—the canon is a non-negotiable given; clearly Barr's wish that Childs would use the word

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<sup>50</sup> This element of Childs's use of canon corresponds strongly with Wall's (and Lemcio's) designation of the canonical approach as a post-critical method. Their suggestion—and a good indicator of the change in the status of the historical-critical method over the last forty years—is that the canonical approach should be regarded as a 'post-critical method' which has as its goal the interpretation of the final form of the text, and is based upon a 'religious epistemology that evaluates the Bible's normative role as canon, or rule of faith, as the foundation for the hermeneutical enterprise' (1992a:143). In their own work this 'post-critical method' is combined with the canonical criticism of Sanders. As Wall puts it: 'My own version of canonical criticism is a synthesis of [the work of Childs and Sanders]. In setting forth what might be called "canon community criticism", I want to call attention to the fundamental importance of the final product of the Church's canonising process, the "canon", for faith and life (with Childs), and yet interpret it in the light of the fluid, dynamic reading of the Bible by the canonising community (with Sanders)' (1992b:185; cf. also Landes, 1980:37).

It seems likely that both Childs and Sanders would be troubled by Wall and Lemcio's move: the former because he sees the reading of the canon as involving a rather different dynamic to that of the canonical process, and the latter because he would see no reason to limit the community's reading to the final form. Despite this 'limitation', Sanders has generally been very appreciative of Lemcio and Wall, offering a response to one of Lemcio's articles (1981) and providing the foreword to their book (1992).

In theory an approach which follows the first half of this reformulation but dismisses the second does not need the canonical process at all, and hence would be untroubled by the lack of evidence for such a process. Childs' insistence on an acceptance of the canonical process would then become optional, and his insistence upon it would perhaps be seen as a relic of his struggle to bring the canonical approach to fruition in an academic climate then dominated by historical criticism. However, it is questionable whether such an approach does full justice to Childs's efforts to use the historical-critical method as a source of illumination for the final form. One's opinion here may well depend upon how convincing one finds Childs' praxis rather than his theory.

‘sometimes’ of the rightness of canon is a non-starter (1980:13).<sup>51</sup> This position picks up on two elements of Ebeling’s definition, those of the normativity of the texts and of the confessional presuppositions of the exegete. Childs sees his approach as recombining the historical and theological elements sundered by Gabler; the task is normative and constructive in nature, and should be defined as a ‘modern theologian’s reflection on various aspects of the Bible’ (1992a:7). Childs has consciously developed his own work as a confessing Christian theologian (cf. e.g., 1972a:711-14; 1974:xiii; 1977a:69; 1980a:201; 1984a:38-39; 1985:14-15, 28-29; 1992a:7-9). He has rejected the view that a normative biblical theology should—or even could—be undertaken from the supposedly ‘neutral’ stance of historical criticism, a stance which he characterises as a ‘philosophical commitment’ to the ‘Enlightenment’s... proposal... to confine the Bible solely to the arena of human experience’ (1992a:9; cf. 1974:xiii). According to Childs, what is needed is a confessional approach with a dogmatic starting point more suited to those who wish to use the texts normatively. There is a risk of such a dogmatic stance obscuring the texts,<sup>52</sup> but since one cannot read without such a framework, it must also illuminate the texts. Its success, therefore, is dependent upon the amount of illumination that it brings to the texts; this Childs defines as the ‘quality’ of the dogma used (1992a:12). The benchmark against which this quality is measured is that of the Church’s confession that both testaments bear witness to the reality of Jesus Christ, ‘the one Lord, in different ways, at different times, to different peoples, and yet both are understood and rightly heard in the light of the living Lord himself, the perfect reflection of the Glory of God’ (1992a:85). This confession

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<sup>51</sup> D.A. Brueggemann asserts that Childs is correct that ‘the canon cannot be subjected to empirical justification or verification by anything external to itself’ (1989:318). However, Brueggemann disagrees with Childs’s formulation ‘the testimony of faith... establishes the canon’ (Childs, 1980b:56), preferring to say that ‘it is the testimony of faith that God establishes the canon’ (1989:318). Brueggemann notes that Barr would accuse both him and Childs of fideism regardless, but believes that ‘there is a major difference in believing in the canonical process and believing in the One who superintended that process, making it reliable’ (1989:318). Brueggemann’s criticism, however, is misguided; Childs is arguing that it is the testimony of those who are the Church, the faithful, that the canon is a given, that an essential part of their Christian faith involves the acceptance of the Church’s canon, and not that they have faith in the canonical process itself.

<sup>52</sup> Childs himself has argued that both the literary approach of Alter and Kermode (1987) and the liberal dogmatics of Burrows (1946) have stifled the text (1992a:12).

defines what Childs has described as the proper ‘scope’ of the biblical texts, and the proper task of his biblical theology is to illuminate the subject matter of the texts, Jesus Christ (1992a:725).

For many modern scholars—Christian and non-Christian alike—this has proved unacceptable. Modern pluralism is inimical to Childs’s singular emphasis on the final form, and this has shown itself in a number of ways.<sup>53</sup> It is significant that Brett’s reformulation of the canonical approach, though claimed to be ‘charitable’, begins with the implicit assumption that some *universal rationale* must be given for using the final form of the text. In his reconstruction Brett has chosen to ignore Childs’s claims about the existence of a canonical process altogether, turning instead to a view of textual growth based initially upon an analogy with the growth of scientific knowledge as portrayed in the work of K. Popper.<sup>54</sup> Popper suggested that objective knowledge exists independently of a knower, a suggestion based upon a distinction between three worlds: ‘first, the world of physical objects or states; secondly, the world of states of consciousness, or mental states, or perhaps behavioural dispositions to act; and thirdly, the world of *objective contents of thought*, especially of scientific and poetical thoughts and works of art’ (1972:74,118-9,148; cf. Brett, 1991:125). Popper’s reference to poetical thoughts and works of art is taken by Brett to indicate the relevance of Popper’s world three to literature, a view which he then extends using the reception aesthetics of H.R. Jauss (1982) in order to argue for a progressive refinement of the biblical texts.

Brett notes that this does not account for the stabilisation of the text and so he argues that Childs should move towards Gadamer’s view of the classic (1979) as a text ‘which has the power to demonstrate continually its truthfulness in new circumstances’ (1991:134). He writes that if the canonical approach can be understood as ‘a filtering

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<sup>53</sup> Especially noteworthy here is the persistent refusal of both Brett and Davies to resolve the confusion left by Childs’s apparent misapplication of monistic language—rightly used of a specific community—to scholarship in general. The result is that Childs’s project itself appears confused and misdirected rather than his terminology.

<sup>54</sup> The first published seeds of this approach can be found in a 1985 article by Fowl, a post-graduate student at the University of Sheffield during Brett’s time there.

of tradition, then interpretation can be justifiably focused on the classical form of the Hebrew Bible rather than the earlier layers of tradition which inevitably reveal the prejudices of particular historical periods' (1991:146; such a view, he believes, can be legitimately held without recourse to Childs's 'dubious' canonical process, 1991:23). From Brett's perspective, the wide range of arguments thrown up by alternative explanations of the biblical literature 'cannot be circumvented by claiming that the canonical approach has different interpretive interests. The classical text needs to demonstrate continually its truthfulness; its authority cannot be asserted dogmatically in the face of all reasoned critique' (1991:147).

Brett's approach is highly problematic, however. Questions as to how the final form should 'demonstrate continually its truthfulness' and who should judge its success would be answered differently by Childs and Brett (who would be followed by many historical-critical scholars, both Christian and otherwise). A response from the latter may follow this example from J. Day:

The moving penitential Psalm 51, the *Miserere*, contains in vv 16-17 the striking words, 'For thou hast no delight in sacrifices; were I to give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.' The psalmist presumably rejects sacrifice here because it is inappropriate in his particular case; he has committed a grievous sin (e.g. murder or adultery), for which the Law provided no sacrifice as a means of atonement, so that all he could do was to throw himself on Yahweh's mercy in abject surrender and humility. Verses 18-19 are surely the work of a later glossator, dating from the exile or post-exilic period, whose *mundane* statement that right sacrifices will be offered when the walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt appears to have missed the *profound* point that the psalm is making. It illustrates the disadvantage in believing, as B.S. Childs appears to do, that it is always preferable to read the Old Testament theologically in its final canonical form! (1992:134—my italics)<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Collins also demonstrates this irony when he writes concerning Childs's approach that it means isolation from much that is 'vital and interesting' in biblical studies, including 'potentially fruitful' sociological work (1990:1). One can only ask of Collins, vital, interesting, and potentially fruitful for whom? Or of Day, disadvantageous for whom?

Childs's has offered his own response to such challenges and, given the increasing emphasis on 'novelty' in our modern culture, it bears repeating in full here:

Day unwittingly points out the irony in Brett's attempt to justify the use of the final form as a 'classical' text; namely, that an individual or a group can—at any point and with no particular need for justification—decide to use a form of the text other than the final form. Certainly decisions as to what constitutes a *profound* or *mundane* reading will vary, the beauty of the biblical text being wholly in the eye of the beholder (cf. e.g., Williams's review of Brett's book *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?*, 1993:327). Childs's canonical text is not a 'classic text' in the Gadamerian sense at all (cf. also Provan, 1997:20-21).

Further problems exist for Brett's suggested alternative to Childs's canonical process. Barr, for example, criticises Brett because he proceeds with Gadamer's ideas—and, it could easily be added, Popper's ideas—'as if they are obviously right.... In other words there is something accidental about the whole argument: one has the feeling, given Brett's wide-ranging knowledge of modern intellectual trends, that a comparable series of significant modern thinkers could be found who would support and justify almost any conceivable idea' (1992:138). But more significantly, it is Brett's combination of Popper and Gadamer that has been questioned by both Barr and A.D.H. Mayes, the latter questioning the possibility of linking (the timeless free-wheeling openness of) Popper and (the firmly closed 'classical' text of) Gadamer at all. Mayes writes:

That Popper and Gadamer can be brought together in this way seems very unlikely. The essence of Popper's theory is its open-endedness: the

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It has often been suggested that the earlier stages of the biblical tradition are theologically more exciting than its final form. I certainly recognise the force of the argument. Who has not felt the excitement of von Rad's brilliant theory of the 'credo' or of the 'Solomonic Enlightenment' (although both are probably wrong)? Nevertheless, I have serious objections to this approach to Scripture. First, I think that the criterion of excitement is a product of the Enlightenment, and grossly misunderstands the responsibility of the theological enterprise. Undoubtedly the Gnostics were more exciting than Irenaeus! Secondly, the development of a canon is by definition a community effort. It is characteristic of the Hebrew canon to play down individual contributions and to blur the marks of the creative genius. The effect is to provide the Old Testament with a radically theocentric focus which has always been a disappointment to those whose interest rests primarily in man and his accomplishments (1980b:58).

process of development of objective knowledge through criticism never yields anything like a final text, and Gadamer's theory of the classic sits very uneasily by its side. The possibility of forgetting, refuting and dismissing earlier conjectures can scarcely be accommodated within Gadamer's understanding, in which tradition plays a much more informative role (1991:56).

Despite this difficulty, Barr has suggested that, since Brett is only attempting to legitimise the use of the final form within a pluralistic setting and not absolutise it, his use of Popper and Gadamer may provide acceptable justification to some to look at the final form; after all, it is only meant to provide an analogy for the growth and formation of the canonical text (1992:136-7). But this is hardly satisfactory. Brett's position is, it seems, unable to convince scholars such as Day as to the pre-eminence of the final form and remains theoretically uncertain at best. It will hardly serve, therefore, to justify a concentration on the 'truth-full' final form to a pluralistic world. And if his work does not make the canonical text pre-eminent but only makes it worthy of study, it must be asked why the study of the final form needs to be justified in terms of its growth at all—no other strand of the text needs such justification, each being considered worthy of study in its own right and for its own sake in Brett's pluralistic discipline. Brett's insistence on justifying the final form in this way in a pluralistic setting comes to a rather bizarre conclusion when he eventually recommends that Childs should move closer to the New Yale theologians (1991:156-67), a group who would surely reject Brett's use of such 'foundationalist' categories out of hand (cf. e.g., Lindbeck, 1984; Wallace, 1987, 1990). It is hard to imagine Brett's arguments impressing Barth or any neo-barthian theologians, and if these theologians do not have to justify their theological work by Brett's criteria of reasonable truth, why should Childs have to do so with his confessional canonical approach? Brett's arguments sit uneasily with his claim to be 'pluralistic'.

In contrast with the difficulties of Brett's position, Childs's rejection of the humanistic desire to judge the text means that he does not have to demonstrate the truthfulness of the text according to the criteria used by Day or any demanded by

Brett. He is not interested in a best reading, an original reading, or disqualifying a text on the grounds that it is the product of an 'incompetent' (Barr, 1980:18-19) or an ideology (although he has been somewhat inconsistent on this point: cf. 1985:148-49), but he is interested in the reading of the canonical text established by the confession of the church. Brett's argument that one cannot just dogmatically assert the truthfulness of one's position is defused by Childs's refusal to submit to the epistemological requirements of the former's modernistic rationalism (cf. Topping, 1992:248-51), a refusal which is paralleled in the work of Barth. D.F. Ford writes:

The most common form of the doubts [about Barth's approach to theology] is about the grounding of what he says. Is Barth not a 'fideist', one who takes up a position of traditional faith and refuses to allow rational criticism? Is his confident theology possible only because he ignores the problem of its intellectual justification? So why did he not engage with [these questions]? The answer is he did but that his solution is a challenge to the very presuppositions of the debate. These presuppositions are sometimes empiricist, ...Kantian, ...[or] reductionist in tendency, ...[and they] characterise the object of knowledge in terms of the way in which it is known by the human knower. Barth sees any such formal criteria, which are inevitably based on the norms of other areas of knowledge, as an infringement of the freedom of God to speak for himself, and a presumption that in the face of God one can step aside for a while to assess the situation neutrally. His confidence is that theology's object shines for itself. So theology is merely a reflection, but since its object is supremely good, true, and beautiful, simply being as faithful as possible a reflection is the best way to convince people. Hence Barth's maxim that the best apologetics is good dogmatics (1979:194-95).

Though there are obvious differences between the object of faith, God, and the (or a) source of knowledge of that object, I believe that Childs should justify his canonical approach in exactly the same fashion.

### III. The Praxis of the Canonical Approach

#### A. Consequences of the Canonical Approach for Praxis

Up until this point Childs has plausibly argued that the canonical texts were formed by the two communities of faith, Israel and the early Church, in such a way as to loosen the texts from their historical moorings. During canonisation proper the communities closed their (various) canons around the now-stabilised texts, and acknowledged them as authoritative, in effect assigning the texts the status of a 'given'. The implications of this position for the *reading* of the biblical texts by the continuing community of faith constitute the final part of his extended use of the term canon; in this section (III), the principal consequences of the canonical approach for the praxis of biblical interpretation will be outlined.

Though Childs has spent most of his career working on the canonical approach, it is unfortunately true that he has not actually produced a clear detailed example of what an exegesis of a particular text would look like. His Exodus commentary, while of great interest to students of the canonical approach, is from an early stage of Childs's work and must be considered flawed according to the implications of his later formulations of the approach. And as already noted, Moberly has pointed out that Childs's later work contains no truly 'memorable exegesis' (1993:373-4). This means that any attempt to describe how the canonical approach should look in practice can only be sketched from Childs's generalised examples and theoretical comments (and even these, Barr has—with some justification—categorised as imprecise, 1999:48, 374). Though what follows should give some idea of just what is involved in attempting a canonical exegesis of a text like the Sodom narrative, a certain lack of clarity is unavoidable. Of course, this fuzziness also opens the door to a variety of different executions of the approach (e.g., House, 1995; Lemcio and Wall, 1992; Wall, 1995; Watson, 1994, 1997; Seitz, 1998; Moberly, 1992b, 1998; Gowan, 1994), but Childs's failure to provide a good exegetical 'model' means that the merit of each of



these members of the 'canonical family', including this present one, must be judged individually and on their own terms.

## B. 'Text as Arena'

The most important consequence of the canonical approach for praxis lies not in the proposing of a particular exegetical methodology, but in its redefinition of the 'object' being studied. Childs's aim was to describe the shape of the canonical scriptures and to argue that this formed the arena within which the canonical exegete should work rather than some historical critical reconstruction behind-the-text (e.g., 1979:72-79; 1985:15). But this shape provides only a negative factor, restricting the area in which exegesis can take place. In consequence canonical exegesis is limited by the features of the text as defined by the approach but it is not restricted to a single flat interpretation.

Within the arena defined by this negative shaping it is the work of the exegetes themselves which provides the positive creativity which the community needs, and thus, an element of reader competence is implicit within the approach (e.g., 1979:73, 79; 1984a:38-39, 41-42; 1985:15; 1992a:71, 335). Since, as Murphy notes (1980:43), there is also a certain ambiguity to the significance of many of the features which make up the constraining shape of canonical text, considerable scope for multiple readings is inherent in the canonical approach. Clearly, such an understanding of the nature of the canonical text does not provide the exegete with a step-by-step methodology, although some strong implications for exegetical praxis do follow from an acceptance of the canonical text as the object of study. In this way the need for reader competence extends to the development of exegetical strategies as well as to insightful interpretation.

Childs recognises both the partial nature of this definition of exegesis and the time-bound nature of the community, and is prepared to acknowledge both multiple readings of the text and the relegation of previous readings to the history of exegesis

(cf. also his comment that there is 'no perfect system' of biblical theology, 1972d:28-29). But since Childs does not view interpretation as progressing to a 'correct goal' the history of exegesis continues to provide a useful commentary upon the texts which should be used to illuminate the final form itself (1992a:721).

### C. 'Formal Features'

Within the canonical text there are what may be described as 'formal features', the function of which is to provide an exegetical guideline for the community of faith by indicating the direction in which the texts should be interpreted (1977a:69; 1985:12-13; 1992a:71, 335, 724).<sup>56</sup> Morgan has separated these features into two groups; the first, 'macro-canonical exegesis', deals with the relationship between the larger blocks of material (1986:87). Childs has pointed out several areas of interest in discerning the macro-canonical shape of the final form, looking, for example, at the relationship between the two Testaments (1992a:73-77, 91-93, 333) and between the four gospel narratives (1984:157-209). Implicit in his work here is the assumption that the canonical placement of these blocks of texts has consequences for their interpretation.

Morgan's second category, 'micro-canonical exegesis', deals with details within biblical books and their inter-relatedness. For Childs, these include the overall structure of books, written intentions, superscriptions, addressees (all 1984a:49), appendices, hymnic settings (1977a:71), the canonical re-setting of material (1971:137; 1977a:70-71), its canonical intertextuality (1992a:327), changes in genre and semantic level—from literal to metaphorical, from everyday to eschatological (1977a:73-77; 1978b), signs of re-interpretation (e.g., on Jeremiah, 1977a:71-71; cf. 1978a), the

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<sup>56</sup> The use of the term 'formal features' may give the impression that Childs is echoing the work of the New Critics (cf. Barton, 1984:141-45). Brennan has also suggested links with the work of Iser because of the constraining nature of Childs's canonical text (1997:66). It will be argued in chapter 3, however, that neither of these characterisations are accurate; these 'formal features' being better understood as loci within the texts which the hermeneutical presuppositions of the community of faith define as important.

backgrounding of unimportant elements of the text (1977a:69; 1980c:129), and the grouping of details around a single character, Law around Moses, Psalms around David, and Wisdom around Solomon (1985:198).<sup>57</sup> It is these ‘formal features’ which primarily provide the structural shaping of the canonical text, the arena in which the exegete must work.

#### D. ‘Canonical Intentionality’

In the context of the ‘canonical process’ and ‘canonisation proper’ Childs has argued that the texts were so formed that they now have what he terms a ‘canonical intentionality’ (e.g., 1979:79, 300, 393, 486, 645; 1980a:199-201, 206-207; cf. also 1985:22-23). This signifies the manner in which the text itself stands in dynamic inter-relation with the community in a form which functions relatively independently of the canonisers themselves;<sup>58</sup> meanings not intended by any of the tradents or canonisers of the texts arise as the texts function within the community of faith (e.g., 1979:79, 259). The source of this canonical intentionality and its relationship to other forms of textual intentionality requires further definition, however.

The very existence of a canonical intentionality has been challenged by S.E. McEvenue, who has argued that there can be no such intentionality because no-one intended that ‘the Bible as a whole’ would have a meaning (1981:229-42). But his assumption that intentionality must reside within a real author—as Barr also implicitly does (1980:13-14)—is open to criticism; it is possible to see ‘intentions’ as existing autonomously within texts (with the ‘New Critics’)<sup>59</sup> or as being attributed to the

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<sup>57</sup> Childs’s two Introductions (1979) and (1984a) are particularly important in outlining the nature of these ‘formal features’, though the fact that many of his discussions concentrate on historical-critical issues means that helpful demonstrations of their actual effect occur with less frequency.

<sup>58</sup> This autonomy and the holistic effect that it has had on the community of faith is Childs’s answer to those who question the prioritisation of the final form over the hermeneutics of those who formed it (e.g., D.A. Brueggemann, 1989:315).

<sup>59</sup> ‘[E]ven a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker (no matter how abstractly conceived) to a situation (no matter how universalised). We ought to impute the thoughts and

'authors' and 'texts' created by readers (with the reader-response critics).<sup>60</sup> The attack of the latter on the idea of a free floating autonomous text (and hence the attribution of an 'intention' to any such a text by the New Critics) has been largely successful, and there is now no such text to which we can attribute the property of 'canonical intentionality'. Rather, the attribution of a canonical intentionality to a group of scriptural texts is actually a product of the reading strategies of the community of faith, the community itself being the source of the canon's intentionality (Fish, 1989:99-100; 1995:14; cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1995—in chapter 3, on the hermeneutics of the canonical approach, this position will be defended in more detail).

If an intentionality can be ascribed to the canon as a whole, the question arises as to how that intention relates to the intentionality of the individual texts themselves and the intentions of their authors. There are two factors which are important here. First, a basic assumption of the canonical approach is that these texts were taken up within the canonical process and were eventually incorporated into a larger whole. This, Childs claims, has had the effect of loosening their specificity and widening (or perhaps, with Gottwald, simply changing) their applicability. In consequence, the original intentions of these texts and of their authors have been subordinated to what may be termed the 'dynamic intentionality' of the final form. But, second, and despite the canonical process, Childs insists that the biblical texts do continue to reflect something of their historical background and the intentions of their authors; thus, the exegete must do justice both to the particularity of the texts and to their loosened role as canonical text.

The necessity for sensitivity and balance here is further demonstrated by R.E. Brown's argument that these texts do not always render the intention of their original authors correctly (1994:6-10). He argues that Luke, for example, gives the

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attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker* and if to the author at all, only by an act of biographical inference' (cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay 'The Intentional Fallacy', 1972:335—their italics).

<sup>60</sup> Scalise has also used the work of Ricoeur on the intentionality of texts to clarify Childs's 'canonical intentionality' in a similar way (1994a:69-71).

impression that the Jews crucified Jesus by neglecting to insert a Roman antecedent to his 'they' who lead Jesus away; grammatically it is the 'chief priests and rulers and the people' of Luke 23:26 who lead him away and crucify him. But it is clear from the rest of Luke's text that he was aware that the Romans did crucify Jesus (cf. 23:36 '[Roman] soldiers'; also it is the Gentiles who killed Jesus in 18:32-33 and in, the possibly Lukan, Acts 4:25-7). It would also probably be correct to deduce that no first-century Christian audience would have been unaware of this either (1994:9-10). Any canonical interpretation of this text must therefore reflect an awareness of the 'intention' of both 'Luke' and of his text, and not argue for a Jewish crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>61</sup> The essential task for the canonical exegete is to balance the subordinated intentions of authors, redactors and texts with the dominant intention of the canon.

#### E. 'Narrative Presuppositions'

Another significant aspect of the canonical approach is the recognition that blocks of material have been constructed into a (more or less continuous) sequential narrative. This structuring has consequences for the canonical interpretation of subsequent material. For example, Childs has argued that the J account of creation (Gen. 2:4b-25) has been joined to the P account (Gen. 1:1-2:4a) in such a way as to subordinate it to the latter. As Childs puts it:

The Priestly formula in 2:4a 'these are the generations of ...' now introduces the J account in 2:4bff. The J material thereafter functions, not as a duplicate creation account, but as a description of the unfolding of the history of mankind as intended by the creation of the heavens and the earth. The structure of the book has thus altered the semantic level of chapter 2 by assigning it a different role. The J material functions on the level of figurative language, once removed from its original literal sense (1992a:113).

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<sup>61</sup> One example of a reading which does not demonstrate this sensitivity is the response of certain commentators to Luke's failure to mention the Pharisees in the passion narratives. Krodel, for example, states that it is *the Sadducean leaders* alone who are found fighting against God at the close of Acts 5, presumably making Gamaliel the only Pharisee in the Sanhedrin (1986:129).

Similarly, he considers the creation narratives as a whole as now functioning as an essential introduction to subsequent narratives about Israel and its deity (cf. also Moberly, 1992a:105-46).

Moberly, in his work on Exodus 32-34, has incorporated into his exegetical approach an understanding of the role of allusion and presupposition in the interpretation of narratives which differs from that commonly found in historical critical exegesis. He writes that:

A writer will frequently be allusive in style. He will not want or need to elaborate on matters of which the reader is already presumed to possess knowledge, either through general knowledge or through what the writer himself has previously said. The preoccupation of historical critical analysis with penetrating behind the text makes difficult an appreciation of this aspect of literary style. Silence about, or only a brief reference to, some feature in the preceding narrative is customarily taken as showing either ignorance of this feature, thus constituting evidence for the discernment of sources, or else a secondary gloss or harmonisation, thus providing evidence for redactional compilation. To interpret silence or allusions as *assuming a knowledge* of the preceding narrative may have far reaching implications. In the exegesis of Exodus 32-4 it is proposed that frequently sense may best be made on the assumption of a knowledge of the preceding narrative in Exodus 1-24; (26-31); and more generally Exodus 1-18 (1983:32—his italics).

In Moberly's work on Exodus 32-34 this assumption is largely justified by its interpretive success in accounting for the features of the final form narrative.

This basic stance on how to interpret biblical narratives does not require that the texts are the product of a single author or even that such allusions are necessarily intended at all. Redactors or simple compilers may 'create' textual situations in which allusions are generated as a result of the canonical process: for example, the Paul of the Epistles over against the canonically prior Paul of Acts or the pre-exilic Prophets over against the historical books (Joshua-2 Kings). It is the placing of a text within its canonical framework through either the 'canonical process' or the stabilisation of

‘canonisation proper’ which entitles the canonical reader to understand succeeding sections of a sequential narrative as presupposing knowledge of previous material.

Childs’s discussion of the canonical shape of 1 and 2 Samuel provides an example of the effect of the canonical process on disparate materials. Noting that historical-critical scholarship has accepted since Wellhausen the position that there are both (A) pro- and (B) anti- attitudes to the rise of the monarchy ‘intertwined’ in 1 Sam. 7-12 (B = 8:1-22; A= 9:1-10:16; B = 10:17-27; A = 11:1-15; B = 12:1-25), Childs suggests that neither strand is suppressed by their editor and that each is allowed ‘its full integrity’ (1979:277). The effect of this move is to give the anti-monarchical source, B,

the pre-eminence. It now encloses the A source, coming both at the beginning and the end. The people think they are solving an immediate problem with the demand for a king, but the dominant note is the prophetic warning of Samuel against the dangers of their being “like other nations”. Nevertheless, the message of the A source remains of great importance and its emphasis is enhanced by its new editorial function. The establishment of the kingdom—even though arising out of disobedience—is not to be viewed as a purely secular act. Although the establishment of the monarchy was not according to the original divine plan, God is still deeply involved. When Samuel anoints Saul, the divine blessing is given and the Spirit of God brings him the victory (1979:278).

In his discussion of the place of the law in the Old Testament, Childs offers other examples of how canonical placing can affect the way subsequent narratives are read. He notes that ‘in its canonical role the Decalogue forms a theological summary of the entire Sinai tradition. All the detailed legislation which follows is therefore subordinated to and interpreted by the heart of the Law found in the Ten Commandments’ (1985:54). All subsequent Law material is therefore to be read as presupposing the existence and pre-eminent place of the Decalogue (*contra* Cazelles, 1980:29) But, of course, the Decalogue appears twice, Exod. 20:1-17 and Deut. 5:6-21, and Childs considers a correct view of Deuteronomy as crucial to any understanding of the Sinai material. There Moses is explaining the Torah, the Sinai

covenant, to a new generation, to those about to enter the land across the Jordan. He is not offering Israel a new law but is rather applying the 'divine law which had once and for all constituted the nation' to a new situation, offering them a 'new application of old tradition'. In the new situation of entering the land, Israel is 'not to continue as before but is given a new charter by Moses', thereby 'legitimizing the principle of change within the law'. Each of the individual laws which are contained in Deuteronomy are now to be understood within this context regardless of their original socio-historical setting. Childs concludes that canonically, 'Moses is portrayed as explaining the divine will to a new generation which had not itself experienced the formative events of its religious history. Deuteronomy, therefore, serves as an authoritative commentary on how future generations are to approach the Law' (1985:55-56).

Because much of Childs's work lacks fine detail, tending more towards the over-view approach necessary for Introductions, it is a major interest of this present work to investigate in rather more detail how the present canonical shape of the material influences the interpretation of subsequent text, initially Gen. 1:1 to 19:38 (chapter 4II) and then in even finer detail from Gen. 18:1 to 19:38 (Chapters 5 and 6).

#### F. '*Sensus Literalis*'

Childs's emphasis on the canonical final form leads to a consideration of levels of textual meaning: How is the final form to be read? Childs has argued (following Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1974) that the sole level of meaning should be the literal sense of the text, the *sensus literalis* (1977b:92). What he means by the *sensus literalis*, however, must be carefully defined (cf. especially Noble, 1993:8-17,21-22). Childs rejects the use of different levels of meaning altogether (1977b:92-93). Both the separate levels above the final form implicit in the allegorical methods of scholars such as Origen (cf. Scalise, 1988) and the separate layers beneath the final form defined by historical criticism when its proponents de-canonise and read the biblical



materials against reconstructed backgrounds (e.g., Murphy, 1980:44; Knight, 1980:143-46) are unacceptable because both effectively destroy the witness of the biblical texts. Neither is the *sensus literalis* the same as the historical sense (1977b:88). Rather for Childs the object of a canonical exegesis is scripture and the subject-matter of which it speaks, Jesus Christ, and the task must take place within and be defined by the assumptions of the community of faith. The *sensus literalis*, as defined by Childs, is not the 'original sense of the text or even the best sense but is the plain sense witnessed to by the community of faith' (1977b:92), and it is defined by the way that the shape of the text has been finally fixed so that the text can be actualised within the life of that community (1977b:93).<sup>62</sup>

But Childs further argues that the *sensus literalis* also has a figurative sense which is not to be regarded as a different level of meaning, but rather as serving a different function in a unified text within the community of faith (1977b:93).<sup>63</sup> His approach to biblical theology insists upon seeing the two testaments as independent witnesses, and investigating the Old Testament as a witness to Christ pre-Christ before looking at the New Testament (1979:77-79; 1985:9; 1992a:91-2). This takes place from a faith perspective—the interpreter already shares the interpretive assumptions of the Christian community of faith (1985:14-15, 28-30)—but should not involve overwriting the *sensus literalis* with Christian concepts (1985:9, 17); Childs has described this as a 'descriptive analysis' (1979:72). This 'description' of the first part of the canon is essential for two reasons: first, because a good reading of the Old Testament is necessary for a good reading of the New, and second, because without the Old Testament the Church quickly becomes marcionite. The New Testament should then be read as a witness to Christ post-Christ.

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<sup>62</sup> On the debate concerning the *sensus literalis*, see Childs, (1977b; 1990), Barr (1988b; 1996), Noble (1993, 1995:306-13), and Scalise (1989; 1994a:75-98).

<sup>63</sup> See further Noble's discussion of Frei's concept of figural interpretation and the reasons why modern historical scholarship is unable to distinguish between figurative and allegorical, rejecting both (1993:14-17)

In his discussion of christology in the context of biblical theology, for example, Childs states that the 'central theological affirmation of the Old Testament is that God has indissolubly bound himself to Israel in a covenant: "I will be your God and you will be my people"'. In redeeming Israel, however, Childs notes that this 'divine movement towards Israel's reconciliation' has two aspects: that of 'God's self-revelation in countless different ways throughout Israel's history', of God-with-us, and that of the way in which, through the anointing of the Spirit, 'the various offices of the people are constantly ushering Israel into the presence of God' (1992a:478-79). In the New Testament's understanding of Jesus Christ, Childs argues, 'both Old Testament lines of revelation, from "above" and from "below", were united in the one Lord and Saviour' (1992a:480). Biblical theological reflection on this subject should therefore continue to regard the Old Testament's portrayal of both the self-revealing activity of Israel's God and the offices which allow the people access to that deity as witnessing to the reality of Christ.

But when these two tasks have been completed Childs argues that it is then essential to look again at both Testaments in the light of the reality witnessed to by both Testaments (1992a:85-88, 333, 344, 444-46). Such a reading, says Childs, is not 'intended to threaten the *sensus literalis* of the Old Testament text but to extend through figuration a reality which has only been partially heard' (1992a:87). This can take place because of the ability of the biblical texts to 'resonate' when read in the light of the divine reality, and Childs concludes that, although typology as a full-blown method should be rejected (1992a:13-4, 45), 'allegory or typology, when properly understood and practised remains an essential part of Christian interpretation' (1992a:87).<sup>64</sup> Uncovering the ontology of God to which all Scripture witnesses requires, according to Childs, just this kind of biblical theological reflection.

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<sup>64</sup> Childs's understanding of the canon as that which defines the range of authoritative texts allows for a further use of a figurative sense. Childs writes that the canon

establishes parameters of the apostolic witness within which area there is freedom and flexibility. It does not restrict the witness to a single propositional formulation. The role of the canon as scripture of the Church and vehicle for its actualisation through the Spirit is to provide an opening and a check to continually new figurative

Because of time and space considerations, this thesis will be concentrating in its exegetical chapters only upon the first aspect of Childs's biblical theology, its 'description' of the Old Testament texts. But it is hoped that the foundational exegesis of the Sodom narrative laid here will allow a more detailed investigation of this particular aspect of Childs's work in the near future.

#### G. 'Referentiality'

Intimately tied to Childs's understanding of the *sensus literalis* is the question of the 'referentiality' of Scripture. Describing the biblical text as a 'witness to reality' with Ebeling calls attention to the external referent to which Scripture, as understood by Childs, testifies. Noble notes that modern historical-critical scholarship has generally assumed that the referent for the text has been, in Childs's words, "a positivity behind the text" rather than the referent rendered by the text itself' (1970:102); this positivity can take forms such as those typified by the ostensivist who believes that the 'meaning of the narratives is the state of affairs in the spacio-temporal world to which they refer' (Noble, 1993:11), the rationalist who believes 'the narratives refer ideally rather than ostensibly' (Frei, 1974:261), and the mythophile who sees the 'subject matter of biblical narratives... in the consciousness they represented' (Frei, 1974:265).

Childs, however, does not see the reality witnessed to by the Scriptures as a referent behind the text to which we have objective access through either historical reconstruction, rationalism, or demythologising (1980a:204). Rather he sees the text and the referent as inseparable in the sense that it is only through the text that we have access to the theological reality, a reality which is only available through the testimony of Israel and the early Church (1985:12). Brett has noted that 'from his earliest work onwards Childs has... been attempting to hold together two different theories of

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applications of its apostolic content as it extends the original meaning to the changing circumstances of the community of faith. These figurative applications are not held in isolation from its plain sense, but an extension of the one story of God's purpose in Jesus Christ (1992a:724).

reference'; one 'in terms of "witnessing" or "pointing" to divine reality', the other 'more straightforwardly connected with the historical background of biblical texts' (1991:32; a point subsequently taken up by Barr, 1999:416). The fact that Childs has been trying to hold these two together demonstrates that he is not arguing that such external referents have no bearing at all on a canonical reading of scripture. But, according to Childs, any details drawn from a historical-critical referent can only be used to inform one's reading of the final canonical form in which the theological reality is rendered, and must not replace or distort it (1980b:58; cf. 1980c:136-37; 1992a:334).<sup>65</sup>

Barr has argued against the validity of Childs's approach to 'reality' (1980:15-16). R.R. Topping records Barr's objection as being that Childs's insistence that 'one must not take up a hermeneutical base *extrinsic* to the text' necessarily means that the author of the canonical approach has cut himself off from 'both the revelatory realities witnessed to in the text and the historical realities under the influence of which the text was produced.... It is as "if [for Childs] the text [is] objective reality"' (1992:247, citing Barr, 1980:16). This Childs would no doubt understand as an assertion that the canonical project is structuralist in tone and fully a-historical.

Topping defends Childs's approach in two ways: first, by re-iterating Childs's own response to Barr that there is no independent access to either the revelatory realities or the historical realities (1980b:57), a situation which results partly from the almost total lack of historically illuminating non-canonical material and partly from the self-effacing activity of the tradents of the canonical texts themselves. Any construction of the community, their socio-historical situation or indeed of any revelatory activity behind the text is therefore 'tenuous and hypothetical in character' (1992:251). Second, Topping argues that Barr basically ignores the fact that the historical critical method 'works with an overly ostensive theory of meaning and truth

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<sup>65</sup> Oswalt also criticises Childs from a conservative perspective for his use of what Oswalt describes as 'historical fiction' (1987:320-21). This concentration on historicity Childs would no doubt dismiss: 'At times the [canonical] context hangs very loosely on history as it bears witness to a representative reality which *transcends* any given historical situation' (1980a:204—my italics).

which flattens the canonical texts' (1992:251), and quotes approvingly in response Childs's statement in his later *New Testament as Canon* that the 'Bible bears witness to a multi-dimensional theological reality which cannot be measured solely on the basis of such a correspondence theory of truth' (1984a:36). Topping concludes that

while independent access to certain historical events recorded in the canonical texts may be possible, the assumption that this in turn provides a kind of independent check on the excesses of the testimony of faith which obscures history is to distort the subtle hermeneutic complexity of Old and New Testaments. The revelatory activity of God in space and time necessarily gives rise to non-historical modes of depiction in the canonical texts of Scripture apart from which we have no independent access (1992:251-2).

On the relation of the canonical text to ostensive history, Childs writes in his *Old Testament Theology* that

the canon makes its witness in numerous ways in relation to historical referentiality. At times it forms a very loose connection whereas at other times a genuinely historical component belongs to the heart of the witness. It is fully inadequate to restrict the nature of the Old Testament's theological witness either by demanding absolute historical coherence or by positing in principle no relationship whatever (1985:149; cf. also Martens's formulation of this position, 1994:338)

Clearly, attempts to brand the canonical approach as either structuralist (e.g., Barr, 1980:16) or as a form of New Criticism (e.g., Barton, 1984:141-45) or to suggest that advantage be taken of the present turn away from history towards a-historical story (cf. Childs's own understanding of the work of the Yale theologians, 1984:541-46; 1992a:21-22)<sup>66</sup> would also have to be rejected.

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<sup>66</sup> Brett has consistently proposed just such a move, and characterises as misguided Childs's continued refusal to do because of his incorrect belief that Lindbeck assumes the non-existence of an extra-textual reality (1991:156-67, 1993:283).

It is in the holding of both history and non-history together in the final form of the text that the canonical approach is distinctive.<sup>67</sup> As Childs puts it himself in his commentary on Exodus

The biblical writer brackets the Exodus event with a preceding and succeeding interpretation. He does not see the Exodus as an “act of God” distinct from the “word of God” which explains it. In theological terms the relationship between act and interpretation, or word and event, is one which cannot be separated’ (1974:204).

In a different context, J. Moltmann has written that

according to Paul’s understanding, in the ‘word of the cross’ the crucified Christ himself speaks. Consequently, the event of revelation consists not only of the event of the cross and resurrection of Christ, but also the preaching of the gospel. The modern distinction between fact and interpretation, which we assume in natural science and history, is inappropriate to the understanding of the ‘word of the cross’. This distinction is essential to modern knowledge, which dominates, which defines in order to affirm and to control what has been affirmed, and which isolates facts in order to take possession of them (1974:74).

But not, I believe Childs would argue, to biblical theology (1980a:204). The use of constructions of ‘ostensive history’ as a source of illumination for the shape of the final form, however, will be considered further in section IIIK.

#### H. ‘Unity and Diversity’

In a canonical biblical theology the two testaments are to be described in such a way that justice is done to their individual witness (1979:670-71; 1985:10-11). According to Childs, it is the ‘Enlightenment’s discovery that the task of the

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<sup>67</sup> Martens notes that the preoccupation with history as a dominant category is a peculiarly Western one, that is not shared by Asian and African biblical theologies (1994:338). It would be more accurate to say that it is characteristic of a certain prominent mode of eurocentric thought in which reason alone defines truth and meaning. Childs’s canonical approach can be understood as one in which this mode is wholly rejected, the ‘reason’ which undergirds modern historical criticism being subordinated to another, more ‘truthful’—at least from Childs’s perspective—mode of discourse.

responsible exegete is to hear each testament's own voice, and both recognise and pursue the nature of the Bible's diversity' which must be extended and developed by the discipline of biblical theology (1992a:8). But the further Enlightenment claim that the interpretive goal is only reached when the interpreter distances him or herself from theological concerns must be rejected. Thus, Childs's interpretations do not describe 'what it meant' but rather what it means as a witness to the reality of Christ; he does not see a great gap between the two as Wrede did. Each testament is to be seen as a witness to Christ *now*; the Old witnesses to a Christ then yet to come, and the New to a Christ who had come, neither of which can be given up for both contribute to a greater understanding of the one reality (1985:9-10; 1992a:73-79, 85-89). There remains, however, a continuing need for historical critical knowledge to be used in preventing anachronistic interpretations of the final form by the community of faith (cf. also Murphy's emphasis on historical criticism's ability to prevent simplistic readings, 1997:268).

Although Childs considers that the recognition of diversity within the biblical texts is one of the great truths of the Enlightenment, he goes on to cite approvingly Calvin's view that each individual passage of the scriptures is able to bear truthful witness whilst retaining its discrete integrity (1992a:725). As Scobie writes, '[b]iblical theology is canonical theology in that *it seeks to deal with the full range of canonical materials*. This means that it will be resolutely opposed to any form of 'canon within a canon'' (1991a:56—his italics). This concept of all of the diverse passages bearing truthful witness is not an indicator of complete agreement between texts on the textual level; for example, Childs writes of the writer to the Hebrews who, whilst attributing 'an anachronistic belief in the resurrection of the dead to Abraham, nevertheless correctly witnesses to the radical nature of his faith in that he look[ed] to God rather than see in the empirical evidence only the contradiction of death' (1992a:334). Rather, Childs sees the texts as 'dissident voices' united into 'a harmonious whole' when they are heard 'in relation to the divine reality to which they point in such diverse ways' (1992a:85). Implicit in Childs's formulations are both Moberly's contention

that theological reality may on occasions be rendered only by the use of 'contradictory' or 'paradoxical' formulations (1983:33-4), and B.O. Long's recognition that the canonical shape may at times generate a plurality of interpretations which the canonical reader must hold together simultaneously (1988:166).

D.F. Hartzfeld notes how his use of Calvin places Childs at odds with the Lutheran tradition (1989:19, 210). Although Childs is appreciative of the work of Luther himself (1992a:43-47), he regards Luther's law and gospel hermeneutic as only one of a number of over-arching principles which connect the two testaments (1992a:74). Thus Childs can only reject the work of scholars such as E. Käsemann who regard the New Testament as a 'mixture of true and false witness to the gospel', and are therefore committed to 'recovering the genuine gospel apart from its widespread falsification already within the New Testament itself by means of a *Sachkritik*' (1992a:215).

Childs's own position builds upon that of Barth who has, he believes, caught the 'true insight of the Reformers', that all Scripture is to be seen as totally time conditioned and thus tainted with all the fragility that entails (1992a:215; cf. also e.g., 1980a: 201; 1980b:55; 1985:13-14). Alongside the time bound text stands Childs's recognition that the reader is also time-conditioned (1985:14). This twin recognition leads Childs to reject any attempt to sift the biblical text for eternal truths; one must return to the final form, and not to any construction which stands in its place (e.g., 1970:101, 131, 134; 1974:xii, 396, 438, 496; 1979:73, 76, 671; 1992a:369). Yet, he claims, it is just through such a vehicle that God communicates with his eagerly expectant people through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit (e.g., 1964:443; 1974:xiii; 1977c:359; 1985:12; 1992a:215). As Childs has put it when discussing the New Testament, 'it is not dead document waiting to be purified but a living voice waiting to be heard' (1992a:215).

W. Brueggemann, however, thinks that Childs falls short of his claim to do justice to the diversity of the canonical text, suggesting rather that his project is



massively reductionistic (1997:92-3). Childs's biblical theology is categorised by Brueggemann as 'hegemonic' because, in the words of D.T. Olsen

it limits the reading of the Old Testament text to what is useful for Christian Theology, disregards the playfulness and ambiguity of the biblical text, and denies the text its own say. Childs' program of putting the biblical text in conversation with the doctrinal tradition of the Church "means that the text is now subject to a set of interpretive categories that come from elsewhere" [Brueggemann, 1997:92]. To force the Bible into such Christian theological categories involves a "programmatically misreading" whose outcomes are "in line with the classical consensus of Protestantism" or "consensus Calvinism" (1998:166).

According to Brueggemann, his own approach to biblical theology is especially concerned with this playfulness and ambiguity of the biblical text. He believes that the Old Testament 'refuses to generalise or to systematise. It...is not at all vexed about juxtaposing texts that explicitly contradict each other. More often, the editorial process seems to exhibit no great need to overcome such contradictions' (1997:82). Because the very openness of the text itself denies closure to biblical theology, Brueggemann concludes that more than one construal of the whole is available. This 'openness', however, does not result in paralysis, and Brueggemann advocates his own construal of the text under the controlling metaphor of the courtroom as being highly suitable for a Christian biblical theology; it is testimony and counter-testimony to the nature of the biblical God that make up the contents of his Bible.

But, as Olsen points out, Brueggemann's attempt to differentiate between his own openness and Childs' closedness is highly questionable because he both understates his own systematising of the texts (as the many pauses to summarise in his *Theology* show, e.g., 303-13, 400-403, 553-64, 712-20; cf. Olsen, 1998:166, footnote 15) and exaggerates Childs's reductionism (Olsen notes Childs's extensive discussion with a wide range of theologians, 1998:167-70). The systematising about which Brueggemann complains is actually unavoidable when dealing with a text as extensive and as diverse as the Old Testament, never mind the whole Christian canon. With the

correction of these two faults, the two biblical theologies are actually 'quite comparable' (so Olsen, 1999:167).<sup>68</sup>

Olsen goes further and asks why should reductionism be considered such a bad thing. Invoking Bakhtin's concept of 'provisional monologisation' (e.g., 1981:259-422; cf. Olsen, 1998:172-75) to describe biblical theologies such as those of both Childs and Brueggemann, Olsen characterises the results of both as temporary and necessarily reductionistic offerings, made within a continuing dialogue about the contents of biblical theology (1998:175-80). In one sense, accepting Olsen's position involves the acknowledgement that any biblical theology produced by Childs is virtually certain to fail to do justice to the canonical text and must, by implication, use a(n unacknowledged) canon within the canon. But since Childs has also written of the fallibility of the interpreter and the frailty of the task at hand, such an admission is hardly earth shattering. Perhaps the most appropriate conclusion to draw is that a biblical theology should *ideally* do justice to the unity and diversity of the canon, and work towards that goal regardless of its almost impossible attainability in praxis.

#### I. The 'Scope' of the Canon: Jesus Christ, Lord of the Church

Despite Childs's rejection of the Lutheran *sachkritik*, that which 'shows Christ', it is evident from his own work that he does in some way envisage the Scriptures as all witnessing truthfully to the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ. The obvious difference between Childs and Luther is that the former would consider faulty any attempt to see the texts as witnesses to Christ which entailed the rejection of parts of the canon. It is therefore obviously important to investigate how Childs's conception of the Christ operates within his canonical approach.

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<sup>68</sup> This is a view that I have held ever since I heard Brueggemann-in-person attacking Childs for doing what I could only see as being virtually identical to his own project. However, Barr, while noting the similarities, is still more interested in the differences (1999:548-57), though a number of these can be traced to either confused rhetoric or misguided polemic on the part of either Childs or Brueggemann (e.g., the use of the term 'ideology' by Childs, 549).

One must begin by noting that Childs actually has *two* figures of Jesus operating within his canonical approach, and it is important not to confuse Childs's language about each of these 'Christs'. The first 'Jesus Christ' operates as a hermeneutical constraint which can best be thought of as analogous to the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, of Irenaeus and the early church (so Childs, 1984a:27-33). Perhaps ironically it is no easier defining the exact nature and content of Childs's *regula fidei* than it was to define that of Irenaeus (see pages 9-10). Whatever its detail, it is clear that this Jesus is a very bare figure who is Lord of the Church and whose Father is the Creator God of Israel; the purpose of this Jesus is to guard against gnostic-like interpretations by providing an interpretive context within which canonical interpretation can take place. Of course, the content of this rather sparse rule of faith is open to a certain degree of interpretation itself. But with this proviso in mind, it is this hermeneutical constraint, Jesus Christ, and the *sensus literalis* of the canonical text which provide, within the community of faith, the proper context in which to do biblical theology.

The second Jesus Christ within the canonical approach is that which emerges in detail from exegesis, the Jesus witnessed to by the scriptures as they are read by the community of faith. The Old Testament is read as a witness to Christ pre-Christ before looking at the New Testament (1985:9; 1992a:91-2). This is a descriptive analysis which should not involve over-writing the *sensus literalis* with Christian concepts (1979:72; 1985:17). The New Testament should then be read as a witness to Christ post-Christ. But it is then essential to look again at both Testaments in the light of the reality revealed by both Testaments (1992a:87) in order to penetrate deeper into the 'shared reality' which is, for Childs, the concern of both Testaments, extending through figuration a reality which has only been partially heard' (1992a:87, 344-46).

In answer to Dunn's argument that the Old Testament had authority for the early church only in so far as it was interpreted by the Gospel (1977:81), Childs responds that:

although it is obviously true that the Old was interpreted in the light of the gospel, it is equally important to recognise that the New Testament tradition was fundamentally shaped from the side of the Old. The Old Testament was not simply a collage of texts to be manipulated but the Jewish scriptures were held as the authoritative voice of God, exerting a major coercion on the early church's understanding of Jesus' mission (1992a:225-6).

This being the case, Childs argues that the New Testament does not correct the Old (1992a:76-77, 85, 591). In the case of law and gospel, for example, Childs argues that their polarisation into opposites is fundamentally misguided and that in terms of the substance of the Bible's witness, the point is rather to seek the 'nature of the one will of God revealed in the law as a vehicle of the gospel' (1992a:559). Part of Childs's attempt to deal with the law involves his argument that Deuteronomy is an example of Old Testament law as a new re-application of the old, demonstrating that the Torah is not a timeless set of principles but is rather an event, the Sinai covenant, here presented afresh in a new context. But he then goes on to argue that the New Testament's reasons for its rejection of the Law must be investigated alongside a search for 'structural and material analogies' between the Testament's views of the law. In all of this Childs, at no time, rejects any of the law as such, but he also does not see it (all, at least) as binding upon himself in his Christian context. In his discussion of Humanity: Old and New, he writes that

the Old Testament serves as a faithful witness to the salvation of God which overcomes human alienation and renders a human being whole. The Old Testament is a continuous testimony to the encounter of Israel with this divine reality who transforms human life to reflect the virtues of humility, honesty and reverence for life (Gen. 50:15ff). The Christian church reads the Old Testament's depiction of both divine and human reality as a true witness to its faith, but also in relation to the full revelation of true humanity in Jesus Christ. It is not that for the Christian the New Testament "corrects" the Old Testament, but rather that Jesus Christ, God's true man, who is testified to in both Testaments is the ultimate criterion of truth for both Testaments. His reality is the test of biblical witness, while conversely the reality is encountered only through the witness (1992a:591).

In truth, it remains very difficult to describe in fine detail just how Childs sees both Testaments as witnessing fully and truthfully to Christ. Questions remain: Must Childs, for example, affirm all details of the canonical text including the bashing of babies against rocks (e.g., Ps. 137:9; Nah. 3:10)? Perhaps in a way this is so, since he seems perfectly happy to see all of the biblical texts as frail testimony, time-bound, and requiring of sifting and penetrating by the exegete. Since for reasons of time and space this thesis is not concerned with offering a New Testament reading or biblical theological reflection, this question of how both Testaments witness fully and truthfully to Christ must await further investigation.

#### J. 'Illumination'

The concept of illuminating the final form is very important to Childs; he has called it the aim of the whole process of biblical theology (1992a:369; cf. 1985:15-16). Similarly, he has written that the point of systematic theology is to illuminate the canonical text (1992a:369; cf. also the positive illumination of the text by 'a fully developed Christian theology', 1992a:88); its mediation of present day questions provides a way for modern concerns to encounter the biblical text (1976:201; 1992a:89; the cultural-situatedness of interpreters also plays a significant role here, 1992a:88). Another source of illumination is that provided by Christian tradition and the history of exegesis. This search for illumination is also expanded outside the Christian community of faith into the Jewish community of faith, and Childs sees Jewish exegesis as being both relevant and a challenge to Christian reading (1964:444-49; 1992a:25-26). In fact, one could extend Childs's search further and define as useful any work from any source which reflects upon the final form of the text, measuring its usefulness against its compatibility with the *sensus literalis* and the 'scope' of scripture

witnessed to by the community of faith.<sup>69</sup> The cultural relativity implied by this drawing of light from such diverse sources, however, needs to be balanced against the historical text and the need for some form of critical distancing: one must do justice to the texts as historical witnesses.

At the heart of Childs's particular emphasis on the term 'illuminate' is his personal conviction that the biblical text is the sole source of the knowledge of God; hence, the aim of his work and his appropriation of the insights of others is to shed light on just these texts (for a useful discussion of insider-outsider illumination, see the debate between Watson, 1996a:80-81;1996b:3-16); Marsh, 1996a:76-80; 1996b, 1997:399-414; and Davies, 1995:17-55). But even if one cannot theologically follow Childs here (see pages 39-44), his emphasis upon the concept of illumination does alert us to many sources which have been woefully neglected, either because they were pre-critical interpreters (like Origen, Aquinas or Rashi), dogmatic theologians (like Barth, Tillich or Moltmann), or just non-historical-critical critics (like populist users of the bible such as advertisers, comedians, films, and fiction-writers). This is not, of course, to say that illumination is an even phenomenon; Childs himself has been criticised on the grounds that the history of exegesis sections in his *Exodus* tended either to include those interpreters closest to his own position or to include those sufficiently different that he was able to ignore them completely in his own commentary. But the humility involved in seeking illumination appears, to this interpreter at least, to be an important tool in the task of biblical theology.

#### K. 'The Diachronic'

Childs has also proposed using historical criticism to 'illuminate' the final form of the text (cf. e.g., 'the depth dimension aids in understanding the interpreted text',

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<sup>69</sup> In the light of Barth's influence on Childs, it is interesting to note that Berkouwer records an account of von Harnack's surprise at finding Barth reading early dogmatic writings, and comments that Barth sought 'illumination' everywhere (1977:44).

1979:76; cf. also 1992a:104-106). This can be considered in terms of two uses. First, historical information should be used to explain the text as it stands, preventing historical anachronisms (cf. also Smend, 1980:47; Murphy, 1997:268). Since Childs sees the text as time conditioned, such a usage is essential, the only question being how much information should be incorporated and when (for further discussion of which, see conclusion, pages 299-302). Second, the results of historical criticism can be used to define a critical background for the growth of the text, enabling diachronic accounts of the text to be integrated into a reading of the final form.

Childs gives four reasons for the importance of this latter usage (1992a:104-6): First, understanding how the text was formed allows one a greater appreciation of the final form itself. Second, the relationship between various sections can be better understood if it can be correlated with the historical growth of the text. Third, the nature of controversies within the text can be clarified by understanding the growth of the text against the background of controversies within the canonising communities. Fourth, the biblical texts, even in their canonical form, continue to reflect their historical background, and so the exegete must do justice both to the particularity of the texts, avoiding anachronistic interpretations, and their role as scripture.

The emphasis which Childs places upon diachronic studies of the text has been questioned, however. Barr, for example, has criticised Childs because the amount of time he spends on historical critical matters means that he does not actually provide a canonical approach (1980:20): Where in the canon, after all, is Second-Isaiah? Provan has argued that the basic difficulty here is that Childs is too insistent on treating diachronic accounts as equal to the canonical reading (1997:25-30). He points out that two consequences of this tendency are that Childs often spends far too long considering historical-critical positions, even to the extent of barely considering the canonical shaping of the text and that Childs appears to have missed many of the recent literary approaches to the biblical text (though the latter is more probably the result of Childs's discovery that literary methods are actually as capable as any historical critical

methodology of stifling the kind of exegesis he wants, 1992a:722-23; cf. also the parallel conclusion of Watson, 1996:213-14; and Barr, 1999:424-25).

That Childs is a product of his training in historical criticism became clear when his attempts to justify the role of the canon in historical critical terms were discussed earlier (see pages 44-47), but Provan argues that this inability to let go of the detail of historical criticism also leads to problems in Childs's reading of the final form. Noting that the logic of Childs's position on the primacy of the final form actually suggests that diachronic studies should play a minor role, Provan suggests that there are two ways in which the illumination provide by the diachronic impinges upon Childs's readings: first, it has no visible effect on exegesis. Second, it results in a reading of the text which is skewed rather than illuminated. As an example of the latter, Provan takes Childs's reading of Jonah.

Consider... the case of the book of Jonah, where Childs in his introduction begins by simply accepting without argument the view that the psalm in chapter 2 was inserted into the original by a redactor. As Landes has pointed out [1980:37-39], this clearly has an effect on the way Childs understands the whole book, for it leads him to under-emphasise the theme of repentance therein—a theme which, as Landes has shown from a rhetorical-critical standpoint, is of central importance not merely throughout the book of Jonah but also in the wider canonical context. This is an excellent example of the way in which Childs, because of his starting point in historical critical theory, arrives at a canonical reading different from the one at which he would have arrived if he had begun with the text simply as canonical text. A more sensitive reading of the text as text in the first instance would have made it clear just how unnecessary the theory was as a starting point at all, and would have led to what is arguably a more satisfactory grasp of its canonical shape (1997:30).

Childs's previous response to Landes is instructive: 'We differ somewhat in the history of the formation of the book... But whether or not one accepts a one stage or a two stage growth of the book, does not the test of one's interpretation lie in the ability to do justice to the final stage of the canonical text? (1980:59-60). Yet, according to Provan, Childs's actual use of diachronic studies proves problematic *exactly because*



*he is often using it to illuminate the text in such a way as to distort the final form.* This is obviously true in the case of Childs's reading of Jonah, but the question then arises as to whether proponents of a canonical approach really need to incorporate diachronic studies after all. Is their incorporation into Childs's canonical approach due simply to his reluctance to let go of the vast amounts of historical-critical work done over the last two hundred years?

It is perhaps helpful to note that a spectrum of options exists here. On the one hand, D.M. Carr has suggested that a full diachronic study can contribute to a final form reading of Genesis and, despite his explicit claims to the contrary, his rhetoric seems to imply that one cannot read the final form 'correctly' unless its tradition history is uncovered and utilised to the full (1996a:12-15; cf. Fretheim, 1998:120-21). On the other hand, Wall's suggestion that the canonical approach should be regarded as a "post-critical method" which has as its goal the interpretation of the final form of the text and is based upon a 'religious epistemology that evaluates the Bible's normative role as canon, or rule of faith, as the foundation for the hermeneutical enterprise' may be understood as historical criticism free (1992a:143; Wall—and Lemcio—combine Childs's work with that of Sanders and so do use historical-critical work in their own version of the canonical approach).

Although either may find some justification in Childs's work, that followed by Carr (and Childs on Jonah) seems unlikely to be able to do justice to the use of the canonical text in the community of faith for two reasons: first, the sheer complexity of developing a tradition history makes it unlikely as a common pre-requisite for bible reading, although granted Childs does supply a version in his *Biblical Theology* (1992a:95-322). Second, the likelihood of its rendering a final form which is essentially different from the final form encountered, being defined by the historical reconstruction used and not by the canonical shaping itself, are all too high. But the option offered by a historical-criticism-denying variant of Lemcio and Wall which simply dismisses diachronic readings out of hand may actually result in some loss for the canonical approach. In Provan's words:

The real value of past historical critical work... will lie, not in its provision of any so-called 'depth dimension,' but in alerting [canonical exegetes] to interesting puzzles in the text which must be taken into account in offering a final form reading. Thus, for example, the strangeness of the 'psalm' on the lips of Jonah..., rightly noted by historical critics, will form part of the data which must be accounted for in the construal of the whole in its present form (1997:35).

In this sense, then, the diachronic may illuminate the final form, although the resulting relationship between the diachronic analysis and the canonical reading is a good deal more oblique than had been previously thought. How oblique may be seen when T.E. Fretheim notes in a review of Carr's work that the tensions within the final form demonstrated by the application of a diachronic study 'do not seem to require the specific historical edifice Carr proposes' (1998:120; Murphy's description of Childs's use of Zimmerli is also pertinent here, 1980:42). The tensions are there anyway, and the role of the diachronic is simply to draw attention to them, 'discouraging readers from engaging in the overly harmonizing tendencies sometimes characteristic of synchronic analyses, and making more prominent the lively tensions within the present text' (Fretheim, 1998:120). In the light of Moberly's contention that theological reality may on occasions be rendered only by the use of contradictory/paradoxical formulations (1983:33-34), that is, through the use of tensions within the texts, the importance of recovering these tensions in canonical readings is obvious.

Less obvious is the interplay between recovering tensions and legitimate harmonisation. In a canonical approach there is an obvious clash between tensions and canonical setting: the setting may either be the direct cause of the tension, being responsible for holding a tension together, or the cause of its loss as texts are realigned in ways which resolve the tensions between them. Presumably, in the case of the former, the tension should be highlighted and in the case of the latter, harmonised. Although decisions about whether to harmonise or highlight may be relatively easy to make, it remains to be seen how large a subjective element exists within each interpreter's decision to highlight or harmonise tensions.

## L. Summary

In conclusion, the canonical approach proposed by Childs clearly has considerable consequences for the interpretation of the biblical texts. The canon of texts is now defined as the 'arena' within which exegesis is carried out, as a structure of 'formal features' which—when recognised and acted upon—function by constraining the kinds of interpretation which can be actualised and be said to be canonical. In reading the text as canon, the exegete seeks to elicit the meaning (or meanings) communicated by its 'canonical intentionality', to read what Rendtorff has called the 'theological message' in its canonical shape (1993:126) and encounter what Childs has described as the sole witness to the 'full history of revelation' (1979:76). The final form itself is reconstituted to take full account of the role of 'narrative presuppositions' in canonically later texts, the '*sensus literalis*' rather than any textual layer behind or in front of the text, and a 'referentiality' which is defined through and by the layer which is the final form. Ideally, a biblical theology done in this mode would do justice to both 'unity and diversity' within and between the Old and New Testaments, seeking the witness of each to the one who is the true 'scope' of the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ, Lord of the Church. As an aid to the canonical interpreter, 'illumination' can be sought from wherever it may be found: from traditional disciplines, history of exegesis, systematics, pastoral theology, ethics, to non-traditional media such as films, fiction, advertising, and many more. In searching for the tensions within the text which are so important in rendering the sacred, a special place is set aside for the 'diachronic' studies of historical-criticism with their emphasis on recovering diverse voices in the final form. These are the features of Childs's approach which are most helpful in defining its implications for praxis. In the following chapter, I shall aim to define a sound hermeneutical basis from which to ground the assumptions of the canonical approach.

## Chapter 3

### The Hermeneutics of the Canonical Approach Reconsidered

#### I. 'Objectivity' and 'Perspectivity' in the Canonical Approach<sup>70</sup>

##### A. Two Kinds of Language

One aspect of the canonical approach which has virtually always been regarded as requiring reconstruction is that of the hermeneutics upon which it is built (e.g., Brett, Noble, Scalise). Childs himself gives the strong impression that he has no thoroughly worked out approach to this subject; his use of terms such as 'special reading' and 'fideism', for example, shows him to be attempting to defend himself against the charges made by liberals such as Barr on the basis of their *presumed neutral ground* rather than on that of the *perspectival ground* which his own approach most readily implies. But this lack of development to Childs's hermeneutics does not necessarily mean that his approach is thereby rendered indefensible or in need of severe reconstruction if it is to survive. The question is, can Childs's language and concerns be explained and justified by a particular hermeneutical approach *without any substantive change in its self-conception or praxis?*

The biblical texts in Childs's canonical approach can best be described as having an 'autonomous objective status' within a 'community setting'. That these twin emphases are present is clearly implied by the fact that his work contains two distinct sets of terminology and argumentation. On the one hand, Childs utilises the

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<sup>70</sup> Traditionally, of course, objectivity is paired with subjectivity as polar opposites. But accepting this opposition results in a skewed choice; rather a further option exist. Fish notes that '[meanings] will not be objective because they will always have been the product of a point of view rather than simply having been "read off"; and they will not be subjective because that point of view will always be social or institutional' (cf. Fish 1980:335). For this reason, I have chosen to set the term 'perspectivity' over against 'objectivity' on the twin grounds that it does not carry with it the negative connotations of 'subjectivity' as free unconstrained choice and that Childs uses the term on numerous occasions to describe his particular view on pluralistic interpretation (e.g., 1980a:208).

terminology of the *objective*, describing his approach to the Old Testament as providing an 'objective description' of the text (particularly prevalent in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, e.g., 1979:72f) and using the loaded term, 'best text' (1977b:92). His emphasis on 'illuminating the text' also belongs to this category (here called, set one). On the other hand, he also uses the language of *perspective*, offering numerous statements about the legitimacy of different viewpoints from which to read the text (set two). For example, 'no-one should contest the right of another to study the Hebrew Bible from a variety of different perspectives. The list would be quite inexhaustible' (1980a:208). This plurality is clearly implied when he writes that when Barr 'seeks to establish as the sole criterion of exegesis "what the text actually says," his appeal rings unusually hollow in the light of the last two hundred years of critical exegesis. Is it not at last obvious that what "the text actually says" cannot be separated from the context from which it is read and into which it is directed?' (1984b:70).

The use of these two sets of terms originates in Childs's attempt to justify his canonical approach over-against what he sees as the good and necessary pluralism of modern biblical studies. He writes:

To assert that the Christian stands in a special relationship to these writings is not to disavow the legitimacy of numerous other approaches to the text, both within and without a stance of faith. Although the right to a pluralist handling of the Bible was first raised in the Enlightenment, it had fully established itself by the nineteenth century, at least within modern Western culture. The theological issue turns on the Christian church's claim for the integrity of a special reading which interprets the Bible within an established theological context and toward a particular end, namely, the discerning of the will of God, which is constitutive of the hermeneutical function of canon (1984a:37)

Since Childs is only talking of one reading amongst a plurality, the language of perspectivity is clearly applicable. But a problem exists with this rather idealistic scenario and it is flagged by the fact that Childs is having to *argue* for his reading strategy when a 'good' pluralism should guarantee the existence of that strategy with

no questions asked; the pluralism which he celebrates is also, at least presently, somewhat mythical. For Childs, the philosophy underlying the historical-critical method has made pluralism into a game in which only those who conform to its rules may justifiably take the field of play. In his often polemical attempts to justify his community-specific reading strategy over-against historical criticism, however, Childs has not chosen to fully and consistently reject the historical-critical playing field, but rather has simply assumed the validity of its rules and cloaked his own work in its terminology, especially those related to 'objectivity': for example, 'description', 'best text', 'illuminating the text', and 'special reading' (an objectivist term because it necessarily assumes the existence of an 'ordinary reading'). This move is probably motivated by any number of factors, but certainly includes Childs's desire to avoid charges of fideism (e.g., 1984a:37).

Childs himself has offered no resolution of the inconsistency which occurs because of his use of these two sets of terms; he seems more inclined to merely assert that both are simply correct, using them as and when he needs them. But that even he has difficulty with handling these two sets becomes apparent when, for example, having already said that other viewpoints are fully legitimate (1980a:208; using set two terms), he then disagrees with D.A. Knight on the right of every layer of the text to its own integrity because neither the 'editors of the biblical material' nor the 'subsequent Jewish or Christian communities of faith' saw it that way (invoking set one, 1980a:210). Of course, these last two groups, the Christians and the Jews, do then offer diverse perspectives from which a reader can approach the text (back to set two again, 1992a:335). Equally, Childs's implication that the text is objectively present leads to the question of why one then needs to define a particular perspective from which to read it. His own writings and claims concerning the need for a community approach call into question the status of such a self-authenticating text: how can an objective text be theologically marginalised by historical criticism as Childs claims (1964:437-38) if it is able to speak for itself? This tension between the objectivist and

the perspectival languages has also caused confusion among scholars (e.g., Barr, 1983:132-33).

The problematic use of terms of objectivity and perspectivity runs throughout Childs's work on the canonical approach, and any attempt to reformulate or even simply to defend its hermeneutics must offer a resolution to this rather unsatisfactory situation. Of the attempts which have been made to do so, some have tried to remove one set of terms altogether: Noble, for example, removes the perspectival language (1991, 1995) whereas Scalise removes the language of objectivity (1994a). If, however, we are to attempt to apply *Childs's* canonical approach rather than making a fresh start elsewhere, his usage of both sets of terminology must be accounted for in such a way as to leave the essential contours of Childs's work intact. In section II an attempt to provide an account of the canonical approach using objectivist categories, that of Noble, will be examined (IIA) before a critique is offered (IIB). My own suggestion for defending Childs approach, appropriating the 'perspectival' hermeneutics of S.E. Fish, will follow in section III. Thiselton's criticisms of Fish will then be examined (IIIB) and a 'fishian' response offered by way of concluding this chapter (IIIC).

## II. A Reconstruction Favouring 'Objectivity'

### A. Paul R. Noble's *The Canonical Hermeneutics of Brevard Childs: A Critical Reconstruction*

The presence of what can be called foundational elements ('objectivity') and non-foundational elements ('perspectivity') in Childs's work has already been noted by P.R. Noble in his Cambridge Ph.D. dissertation on the canonical approach (1991; subsequently published in 1995).<sup>71</sup> Noble argues that the non-foundational

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<sup>71</sup> Noble seems to believe that Childs has consciously aligned himself with Reception Theory (1991:128-29), a conclusion for which I can see no evidence (cf. e.g., Childs's comments on reader response criticism, 1992a:722-23). It seems more likely that Childs has simply noted what seem to

elements—which he terms ‘anti-intentionalist’—should be rejected and that a view of the text be accepted which is based upon the text having a foundationalist and determinate meaning—termed ‘intentionalist’: namely, that which its author intended, a meaning which can be objectively discovered through critical testing (1991:134,216).

He writes:

Although there are both Intentionalist and Anti-intentionalist strands in Childs’s programme, [I have] argued that he should drop the latter—he cannot consistently have both, and the Anti-intentionalist elements are highly dubious. Fortunately, his main emphasis is upon the final form having been shaped through the religious community’s use of the traditions in their life and worship and this can be explicated in predominantly Intentionalist terms (1991:135).

According to Noble, it would be misguided for anyone to ‘try to provide theoretical underpinning for Childs’s programme through appealing to an anti-objectivist conception of textual meaning’ (1991:216). Such an option leads, according to Noble, to relativism and fideism.

Noble begins his defence of objectivism by noting the importance of ‘intention’ in objectivist accounts of interpretation, but especially of interest to him is the existence of a tendency amongst such accounts to weaken definitions of ‘intention’ to the point of losing the argument by default. He writes:

The fundamental problem, then, which the pro-intentionalist has to resolve is to show that there is a relationship between meaning and intention which, on the one hand, avoids those versions of intentionalism that are now generally recognised to be fallacious, and yet, on the other hand, does not achieve this by giving such a ‘thin’ account of intentions as to become anti-intentionalist in all but name (1995a:193).

Noble offers two examples of what he terms the ‘dependence of meaning upon context’, only one of which he will subsequently affirm as correct. The first is that of

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him to be obvious facts about biblical interpretation (i.e. how one interprets the Bible relates to why one interprets it; cf. also Moberly, 1992b:147), and has presented these facts without a fully thought-out theoretical basis for his assertions.



Caiaphas's statement in John 11:50, that 'it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish'. But Noble notes that new meaning is given to the words by their Christian setting and concludes—at least initially—that Caiaphas could not prevent it from acquiring new meaning. His second example is that of T.S. Kuhn's account of his reading of Aristotle's *Physics* (1970:xi-xii).<sup>72</sup> Having first understood Aristotle's work not as simply dated but as absurd, Kuhn found a key to understanding Aristotle's work when he recognised that one of the concepts involved, motion, was not being defined as motion as such but as change of state in general. In Kuhn's re-reading of Aristotle, absurdity receded and the work became more intelligible. This latter example illustrates for Noble what happens when a text is read in a different context to that which its author intended. He asserts:

Linguistic communication is only possible if author and reader have *shared conventions* about the meaning of words and how they may be combined. When Aristotle made his customarily-astute observations on change-of-state in general he was able to write a book that accurately expressed his thoughts by choosing words with the correct semantic values, arranging them in grammatically correct sequences etc.; and since his contemporaries were familiar with these same linguistic conventions they were able to understand him correctly, and therefore recognised his *Physics* as a serious contribution to the subject (1995a:196—his italics).

If this is not taken into account, argues Noble, the text's meaning becomes degraded, 'with insights reduced to absurdities' (1995:196). With this in mind, he reconsiders his first example and argues that the anti-intentionalist reading of the words of Caiaphas will not hold because it was John, the author of the Gospel, who took those words and placed them in an appropriate context, intending that the words should have a legitimate second meaning. Noble concludes:

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<sup>72</sup> This is an ironic choice given Kuhn's own falling into non-foundationalism in the first edition of his *Structures of Scientific Revolutions*. Despite his subsequent attempt to argue that his position does not entail a necessary acceptance of non-foundationalism (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, and much quoted by Thiselton, e.g., 1992:542), he has been judged, by Chalmers at least, to have failed to prove his case (1982:107-109).

What I am arguing is that the author's intention is a 'Regulative Principle' for correct interpretation. A text is an instantiation of some particular language-system, with reference to which the author made certain choices in producing his or her text—the author selects from among the options that are available in that language, arranging its components in such a way as to express the desired meaning. It will therefore be through interpreting a text in relation to the milieu of its production that the most worthwhile meanings will be found in it—alternative contexts are inherently inferior because they will yield inferior meanings (1995a:197).

Noble carefully delineates his 'regulative principle' over against intentionalist accounts which insist on recreating an 'author's inner life or thought processes'; nor is he

claiming that the meaning of a text is decided by appealing to what may be known about the author's intentions from sources outside the text. Both these... positions are forms of what might be called the (auto)biographical fallacy in that they misconstrue the relationship between (auto)biographical information about the author's intentions as they stand apart from the text and the intentions that come to expression in the text (1995a:198).

Clearly 'authorial intent' for Noble is not the same as the definition that is rejected by Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'intentional fallacy' (1972). He is not claiming access to the interior motivations of an individual, but rather he is simply assuming that what the text says *is* the intention of the author, a claim which may have surprising results when considering actual biblical texts and their interpreters (see Brown on page 70 above, for example).

Noble's next move is to consider and reject the alternative to his approach, that of reader-oriented hermeneutics, initially as exemplified in the work of Fish. This assault on the anti-intentionalist position is then extended into the field of philosophical hermeneutics where Noble spends considerable time rebutting the work of Gadamer in favour of a view of objectivism developed from F. Schleiermacher (1995a:219-53); the hermeneutical circle is rejected in favour of a hermeneutical spiral. But Noble's arguments against Gadamer add little to his overall stance and since he concludes—in my opinion, correctly—that Fish represents the 'anti-intentionalist' position more

consistently than Gadamer (1995a:289),<sup>73</sup> I shall concentrate upon answering Noble's questions from Fish's perspective.<sup>74</sup> At this point, it should be noted that Noble consistently argues from a position *within interpretation*; he does not at any point attempt to provide philosophical arguments for the objective nature of his text in terms of its external reference. (This type of argument will be considered in assessing the criticisms of Fish generated by Thiselton in section IIIB)

In fact Noble spends a considerable amount of energy in both his (now-published) thesis (1991, 1995a) and two articles (1994, 1995b) attempting to show that Fish's account of textual meaning is untenable, a process which usually takes its lead from Fish's example of a list of names on a blackboard which his students are then asked to read as a poem (1980:322-337). In short, it is not too far from the truth to say that Noble's own positive proposal is to a large degree dependent upon accepting his resounding rejection of the (apparently) only available alternative, the hermeneutics of Fish (as understood by Noble). My reason for highlighting the importance of

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<sup>73</sup> The element of inconsistency in Gadamer's approach to non-foundationalism forms one of the two principal reasons why I have rejected Scalise's use of Gadamer and Wittgenstein to defend the canonical approach (though I am obviously appreciative of many of the views of the only other significant developer of Childs's hermeneutics in non-foundationalist terms). My second reason for not taking up Scalise's work more positively is its sheer complexity. Even though he is already using two of the most significant (and disputed) thinkers of the twentieth-century in Gadamer and Wittgenstein to reconstruct Childs, he is forced to introduce yet another—Ricoeur—in order to account for canonical intentionality (1994a:68-74). Given Scalise's rhetorical aim—getting thoughtful evangelicals to accept this view of the text (1994a:xi-xii)—the density of each of these three must count against the likelihood of their (and others') acceptance of such a view of Childs.

In contrast, Fish's work is both sufficiently comprehensive to be able to account for the canonical approach with very little addition and he is, without doubt, one of the most readable theorists presently available. The biggest problem in using his work is likely to be as a result of often uncritical use of badly skewed descriptions of Fish by such as Thiselton (particularly in his *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*). It is the combination of Fish's total commitment to the non-foundationalist position, his comprehensiveness and his accessibility which leads me to think that Childs's approach may be best served by a reconstruction based on a 'fishian' hermeneutic.

<sup>74</sup> It should be noted, however, that Fish would reject Noble's categorisation of his work as 'anti-intentionalist'. According to Fish, '[w]ords are intelligible only within the assumption of some context of intentional production, some already-in-place predecision as to what kind of person, with what kind of purposes, in relation to what specific goals in a particular situation, is speaking or writing' (1989:295). Thus, when Fish consistently implies that all human beings ascribe an intention, a purposfulness, to every communication, always constructing for themselves an author or speaker who has uttered or written that text, it should be clear that for Fish, *all* interpretation is 'intentionalist' (1989:99-100, 294-95; 1995:14).

Noble's negative arguments here is that the positive side of his own proposal is put forward with very little argumentation. His presentation of the two examples of Caiaphas and Kuhn and his ensuing discussion of a 'regulative principle' are both unsupported by detailed empirical or theoretical evidence. They appear, in fact, to be generated by a logical argument derived from his *a priori* conviction that his description of what is happening in these two examples is basically correct. In a very real sense, Noble proceeds principally on the basis that if Fish is wrong, then he must be right.

### B. A Critique of an Objectivist Canonical Approach

In the discussion of his intentionalist programme, Noble states that to follow up the relationship between meaning and intention in detail would involve many diverse aspects of literary theory and linguistics, a project for which he has insufficient space in his thesis/book—he will therefore cover, he claims, only the essentials that impinge upon Childs work (1995a:194). In practice, this appears to mean that he justifies his own proposal by importing, uncritically and wholly without acknowledgement, a number of assumptions from the discipline of linguistics (1995:194-99; Noble does not refer to *any* linguistic theorists in any of his work on this topic). His description of Aristotle using shared conventions to encode his meaning through his choice of semantic units and their grammatical order (see above) invokes several aspects of linguistic theory,<sup>75</sup> though it is difficult to know if Noble has a particular theory or

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<sup>75</sup> He also adds in a footnote the comment that:

Semantics and grammar, of course, are not the only means through which a text can communicate. A full account would also have to reckon with the contributions made by genre, rhythm, figures of speech etc.; but this is unnecessary for my present purposes since the added complications would not introduce any new principles (1995:196).

But what is the basis of this assertion?

theorist in mind. Nevertheless, it can be asked if a linguistic theory based upon these points is both sound and available to provide support for the 'intentionalist' canonical approach which Noble requires. If the answer is no, then is there an alternative within linguistics to which he can appeal?

According to M.L. Apte, the study of language has a long history, stretching back into the study of rhetoric and philosophy in classical antiquity. But in the nineteenth century, the discipline began to use the comparative method to study languages, finding links between the likes of Greek and Sanskrit and developing grammars based upon the resulting Indo-European model of language. Around the beginning of this century, a concentration upon the actual structure of language itself arose with the work of de Saussure, and language was increasingly seen as a 'system with a structure. The objective of linguistics became not only the writing of structural descriptions of as many languages as possible, but also the developing of a universal conceptual and theoretical framework which could be the foundation of language specific grammars' (1994:2000). De Saussure coined the terms *langue* and *parole*: the former denoting the structure underlying a language and the latter denoting the language in use (1974). Although basically empirical in nature, this discipline became increasingly concerned with the study of *langue*, of language in isolation, a process which was not altered by Chomsky's subsequent development of generative-transformational theory (Apte, 1994:2000). Language study was, for a while, focused on ideal speaker-listeners, and everyday usage was—with rare exceptions—essentially ignored.

With the development of sociolinguistics in the 1960's, however, the study of language in practice began to grow. Concerned to account for the variation, function, and use of language as used by average people in everyday cultural contexts, sociolinguistics became the other side of the linguistic coin to the theorists concerned with the ideal structures of language, and, for some, almost a competitor to them. In 1968, John Lyons noted the tendency to set these two approaches over against one another, and concluded that the two were actually a unity; they were not competitors because

both were supposed to account for the same feature, language in use (50-51). Lyons's claim points out the distinction between the inner and outer approaches to language, and leads to the conclusion that the two can only be unified when the practical features of language uncovered by sociolinguists can be accounted for by the internal theoretical approaches, thus achieving Lyons's goal of a unified 'scientific' linguistics (1968:51).<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the most important addition to linguistics as a whole resulting from the emergence of sociolinguistics has been the rediscovery of the effects of 'context' upon interpretation (cf. Quasthof, 1994:731). The tendency of the theoretical approaches towards idealisation had led to a certain a-situational element within their descriptions of language. It was often assumed that the production of a sentence would involve the encoding of a speaker or writer's intended meaning into an entity consisting of a group of semantic units placed in a particular syntactic structure which would then be decoded by the ideal hearer or reader. Such a 'formalist' encoding approach to

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<sup>76</sup> As well as defining theories in terms of their emphasis upon either an inner and outer orientation towards language, a further taxonomy has been suggested. Morris has argued that linguistics consists of three fields (1938): syntactics, semantics (which grew out of syntactics), and pragmatics (which has grown out of semantics). In such a taxonomy, semantics is viewed as moving beyond earlier studies on syntax in order to account for 'meaning' in terms of the lexical meaning of words and the objects to which those words refer, that is in terms of *reference*. In contrast, pragmatics is viewed as being concerned with the uncovering of the *sense* of the utterance in the context in which it occurs.

Leech defines the difference between semantics and pragmatics as being the difference between these two sentences (1983:6):

semantics would say—What does X mean?

pragmatics would say—What did you mean by X?

A pragmatic theorist would suggest that the question asked by the semantic theorist should already be understood as being set in a context—semantic description of the communication as dyadic, as between the words and an ideal reader ignores the fact that interpretation of the sentence is always triadic, involving words, reader, and context.

The often polemical use of Morris's definition to designate semantics as wholly 'formalist', however, has often served to disguise the fact that considerable overlap does exist between these three areas, a fact especially noticeable when considering the extent to which semantic theories build on outer and pragmatic theories build on inner orientations to the linguistic data. While it is right to reject the formalism of failed approaches, the positive contributions of both semantics and pragmatics must be acknowledged. Until such time as one theory—whether pragmatic or semantic in origin—accounts for all language, it seems advisable to hold lightly to whichever theory seems best suited to account for the evidence in any particular context. But an answer may still be sought to the question being asked here, that of whether or not linguistics can—or will be able to in the future—supply viable theoretical support for Noble's intentionalist project.

language, however, is now recognised as incomplete precisely because it has what U.M. Quasthof terms ‘a very reductive treatment of context’ (1994:731; cf. also Levinson, 1983:5-35, esp. 22-23; Sperber and Wilson, 1995:3-28; Blakemore, 1992:18-22). Although this description has strong echoes in Noble’s description of his ‘intentionalist’ programme, his mention of the ‘shared conventions’ of language users—features which are contingent and relate to *parole*—shows that his view of linguistics is somewhat more sophisticated.

The adoption of ‘conventions’ as part of the description of language use is one way in which certain theorists have attempted to come to terms with the contextuality of *parole*. D. Davidson lists three ways in which the concept of convention has been added to descriptions of linguistic practice with the explicit intention of formally demonstrating how meaning is produced:

First, there are theories that claim that there is a convention connecting sentences in one or another grammatical mood (or containing an explicit performative phrase) with illocutionary intentions, or some broader purpose; second, there are theories that look to a conventional use for each sentence; and third, there are theories to the effect that there is a convention that ties individual words to an extension or intension. These are not competing theories. Depending upon the details, all combinations of these theories are possible (1984:266).

The claim is that an utterance such as an assertion must, by shared convention, be understood as literal, as a valid assertion. Invoking the example of an actor in a theatre who asserts that ‘there is a fire’, however, Davidson points out that no convention can dictate that these words must always mean that there is a real fire, because ‘there cannot be a convention that signals sincerity’: such a signal would obviously be used by the insincere.<sup>77</sup> Davidson argues that it is the necessary invocation of a ‘standard situation’ in which these conventions can operate—for example, one in which the

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<sup>77</sup> Davidson notes Frege’s recognition that language lacks a sign to signify ‘sincerity’ and his attempt to provide such a sign, |- (1984:269-70). Davidson, suggests, however, that Frege should have asked himself *why* such a sign did not exist, the obvious answer being that since its presence in a text cannot guarantee truthfulness, it is basically unusable.

utterance of an imperative *is* an order—which demonstrates that shared conventions capable of accounting for interpretation always and everywhere simply do not exist (1984:274-76). This is not to say that those involved in mutual communication share no commonality—communication after all happens—but rather that it is not able to constrain meaning as these linguists (and Noble) require.

In Noble's case, 'shared conventions' which are claimed to settle the question of meaning include his invocation of the author's intention as a 'regulative principle' and his positing of 'definitional constraints' under which all readers must place themselves when offering interpretations (1994:423). But in the light of Davidson's critique, it can be asked how Noble knows that all interpreters must accept these two conventions? When Noble writes that 'a text which is plainly about David should not be *arbitrarily* taken as referring to Josiah or Jesus' (1995:205), who or what defines 'plainly' or 'arbitrarily' here? It is difficult to see how the New Testament authors can avoid being found guilty of violating both of Noble's conventions, of ignoring the 'regulative principle' and of reading 'arbitrarily'. Most significantly of all, given Noble's project, is the unavoidable conclusion that Childs's canonical approach, with its focus on a 'canonical intentionality' capable of generating meanings unimagined by its authors redactors or canonisers, is also culpable (cf. Childs, 1979:79, 259, 661; 1985:49). Noble's 'shared conventions' cannot account for the behaviour of these communicators and his utilisation of terms such as 'degraded' to describe their readings must therefore be rejected.

A more realistic linguistic option arises from a consideration of Davidson's response to D. Lewis's suggestion that a convention of regularity is shared by communicators (1969). He states:

it is very difficult to say exactly how speaker's and hearer's theories for interpreting the speaker's words must coincide. They must, of course, coincide *after* an utterance has been made, or communication is impaired. But unless they coincide in advance, the concepts of regularity and convention have no definite purchase. Yet agreement on what a speaker means by what he says can surely be achieved even though speaker and



hearer have different advance theories as to how to interpret the speaker. The reason for this is that the speaker may well provide adequate clues, in what he says and how he says it, to allow a hearer to arrive at a correct interpretation. Of course the speaker must have *some* idea how the hearer is apt to make use of the relevant clues; and the hearer must know a great deal about what to expect. But such general knowledge is hard to reduce to rules, much less conventions or practices (1984:278).

Clearly, any such account of communication would be incapable of supporting Noble's claim to have provided an intentionalist account of the canonical approach. Rather any theory of linguistics which fulfils Davidson's requirements—and which may eventually provide the basis for a unified linguistics—will move towards a definition of communication as local, contingent, inherently risky, and a far cry from Noble's stable text. Linguistics, therefore, may well give more succour to Noble's opponents, the anti-intentionalists, than to his own needs.

If it is accepted that Noble's 'linguistic' formulations are unable to provide the intentionalist stance he requires, then it can be acknowledged that what he is actually offering is a rather less than adequate description of the communication process in terms of 'authorial intent' while arguing strongly that the alternative is highly suspect and unworkable. Two questions can then be asked: first, is Noble's attack on Fish well-founded or has he either misunderstood or misrepresented his non-foundationalist opponent? Second, is Fish's account of communication able to explain what is occurring more comprehensively than Noble's 'intentionalist' programme? In section III, an answer will be provided to both of these questions.

### III. Taking the Route of 'Perspectivity'

#### A. The Hermeneutics of Stanley E. Fish

In many ways Noble's formulation of 'authorial intention' is reminiscent of New Criticism's view of the text as autonomous and self contained, insulated against

the author and the reader by the 'intentionalist' and 'affective fallacies' (cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954, 19). Noble is not really interested in an author or his intentions as such, but rather believes the text itself is the sole and correct bearer of an (author's) encoded intention. This parallel between Noble and the New Critics is particularly intriguing, because of the latter's fate at the hands of Noble's own enemies, the 'anti-intentionalists' and their reader-oriented criticism. As J.P. Tompkins puts it:

[According to] Wimsatt and Beardsley, 'the Affective fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results.... It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of a poem and ends in impressionism and relativism' [1972:345]. Reader response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its 'effects,' psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realisation in the mind of a reader (1980:ix).

Reader response criticism has thoroughly destroyed the credibility of the 'Affective fallacy', one of the mainstays of New Criticism. Do Noble's criticisms of the anti-intentionalists enable him to fare any better?<sup>78</sup>

In reader-response theory there are two principal options that one can take; the first is a semi-formal approach in which the text has an 'objective influence' on the reader (as in, for example, the work of Iser; e.g., 1974, 1978),<sup>79</sup> and the second is a more radical approach in which it is argued that the text does not objectively influence the reader at all; its very 'existence' being a product of the reader (cf. Tompkins, 1980:xvi).<sup>80</sup> Noble, in his attempt to designate anti-intentionalist approaches to the text as dubious, has focused upon the latter in the form of Fish, arguing that such an

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<sup>78</sup> Brett argues that Childs needs a 'formalist' approach to his texts rather than an intentionalist one (1991:25-26). Ultimately, though, it is not clear whether he wishes to build this 'formalism' on the work of either or any of Popper, Jauss, Gadamer or Hirsch.

<sup>79</sup> Examples of the application of Iser's theory within Biblical Studies can be found in Darr (1992), Staley (1986) and many others.

<sup>80</sup> Fish's work has been applied within the discipline by Adams (1990b), Lyons (1998), and Burnett (1990). In this thesis, the work of Fish will be considered over that of Iser for two reasons. First, because Fish's own criticisms of Iser appear cogent (1989:74-86); and second, because of the various parallels between the work of Childs and Fish, as also noted by Noble above, by Scobie (1991a:47) and, more recently, by Barton (1996:213).

approach can provide no support to the canonical approach, being fundamentally flawed. In contrast to Noble, however, my own background in hermeneutics is rather different; as S.E. Fowl once wrote, '[i]t is no secret that what counts as meaning in Sheffield most certainly does not count as meaning in Cambridge' (1988:69). I do not consider Noble to be correct in his assertions, and will argue that Childs's approach is best understood in Fishian terms.<sup>81</sup>

Fish is an American literary critic whose work can be divided into two distinct periods (commonly called the 'early' and 'later' Fish.) His early work on 'Affective Stylistics' involved a close reading technique which slowed down the reading process so that one could see how the reader was responding to the text (1980:21-67). This approach was a semi-formalist one, however, the text existing independently of and constraining the reader. The 'later' Fish came to see such an approach as fundamentally incorrect, arguing that in his earlier work he had done,

what critics always do: I 'saw' what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see and then I turned around and attributed what I had seen to a text and an intention. What my principles direct me to see are readers performing acts; the points at which I find (or to be more precise, declare) those acts to have been performed become (by a sleight of hand) demarcations *in* the text; those demarcations are then available for the designation 'formal features' and as formal features they can be (illegitimately) assigned the responsibility for producing the interpretation which in fact produced them (1980:12-13—his italics).

Fish's change of mind can be summed up as an acceptance of the view that every human sense perception is 'interpreted', and every human experience the product of 'interpretation'; as he puts it, 'interpretation is the only game in town' (1980:355).<sup>82</sup> To argue in this way is not to state that there is no raw data beyond this interpreted perception but to argue that there is no way for humans to see this raw data outside of

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<sup>81</sup> For my reasons for choosing Fish over the rather complicated non-foundationalist reconstruction of Scalise (using Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Ricoeur), see page 101, footnote 73.

<sup>82</sup> Gill (1983:53) and Thiselton (1992:537) both credit Fish with having pursued this basic insight to its fullest extent (among the disciplines in which Fish has worked are law, critical theory, cultural studies, literary theory, and many more).

that interpretation or for them ever to encounter it directly (cf. Fish, 1980:165).<sup>83</sup>

From this position, Fish set out to explain the following conundrum:

What is the source of interpretive authority: the text or the reader? Those who answered 'the text' were embarrassed by the fact of disagreement. Why, if the text contains its own meaning and constrains its own interpretation, do so many interpreters disagree about that meaning? Those who answered 'the reader' were embarrassed by the fact of agreement. Why if the meaning is created by the individual reader from the perspective of his own experience and interpretive desires, is there so much that interpreters agree about? What was required was an explanation that could account for both agreement and disagreement (1989:141).

For Fish that explanation was found in the concept of an interpretive community,

not so much a group of individuals who shared a point of view, but a point of view or way of organising experience that shared individuals in the sense that its assumed distinctions, categories of understanding, and stipulations of relevance and irrelevance were the content of the consciousness of community members who were therefore no longer individuals, but, insofar as they were embedded in the community's enterprise, community property (1989:141; cf. 1995:14).

According to Fish, each individual human being is constantly a member of many different interpretive communities (1989:30-2), some of which are unchanging (e.g., race) and some of which can change rapidly (e.g., religious conviction). It is important to note, however, that Fish's definition of an 'interpretive community' is somewhat ambiguous. Despite his statement (quoted above) that they are 'not so much a group of individuals who shared a point of view, but a point of view or way of organising experience that shared individuals', it is clear that he does use the term to indicate both; for example, Fish writes that 'as a fully situated member of an interpretive community, be it literary or legal', one naturally looks at the 'objects of the

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<sup>83</sup> Norris argues that reality eventually breaks into our constructions of the world (1990:144-82). An obvious response from Fish would be that whatever it is that breaks in to our constructions of reality, is still itself only a part of that constructed reality; it can never be an extrinsic 'reality' apart from all construing.

community's concerns with eyes already informed by community imperatives, urgencies, and goals' (1989:303).

The text, then, does not exist as a separate, free entity which can be appealed to in order to demonstrate the correctness of one's interpretations (cf. Fish, 1980:339-40, 354). As Fish puts it in his book *Is There a Text in this Class?*:

The answer this book gives to its title question is 'there is and there isn't'. There isn't a text in this or any other class if one means by text what E.D. Hirsch and others mean by it, 'an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next' [1967:46]; but there is a text in this and every class if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force. [1980:vii]... What I am suggesting is that an interpreting entity, endowed with purposes and concerns, is, by virtue of its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be observed (1980:8).

When J. Culler faults Fish for the immediate re-appearance of the text in Fish's interpretations after its supposed demise, he is clearly confusing these two types of texts (1983:71-72). It is the *Hirschian* text which disappears, and it is the *Fishian* text which now appears in its place and forms the 'object' of criticism. It is in this sense that Fish is arguing that there is no longer a text in the class.

If one cannot demonstrate that an interpretation is correct by an appeal to the text then, according to Fish, one must attempt to persuade other readers to discard their own assumptions and accept the assumptions which will lead them to see the text in the same way (1980:356-71). This process takes place despite Fish's clear implication that many of these assumptions are hidden (though it is always possible that they may be drawn to the surface by subsequent events). Agreement will take place when two readers share 'community specific' reading strategies which enable them to see as evidence features which appear only as a result of those strategies.

But this does not mean that one can sit back and choose how to interpret a particular utterance. Fish argues that utterances occur only in context and that they are understood immediately as heard in that context; there is no gap between hearing

and interpreting (1980:307, 310, 313, 317-18). Moreover, in context they generally have an obvious meaning. But that meaning is always context dependent, and there may be other ways of understanding the same utterance depending upon the context in which it is heard or read. In a discussion about Austin and Derrida, two conceptions of 'context' are contrasted by Fish:

Traditionally, a context has been defined as a collection of features and therefore as something that can be identified by any clear-eyed observer; but Derrida thinks of a context as a structure of assumptions, and it is only by those who hold those assumptions or are held by them that the features in question can first be picked out and then identified as belonging to a context. It is the difference between thinking of a context as something in the world and thinking of a context as a construction of the world, a context that is in itself performed under contextualised conditions (1989:53).

This emphasis on the constructed context of the reader and the way in which the reader is 'grasped' by the interpretive strategy of his or her community/ies demonstrates that Fish does not see an individual or a community as radically free, and able to make the text say anything they want (1980:332). But then, it would be a mistake to see this, with E. Freund, as resulting in an individual's imprisonment within an oppressive community (1987:110-11). The community constraints operative are not only limiting but also actualising; without them, the interpreter can do nothing at all. Although a set of constraints must always be in place, the exact contents of the set are not set in stone; they will change over time (in answer to criticism of *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Fish defined interpretive communities as 'engines of change', 1989:150-52, 156). Nevertheless, at any given point in time, it is these constraints which are responsible for limiting interpretation. As my supervisor, R.B. Matlock, once put it, 'for Fish it is never the case that "anything goes" but rather that only what goes goes'.

It is this emphasis on the limiting of interpretations by non-textual constraints which is completely missed by Noble, rendering his portrayal and subsequent critique

of Fish wholly inadequate on two counts: first, Noble believes that a fishian interpretive community can make its text mean anything it wants. Second, he therefore incorrectly assumes that Fish believes that all interpretations are possible without limitation. Noble's critique is therefore aimed at a complete—and rather caricatured—relativist.

Noble's view of Fish as a theorist who asserts that a community may twist its text into any shape is based on an admittedly common mis-reading of Fish's famous—or, perhaps, infamous—example of a 'list' of names on a blackboard which his students are asked to read as a 'poem' (1980:322-337). Although this may be read as asserting that readers can always make texts mean what they want, in the context of Fish's argument it is actually a rhetorical exercise—and therefore not a theoretical proof—which is simply supposed to show the existence and strength of the schemas which people are always using to define and classify texts as they are encountered. The rest of the chapter in which the list/poem occurs and in which this becomes clear is, it seems, rarely read (cf. e.g., 331-7 on the lack of a free standing reader and especially the statement that a 'text cannot be overwhelmed by an irresponsible reader', 336). Nevertheless it should perhaps be acknowledged that, given the large number of misunderstandings generated (e.g., Blakemore, 1992:172; Pilkington, 1989:121), the list/poem has often served to confuse rather than clarify the issues.

The extent of Noble's misreading of Fish is clearly seen when he writes that

Fish's hermeneutics entails that there is no question that a sufficiently ingenious interpretive community could not get a set text to answer, because as Fish himself explains, 'while there are always mechanisms for ruling out readings, their source is not the text, but the presently recognised interpretive strategies for producing the text. It follows then that no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one' [quoting 1980:347] (1995:239).

Yet this completely ignores Fish's argument that there is 'a text in this and every class if one means by text the structure of meanings that is *obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force*'

(1980:vii—my italics). Rather, it is the case that a particular reading can arise only where a community with the necessary interpretive assumptions is in existence, and it is then encountered as a solid object, not as a malleable entity. When Noble argues in one example that while a pipe may be seen as a telescope by Galileo, no-one sees it as a ‘steamroller or a killer whale’ (1995b:7), he merely demonstrates the absurdity of his own misunderstanding—nothing in Fish’s hermeneutics even begins to suggest that a pipe will *necessarily* be seen as a killer whale. The quotation of Fish (mis)used here by Noble does not imply an infinite relativism in which all interpretations can be chosen and are therefore possible, but rather implies a view in which the infinite—that is, the open-ended—number of contexts and communities which may occur in the future means that no readings can be rejected *a priori*—even one as absurd as the pipe as a killer whale; the number of interpretations can never be said to be complete.<sup>84</sup> Even if it seems certain that a pipe may never be seen as a killer whale, it cannot be said that this is so because of the ‘thing in itself’ since Fish has argued that any such access is impossible. This can only be asserted—and even then, not proven—on the grounds that the existence of a context or community in which such an interpretation could be the case is virtually impossible to imagine; Noble’s killer whale is actually a red herring.

On hearing a communication the listener does not simply read off the meaning passively and attribute it to no-one. According to Fish, ‘[w]ords are intelligible only within the assumption of some context of intentional production, some already-in-place

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<sup>84</sup> Readers of Noble’s type may also apply this particular confusion to Moore’s discussion of ‘bottomless interpretation’ (1986:716), and to Gill’s use of the term ‘indefinite’ (1983:53). The solution to this problem of definition can easily be exemplified by a consideration of any one of these words or phrases. For example, there are two very common definitions of the word ‘infinity’. On the one hand, it can be used to indicate a situation in which interpretation has no hermeneutical constraints at all and so an infinite number of readings are available in the sense that all readings are equally possible. On the other hand, it may also define the ‘number’ of readings available when some hermeneutical constraints are operative. In this latter case, there exists a space within those constraints in which multiple readings can arise. Since there is no way of exhausting the interpretive possibilities of this space, the number of interpretations available in this situation can also properly be described as infinite or bottomless or indefinite. It is this confusion in particular which is the cause of the (unwarranted) fear with which some theologically minded hermeneuticians regard the work of Fish.



predecision as to what kind of person, with what kind of purposes, in relation to what specific goals in a particular situation, is speaking or writing' (1989:295). In other words, Fish consistently implies that all human beings ascribe an intention, a purposefulness or directedness, to every communication, always constructing for themselves an author or speaker who has uttered or written that text (1989:99-100, 294-5; 1995:14).<sup>85</sup> It is useful at this point to reconsider one of Noble's examples, that of Kuhn's reading of Aristotle, and attempt to redescribe it in these terms. Noble makes much of a reader re-reading a text with increasingly accurate results (his 'hermeneutical spiral'). But it can be argued that Kuhn's initial reading of Aristotle was problematic only because the Aristotle who appeared to have authored the work was not the Aristotle whom Kuhn had expected. He became, in effect, absurd, even a-historical and the dissonance generated by this constructed author was such that Kuhn was forced to reconsider the text. The second Aristotle he constructed was, however, much more coherent, and Kuhn, now satisfied with this reading, had found 'Aristotle'. But the feeling of satisfaction involved, the feeling of nearness to the author, results not so much from the greater accuracy of the second reading—though we all might agree, as members of a historical critical interpretive community, that it is more accurate—as from its closer relationship to Kuhn's expected author.

Despite his claim to be a localist (1994:282), Fish does actually assume certain *universals* with regard to human communication. Membership of interpretive communities is clearly not optional but is rather to be considered universal, and so is the existence of a universal approach to understanding communication, whether

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<sup>85</sup> Brett has argued against Fish that a distinction must be made between motives and communicative intentions: 'the whole point of a lie, for example, is that a speaker's deeper intent is detachable from his or her linguistic meaning' (1993:28). But Brett's point requires refinement on two counts: first, intentionality for Fish does not reside in the mind of a writer but rather in the way in which readers encounter texts as purposeful, as intentional. It is therefore a moot point whether any given statement is a lie or not. But, second, viewing any text as intentional with Fish does not necessarily mean accepting said statement as true or accurate because—with the possible exception of self-contained formulations like tautologies—such verification is *always* judged in reference to the extra-textual. The difference between a true statement and a lie is simply that the same assumption—that of truthfulness—is being used to categorise the intent of each when different assumptions should be applied to the latter; i.e., the originator of the former is untrustworthy.

spoken or written, as 'purposeful' or 'intentional'.<sup>86</sup> Although this latter claim implicitly underpins Fish's work on hermeneutics and arises from his philosophical and literary critical work, he has not been concerned to discern its source or, more importantly here, to describe its implications for the process of interpretation. In what follows, a theory which has been specifically developed around this point will be introduced, not necessarily in order to provide a theoretical foundation for Fish's claim about intentionality—its own theoretical claims about the origins of this tendency still require much work—but rather to demonstrate in more detail the effects of such a claim upon interpretation.<sup>87</sup> Ironically, given Noble's own attempted justification of intentionality through linguistics, the theory is one currently arousing much interest within that discipline—that of Relevance.

## B. Relevance Theory and Constructions of the Author

The theory of relevance, as developed and articulated by D. Sperber and D. Wilson, originates in the groundbreaking work of the philosopher H.P. Grice. Grice

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<sup>86</sup> The mode of argumentation used here shows that this does not form some new foundation upon which to base interpretation—Fish is too canny to fall for that. That his position is a foundation is true—he notes that one always operates from foundations—but it is a foundation that is essentially the current result of an argument on the status of 'foundations' in general, and not a foundation in the sense used by foundationalists; it cannot be conclusively proven but is always open to refutation (1989:29-30).

<sup>87</sup> Taylor, in his book *Mutual Misunderstanding*, describes the approaches of both Relevance theorists and Fish to communication (along with a number of other theories), his aim being to avoid what he terms the transcendental claim that they are correct *because* understanding takes place. The former he describes as 'naturalism with a twist', a reference to its theoretical grounding in cognitive theory. The claim is that if cognition works in accordance with the search for relevance then we can understand each other because of this mutually shared mechanism (1991:133-36). Fish, however, is described in terms of the tendency of human beings to believe that they understand, to be satisfied with what they know if further communication does not suggest misunderstanding (1991:167-84).

It is significant, however, that Taylor largely misses the importance of Fish's claim that hearers ascribe intentionality to the words of a speaker. Similarly, if one considers the risk elements of Relevance theory, then links can also be made in terms of understanding as achieving satisfaction. Despite the differences on a theoretical level (and to which future research may suggest a resolution), there are very close links between the actual ways in which Relevance and Fish account for meaning and communication, and these suggest that—for the moment—the two can usefully be set side-by-side as mutually illuminating.

argued that human communication was governed by 'reasonable' norms based in human cognitive processes:

Our talk exchanges...are characteristically, to some degree at least, co-operative efforts; and each participant recognises in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction...We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected...to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (1989:26)

This Grice designated the 'co-operative principle', and he broke it down into a series of 'maxims', summarised here by D. Blakemore (1992:26):

*Maxims of Quantity*

- 1) Make your contribution as informative as required
- 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

*Maxims of Quality*

- 1) Do not say what you believe to be false
- 2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

*Maxims of Relation*

- 1) Be relevant

*Maxims of Manner*

- 1) Avoid obscurity of expression
- 2) Avoid ambiguity
- 3) Be brief
- 4) Be orderly

The Theory of Relevance as articulated by Sperber and Wilson (from 1986 onwards) is developed from Grice's co-operative principle and involves the assertion that one of his maxims, that of relation or of 'relevance', can be used to account for all human communication.<sup>88</sup> All of the other maxims, whether of manner, quality, or

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<sup>88</sup> Although Sperber and Wilson have concentrated primarily on spoken communication, subsequent theorists have shown great interest in a 'literary pragmatics' (cf. e.g., the volume of essays

quantity, are, they suggest, types of 'being relevant'. Although some have attempted to ground Gricean communication models in areas such as the nature of society or culture (e.g., Leech, 1983), Sperber and Wilson have followed Grice's lead and have argued that Relevance should be understood as being grounded in a theory of cognition, signifying a property of human mental processes. Cognition is, for Sperber and Wilson, modular, consisting of a set of independent but linked systems which convert sense data into information that may be either stored or further processed. Language is seen, following J. Fodor (1983), as a system which allows the processing of visual and audio information into representations with a logical form (1995:71-75, 257-58); Blakemore gives as examples, 'David isn't here' and 'Barbara's in town' (1992:149). These 'represent' thoughts but are inevitably incomplete, the gap between thought and communication being crossed through inference. 'Inference' is the name for the deductive process in which interpreters make sense out of what they hear or read by attributing a context to a semantic sentence such as 'David isn't here' in order for it to be interpreted as an utterance, as a contextualised communication. Meanings are not, therefore, simply encoded into words and then decoded but are rather offered into a contextualised space in which the intended hearers (or readers) 'infer' the meaning of the communication from both what they hear *and* whatever specific contextual information they have been presupposed by the communicator to possess. But how does each recipient know which contextual information to apply to any given utterance?<sup>89</sup>

Sperber and Wilson explain the principle of Relevance as containing two postulates:

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*Literary Pragmatics*, edited by Sell, 1991; Sell's article on 'Literary Pragmatics' in the *Dictionary of Languages and Linguistics*, 1994; and the work of Pilkington, 1989, 1991; and Tanaka, 1994).

<sup>89</sup> This emphasis on the contextuality of the communication already shows some strong connections between Fish's account of literature and Relevance's accounts of communication. Fish's discussion of Hirsch's contextless phrase, 'the air is crisp', in which he shows that Hirsch is simply ignoring the context in which its reception takes place (1980:309-10), could serve equally well in the work of Sperber and Wilson as an example of the failings of older formalist approaches to linguistics.

- (1) that human cognition tends<sup>90</sup> to be geared to the maximisation of relevance, and
- (2) that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (1995:260).

Because a cognitive theory of relevance must by definition be innate, Sperber and Wilson are clearly implying that it cannot *not* be practised by any human being (1995:261-66). In interaction, both speaker and hearer are always entitled to assume that what is being said to them is maximally relevant to them. The originator of the communication must make assumptions as to how much information the recipient requires when formulating a propositional representation of the thought to be communicated. The propositional form, in limited instances, may resemble the speaker's thought completely (although not literally). More frequently, the resemblance is an approximation of the thought because the speaker 'aims for optimal relevance and not at literal truth' (1995:233), their choice depending upon the contextual cues they deem best suited for that act of communication. That representation when uttered carries with it a number of explicatures and implicatures which may be realised by the recipient. Both explicatures and implicatures are contextual assumptions or implications that are communicated to hearers/readers in the course of being relevant in communication, the communicator risking that the audience will infer meaning from them and fill the interpretative gaps. In Blakemore's account of Relevance, a hard distinction is made between these two with an explicature being that (or part of that) which is communicated explicitly by the semantic content of the utterance; it is a blueprint which merely requires expansion and does not go beyond the words themselves (1992:59). For Sperber and Wilson, however, this gives the impression that an explicature is a dyadic semantic unit such as one finds in a formalist code model, involving no inference. Instead they argue that the distinction between explicatures and implicatures is not one of kind but one of degree; both involve

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<sup>90</sup> The occurrence of the word 'tends' here is not meant to imply that the mind has a choice of maximising relevance or not, but rather to allow for the failure of human cognitive systems through inefficiency or limitations (Sperber and Wilson 1995:262-63).

inference, but the former requires less than the latter; a range of assumptions is communicated with differing degrees of inferential processing requirements and those at one end are defined as explicatures and those at the other as implicatures (1995:182).

The recipient assumes that the 'intended' meaning of the communication is that which is produced when they have processed the utterance to a certain degree; a degree which they can assume will be that which requires the least work from them. Hearers search for relevance and not literal truth when interpreting communication and they infer as much context as needed to achieve a satisfactory meaning (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:46-50). In other words, the search for relevance is not open-ended but is limited by notions of sufficiency and efficiency. Many readings could be relevant, but in practice a—more or less—limited number of readings apply because it is not necessary for the hearer or reader to process the utterance further than the intersection at which the presumption of relevance encounters the limitations of economy. (As an aside, it is worth noting that the notion of deconstructing a text, concerned as it is with demonstrating the ultimate lack of solidity to any text, can only be viewed from a relevance theory perspective as technically 'irrelevant'.)

There are certain points which remain troubling about the relevance account of communication. On the one hand, the theory has been on the scene for fifteen or so years and has proved itself a useful tool in explicating communication (cf. e.g., Tanaka on advertising, 1994). It appears that certain aspects of the theory are probably correct, especially with regard to the role of inference and contextuality in meaning production and to its account of the empirical data (which essentially mirrors Fish's conclusions). On the other hand, its theoretical account of why relevance should be accepted as the innate basis of all 'human' communication is at a relatively early stage of development and requires further exploration. Such innatism, for example, serves to draw attention to examples of human communication which do not proceed by the principle of relevance; autistic children, for example, do not appear to have an innate tendency towards relevance in communication, but are they less human for that?

Nevertheless, the claim put forward by Sperber and Wilson (and by Fish), that human beings *in general* do attribute intention to communications they encounter, has both a strong evidential base and is based on the present state of the study of cognition. Therefore, their account of the mechanics of how communication occurs and the implications of its nature can be cautiously accepted and used here in order to explain further the limitations of communication and the resultant state of the biblical 'text'.

In linking Relevance theory to the work of Fish, I am suggesting that Sperber and Wilson's hearer of an oral communication is in exactly the same position as Fish's reader of a text (cf. the attempt to develop a 'literary pragmatics' in Sell, 1991). The hearer/reader of the oral communication/text assumes certain things about the utterance being heard/read. These may include assuming that it is a direct one-to-one communication highly relevant to that individual. Or that the utterance may be part of someone else's letter, the reading of which by subsequent readers involves the assumption that they are not the person(s) at whom the communication was originally aimed. Or perhaps, as R. Bauckham has recently argued with the Gospels, that these communications were intended for an indefinite audience rather than a specific one (1998:44-46), and therefore one perhaps including even them. Whatever construction of the intent of the communication is ultimately accepted, the recipient understands it in terms of its optimal relevance to them, and the author they construct is dependent upon the textual and contextual material available to them as they read.

In Fish's essay 'With the Compliments of the Author', an example of how this process works is unintentionally provided (1989:37-67). Fish—according to his true account/fictitious story (?)—is preparing to teach J. Derrida's book *Of Grammatology*, and out of his copy falls a slip on which is typed, 'With the Compliments of the Author'. Fish then tries to understand this phrase in a manner which exemplifies the relationship between the principle of relevance and constructions of the author. He first asks who sent him the book. Was it Derrida, whom he had briefly met? Or G. Spivak the translator, whom he knew? Was it the John Hopkins Press, of whose editorial board he was a member? He does not know. So, Fish asks, does this failure

demonstrate the superiority of face to face communication over that mediated by the words on the slip of paper in his hands? Does this result in a hierarchy of utterances/texts ranging from the most to the least, to quote Culler (1975:133), 'orphaned'?

Fish's answer is that all texts are orphaned, but differently. He proceeds to imagine a context in which he knows that the slip of paper came from Derrida, and then asks if his position is now different to the one that he had previously occupied. Obviously, in one sense the answer is yes; he is no longer asking if the 'author' of the 'text' was Spivak or the John Hopkins Press. But what is the significance of this difference? Fish is still left with the problem of interpreting a message from Derrida, and must ask what 'he' intended by the words. Perhaps Fish is simply on a list and Derrida would answer, 'Who is Stanley Fish?' when asked. Perhaps in the light of Derrida's work, irony is intended. Of course, Fish could ask Derrida to his face and demonstrate the superiority of face to face communication by hearing Derrida's own explanation. Or could he? Fish notes that even this case is open to further questioning. Does Derrida mean what he writes and then says? Fish's conclusion is that he can never be 'certain' what the phrase means even when Derrida tells him what it means face to face. Insecurity may lead to Fish doubting Derrida's word, regardless. No matter how immediate, all communication is mediated and its interpretation is always dependent upon extra-textual features. But this does not mean that Fish is forever condemned to uncertainty but rather that certainty and uncertainty are not determined by either a lack of proximity or the loss of objective proof but rather by the acceptance and incorporation of contextual evidence. In other words, when the reader is 'satisfied' with his/her interpretation (Fish, 1989:42), optimal relevance has been achieved. Good communication is about satisfaction and not about clarity and objective evidence.

All texts are read in context and their meaning is related to that setting. Equally, their authors are constructed as much when face-to-face as when mediated by an approximately two thousand year old biblical text. The application of the principle



of relevance in each case involves the use of extra-textual information to make decisions as to the text's meaning and the meaning is decided when the reader is satisfied that he/she has done justice to the text. Returning to the notion of 'canonical intertextuality' suggested by Childs, it can be seen that the 'author' of the biblical text is a multi-layered entity which the canonical reader constructs as he/she reads a disparate group of collected texts, each of which has been formed into a whole to a greater or lesser degree. In Fish's sense, there is an 'author/intention' of the whole, but such an author/intention is derived from a synthetic reading of a large number of other 'authors/intentions'; a reading which is the product of a balancing act between the different forces at work in Childs's canonical approach.

### C. A Critique of a Perspectival Approach: Anthony C. Thiselton

Fish's 'perspectival' approach has not gone unchallenged in his own field, though none has, as yet, decisively refuted his position (cf. e.g., the criticisms of Culler, 1983; Freund, 1987; Spikes, 1990; Worthen, 1991; and Norris, 1990; a number of these criticisms have been already been broached in section IIIC earlier). But, in the light of my own experience of the most common criticisms of Fish within theological circles, I have decided that it would be more fruitful to concentrate on what is easily the most important and influential critique of Fish in terms of biblical hermeneutics and Christian theology, that of A.C. Thiselton.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Other substantial critiques have come from Jeanrond and Vanhoozer. Both, however, are clearly influenced by the same interests which inform Thiselton's work, and may be offered the same response (for which, see below). Jeanrond, for example, insists that these texts demand a theological reading, and regards other readings as partial at best (1993:95). But this simply begs the question, 'What is a full reading?' If a reading can be offered which takes account of all the textual data which is apparent from its perspective, on what basis can that reading be criticised as being less than full (cf. e.g., Recse's close reading of *Jude* with little theological content, 1995). Clearly, his definition of the text as theological is drawn from his own prior reading of the texts and it follows that any reading which is less than full is simply one which is in disagreement with his 'full' text.

Described specifically by one reviewer, Blomberg, as 'readable' (1999:85), it may be that Vanhoozer's book *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (1998) will replace Thiselton as the standard 'foundationalist' response to such as Fish. However, when Blomberg on that basis continues, 'until one has attended carefully to something other than oneself and has allowed for the possibility of a text to transform us (*possibilities that are logically incompatible with purely reader-oriented theories of*

According to Thiselton, the key issue in hermeneutics concerns the ability of a text to reform a group *from outside* (1992:537).<sup>92</sup> In order for this to take place, he believes that the text must be defined as a relatively objective non-changing entity which every group must encounter as it stands. Thus, Thiselton believes that Fish's approach would be disastrous for Christian theology if it were true because Fish sees the text as constituted by the interpretive practices of the community and not as a free standing entity.<sup>93</sup> Rather fortunately for Christian theology, then, Thiselton also believes Fish's position to be fatally flawed (1992:541). The error which he believes Fish has committed is that of believing that one has a choice only between formalism or what he terms 'radical pragmatic anti-formalism'. This betrays a

fundamental philosophical weakness... [which] lies in failure to come to terms with the major transcendental questions which stem from Kant, in which very careful and rigorous attention is given to the working distinction between how the knowing human subject or agent *conditions* raw data and what this subject or agent *constructs* independently of raw data. *Do social contexts condition or do they construct social realities, including texts?* (1992:541-2—his italics).

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*interpretation*) one has not read responsibly' (1999:86—my italics), it becomes apparent that the same error which afflicts Thiselton's work—a caricaturing of Fish—also appears in Vanhoozer's. Its readability may therefore simply mean that those errors will be even more widely disseminated!

<sup>92</sup> Jeanrond also echoes this basic need for the hermeneutical project (1988:112-5). Though both Jeanrond and Thiselton sometimes seem more driven by historical or theological necessity than by the desire to simply offer a valid hermeneutical account of plain experience, we might nevertheless agree with their basic point. Cross community readings do seem to happen and it is therefore incumbent upon any hermeneutical account to explain that feature of experience. This section will seek to answer the two questions which then arise: first, is Thiselton's account—I have already problematised Jeanrond's position above—capable of explaining this feature while remaining theoretically sound? Second, does Fish's account fail to account for this feature? If it is found that the answer to both these questions is no, then it may be asked how Thiselton succeeds in filling any real lack in Fish.

<sup>93</sup> In a review of Thiselton's book, *New Horizon's in Hermeneutics* (1992), Morgan echoes this sentiment: 'Most theologians will agree with [Thiselton] that the kind of textual indeterminacy advocated by Stanley Fish would rapidly dissolve the Christian tradition' (1993:187). Watson has also accepted such a view of Fish (1994:124-36).

Certainly some of those with whom I have personally discussed Fish's work have taken this view. Vanhoozer, for example, told me in 1995 that he could not do theology if Fish was right (the depth of Vanhoozer's feelings against Fish is demonstrated by his recent publication of a volume entitled *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*). Others, however, have seemed less convinced by Thiselton's reading of Fish, and this present work owes much to their published efforts and, in some case, their personal encouragement.

Fish, according to Thiselton, is guilty of ignoring the constraining influence of raw data upon the interpretations of human subjects and communities, being a relativist who argues that social realities are subject to an infinite range of whatever an infinite number of interpretive communities makes of them. Thiselton suggests that a truer picture would be gained by an appropriation of L. Wittgenstein.

When he looked at language, Wittgenstein observed that *some* language games could be thought of in entirely context-relative terms, but *for the most part* 'we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing'. In other words, although social practices of given communities do indeed provide a background which contextually shapes concepts and meanings, overlapping and interpenetration also offer *certain* criss-crossings which constitute trans-contextual bridges. Sufficient bridging can occur for Wittgenstein to suggest that *in many cases* a trans-contextual frame of reference for meanings can be found in 'the common behaviour of mankind'. It is not the case, as Fish suggests it is, that we must choose between the sharply-bounded crystalline purity of formalist concepts and the unstable concepts of contextual pragmatism. Concepts *may* function with a *measure* of operational stability, but with 'blurred edges'. Difference of social context and practice may push or pull them into relatively different shapes but do not *necessarily* change their stable identity. For Wittgenstein... 'concepts with blurred edges' are situated on middle ground along the road from formalism to pragmatism (1992:541—my italics).

It is these trans-contextual bridges which give Thiselton the solid Bible he needs in order to confront all humanity with the 'word of God'.

#### D. A 'Fishian' Response to Thiselton

There are difficulties with Thiselton's position, however. His discussion of 'raw data' and its role in generating hermeneutical constraints is problematic: How can one make sense of Thiselton's notion of 'raw data'? What can it either do or mean? Fish claims that there is no way to move from such data to the human subject without interpretation, and Thiselton does not explicitly deny this. There is no essential difference, it seems to me, between Thiselton's being conditioned by raw data and

Fish's having to interpret raw data; one still does not have access to raw data itself. Thiselton may perhaps choose to argue that common human experience indicates that consistent raw data exists but since he is already using the latter to justify the former such an argument would be circular; one could also just as easily argue that common human experience indicates a common human interpretative capacity for ordering disorganised raw data. Thus one can *claim* that raw data exists but one cannot *demonstrate* it outside of conditioning or interpretation; it cannot be made to do any real work in constraining interpretation. As R. Rorty puts it, 'to say that we must have respect for unmediated causal forces [that is, raw data] is pointless' (1985:4). If we cannot access 'raw data', this Reality with a capital R, then raw data can supply no foundation upon which to build a theory of hermeneutical commonality and we have no epistemological grounds on which to argue that Thiselton is right. Clearly, his suggested answer to the problem of communication between communities, 'raw data', cannot provide commonality to the constraints operative on any given community; its very inaccessibility means that it can never be invoked to deny an interpretation, no matter how 'ludicrous'.

But a further problem arises with Thiselton's argument that Fish's work entails the construction of social realities 'independently of raw data', leaving fishian interpretive communities completely unconstrained and able to exist in an infinite number of forms, offering infinite numbers of unchallengeable interpretations of any text. This seems to me to be a fundamental mis-reading of Fish, however, which is virtually identical to that of Noble. If Fish could be shown to be indicating that every perspective was indifferently available to every community, then one could, with Thiselton, say that such interpretive communities were totally unconstrained. But this is not the case. Fish's point is not that interpretive communities are unconstrained but rather that any constraints are themselves either internal to the community or the products of interpretation. In fact all communities are constrained by their interpretive strategies, and are unable to choose interpretations as and when they choose—their texts are solid from where they read.

Since communication does appear possible, it is necessary to ask how the Fish described here (rather than Thiselton's misrepresentation) would account for interpretation as it occurs across community boundaries. In his view of hermeneutics, there are two factors which may provide an answer to this question; here designated, 'universal commonality' and 'hermeneutical growth' or perhaps better, 'hermeneutical change'. The first of these indicates that interpreted reality which may be rendered by humanity's universal interpretive strategies, through a 'reality' with a small 'r'. Such a view of commonality avoids the need to argue for the influence of raw data. If a universal commonality does exist, it would appear that some interpretive communities are wide enough to embrace all of humanity. That such universal interpretive strategies do exist in Fish's work is demonstrated by his insistence on the way that all human beings reading texts ascribe an intention to that text (1989:99-100; 1995:14), but, of course, defining which facts are universal facts is likely to be virtually impossible (cf. this is the core of Fish's argument with Iser, e.g., 1989:74-86).

The second factor can be seen at work in some of Fish's examples of how communication takes place. In his essay *Is there a Text in this Class?* Fish utilises as an example the comment of one of his students to one of his colleagues, 'Is there a text in this class?' (1980:303-21; but cf. also 1980:329-39). The colleague's immediate reaction was to say yes and name the text, *The Norton Anthology of Literature* (1980:305). However, the student did not mean this but was rather asking does a text exist as an objective entity? In his discussion of this example, Fish argues that in order to hear the comment as it was intended to be heard the hearer must either already be in a position to hear or must move into a position from which the comment can be understood (1980:314-6). In this case, this can happen because Fish's colleague is aware of a number of 'rubrics' within which the sense of the comment can be examined, and eventually the professor arrives at, 'Ah, there's one of Fish's victims' (1980:313-4), a victim who can ask if the text exists objectively by using the phrase, 'Is there a text in this class?' If these rubrics had not been available, however, Fish writes that there would have been a need for the speaker to 'make a new start,

although she would not have to start from scratch (indeed starting from scratch is never a possibility); but she would have to back up to some point at which there was a shared agreement as to what was reasonable to say so that a new and wider basis for agreement could be fashioned' (1980:315). The move which enables one to understand an utterance through the acquisition of these 'rubrics' through common roots indicates that at a certain level Fish's approach does allow the possibility of what Thiselton calls trans-contextual meaning through hermeneutical growth; the acquiring of a position from which to hear an utterance as intended by its speaker.

The question then arises as to the relationship between a possible universal commonality and a community's context-specific interpretation. Although Thiselton's use of Wittgenstein's stable but fuzzy-edged concepts may be understood in fishian terms—indeed this may actually be what was intended by Wittgenstein himself<sup>94</sup>—it is clear that this stability is not true of a hundred percent of all concepts as my italicising of words such as *some*, *for the most part*, *certain*, *in many cases*, *may*, *measure*, and *necessarily* in the quotation of Thiselton on page 125 shows; thus one cannot say that all concepts are stable with fuzzy edges, although many may be. At this point, Wittgenstein's comments about context-specific language games become significant, and it must be concluded that they play a larger part in interpretation than Thiselton would allow. This is not to say that such games are self-contained and have no relationship to a possible universal commonality. But concepts may be interpreted differently or not at all depending upon one's context or experience of interpreted reality. For example, one problem in rendering the New Testament to the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa is the difficulty of translating the concept 'kiss'; the Dogon do not, it seems, kiss, and the New Testament word which was previously

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<sup>94</sup> There is considerable and continuing disagreement between interpreters of Wittgenstein as to whether or not his later work in the *Philosophical Investigations* is a continuation or a rejection of his earlier work in the *Tractatus* (cf. e.g., Thiselton, 1980:357-62; Pears, 1971:13). Wittgenstein himself, therefore, does not provide wholly unambiguous support for Thiselton's position, something further demonstrated by those who see strong links between Wittgenstein and Fish (cf. e.g., Fish, 1994:293-94). Also noteworthy is Scalise's attempt to reconstruct Childs using the hermeneutics of a 'non-foundational' Wittgenstein as support (1994a:17-41).

rendered as 'mouth-sucking' in early translations has now been rendered by a general term for embrace.<sup>95</sup> This problem brings us back to Fish's interpretive communities; there may be universal concepts involved (though Fish has shown no great interest in this except perhaps implicitly by his refutation of Iser's concept of a semi-solid text, describing himself as a localist, 1994:282), but these are mixed with context specific concepts which may only be rendered to others through hermeneutical change.

This last point addresses Thiselton's main concern and the reason for his attacks on Fish, once again the caricatured relativist; namely, that a group cannot be reformed from the outside or, in Christian terms, a group may be unable to hear the gospel—something no Christian theologian would easily concede! It seems to me that Fish's position does not deny the possibility of a group being reformed from outside, but rather only the foundation from which such a reform would take place. With patience, the gospel—or in Thiselton's terms, the Bible—can probably be rendered intelligibly to all; not because there is an objective biblical text, but because a critique of community assumptions can be offered from the non-foundational position taken up by the proclaiming Church and its Bible which would be understood both through commonality and the hermeneutical growth of the community being evangelised. To say 'probably' here indicates the wearing of two hats; in terms of hermeneutics one cannot say with absolute certainty that this is possible (although it does seem likely) but in terms of Christian theology one can be certain that God would have left no-one unable to hear the gospel. This tension is unresolvable in theory and one can only work towards a resolution in praxis.

For Thiselton, seeing the Bible as the product of a community's reading strategy means that 'notions such as grace or revelation must be...illusory.... The message of the cross remains a linguistic construct of a tradition' (1992:549). But this ignores the role of the Church or 'community of faith' as the setting of the text. On

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<sup>95</sup> Similarly, major problems have been encountered with translating New Testament language about sheep and lambs for people who do not keep sheep; difficulties abound in trying to relate these concepts to animals such as pigs. I am grateful to my fellow student, Sharon Gray, for these examples drawn from her experiences in West Africa as a Bible translator.

the basis of its shared understanding of God, the scriptures, and its tradition, the concern of the Church has been to preach the gospel of Christ crucified, not as a linguistic construct plucked out of the air as Thiselton seems to believe, but as a true witness to a 'Reality' which exists beyond interpretation but is encountered and known *only by faith* and not because of an epistemologically solid text (see my earlier discussion of Childs on 'referentiality', pages 77-80). It is not necessary to understand the non-foundationalist approach to be indicating that nothing exists beyond interpretation but a Nietzschean void. Since 'non-foundationalism' (and its sometimes co-terms 'anti-realism' and 'post-modernism') has given up its claim to be able to talk about such 'Reality' at all, denying that we can reach out beyond interpretation, it has nothing to say to a Christian theology of revelation which asserts that God has spoken to us, entering into our reality from the outside. Perhaps the most graphic illustration of the ramifications of this understanding of non-foundationalism is that whereas Thiselton and Noble might see D. Cupitt's projectionist 'Sea of Faith' theology as representative of non-foundationalist theology (1988), I would see the theology of Barth as representative of a more accurate understanding of the claims of non-foundationalism upon Christian theology (On Barth's relationship with Fish, see Saye, 1997; also noteworthy is Jenson's comment: 'If there is indeed such a thing as "post-modernism", Barth may be its only major theological representative so far', 1989:25). Since Thiselton's concerns about the wider theological picture seem to be unfounded and his own suggestion fundamentally flawed, I can see no hermeneutical reason why Christian theology cannot be done with a 'fishian' text, namely, the Bible as the canonical scriptures of the Christian Church. Indeed, it seems to me that, to judge from the history of exegesis, it has always been so. And until the foundation required by philosophical foundationalism is discovered, it will remain so.



#### IV. The 'Community of Faith' and the 'Interpretative Community': Preliminary Consequences of Adopting a Fishian Hermeneutic

##### A. The 'Community of Faith' as 'Interpretative Community'

How, then, does this relate to Childs's approach to the biblical texts? Clearly, his community of faith is an interpretive community which shares a specific task and in which what counts as evidence for theology is defined by community assumptions. Although recent interpretations of Wittgenstein have suggested that he thought of a language game as a small task in a particular localised context rather than as the larger task of a community (so Thiselton, 1992:540), it seems useful to conclude that Childs's community is engaged in a context specific task with some roots in the larger universal context, and that this task be conceived of as a language game; it is interesting to note at this point that Childs himself has referred to his approach as, to use 'Wittgenstein's expression, a language game' (1980b:52).<sup>96</sup>

In his non-foundationalist reconstruction of the canonical approach, Scalise takes the view of Childs's work as a language game further by suggesting that the interaction between the language games of particular church communities and their scriptures be seen in terms of Gadamerian tradition, the growth of a dialogue over time in which the 'text is a living tradition that "speaks" to the experience of the interpreter in both positive and negative fashion' (1994a:26). Although I have chosen to base my own non-foundationalist reconstruction of the canonical approach on Fish rather than Scalise's complex mixture of Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Ricoeur (see page 101, footnote 73), the phrasing of his comment here does raise two interesting points for a canonical approach in a non-foundationalist mode: first, as already noted, the very

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<sup>96</sup> Scobie has also explicitly suggested that the production of a canonical biblical theology is the task of a fishian interpretive community (1991a:47). In his second edition of *Reading the Old Testament*, published in 1996, Barton notes the similarities between the language used by Childs and Fish (213). He cautions that there is no evidence that Childs has been influenced by Fish—a point with which I agree (cf. Childs on reader response, 1993:xvi-xvii)—but notes that 'the parallel is still an interesting one'.

mention of Stanley Fish's name produces in some people's minds images of interpreters who are capable of making texts mean whatever they want. If that were the case, then the question of how the 'text' can act as a normative—or even as a descriptive—partner in a dialogue with the interpretive community which produced it would be a valid one.<sup>97</sup> But the notion that readers are free to make a text mean anything does not originate with Fish. In fact, the question of whether a text derived from community assumptions can be a dialogue partner is only problematic when considered abstractly. In practice, the community's assumptions will allow the text to speak as a two thousand year old witness to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church. Of course, sometimes community assumptions may over-ride the text—what Fowl and L.G. Jones, citing D. Bonhoeffer, call reading the text 'for oneself' rather than reading the text 'over against oneself' (1991:42)—but Childs's view of the texts as Scripture subject to the close attention of Old and New Testament specialists should help reduce the dangers of reading the text irresponsibly, 'irresponsible' being defined according to community assumptions.

The second point is that Scalise is clearly envisaging different interpretive communities with slightly different language games. In contrast, Childs, perhaps influenced by Barth, has consistently talked of *the* Church, *the* community of faith. However, his view that multiple readings are to be expected and old readings consigned to the history of interpretation clearly indicates that he can view the community as changing over time. But he does not explicitly consider the effect of different contextual settings on particular communities,<sup>98</sup> Brett characterising Childs as paying 'lip service' to the contextuality of interpreters (1994:283). One could, for

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<sup>97</sup> This seems to be Noble's understanding of a non-foundationalist canonical approach. He concludes that the implications of Fish's position 'would be disastrous for Childs's belief in a normative Bible which bears witness to Jesus Christ as an independent reality. On Fish's theory, the Church is necessarily its own ultimate authority, whatever doctrine of biblical authority it may profess—the Bible can only mean what the Church interprets it to mean, and it does indeed have that meaning through the church interpreting it that way' (1995a:211).

<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, Fowl and Jones also accept changing interpretations over a period of time but fail to consider the differing interpretations of two churches co-existing temporally in very different societal and cultural contexts (1991).

example, have two churches temporally side by side who, because of a contextual combination of different social, political or ecclesiastical factors, are interpreting the texts differently. Childs could respond to this challenge by seeing this variation as a consequence of the limited nature of both humanity and the task of biblical theology itself (perhaps echoing the rosy view of Patte who argues in his *Discipleship According to the Sermon on the Mount: Four Legitimate Readings, Four Plausible Views of Discipleship and their Relative Values* [1996] that the four ‘androcritical’ readings he is using may prove mutually enriching), but prior to the exegetical component of this thesis, it can only be concluded here that it remains to be seen how large a problem will arise from seeing Childs’s work as context dependent.

If Childs’s community/ies of faith can be redescribed in terms of Fish’s interpretive communities, then it may be asked what implications arise for his approach and its praxis. First, there are no consequences for the praxis of the approach; second, the claim to be reading *Sola Scriptura*, understood as using an essentialist ‘hard’ text, must be rejected; third, apologetic against the polemic of liberal foundationalists such as Barr becomes unnecessary; fourth, there needs to be a recognition of the autobiographical nature of the canonical approach and the canonical ‘text’. Finally, ‘objectivist’ terminology must be translated into the language of the ‘perspectival’.

## B. The ‘No Consequences’ Argument

In line with Fish’s own conclusion that no consequences for praxis follow from his theory (1989:315-41), it is possible to assert that such a view of Childs does not have consequences for the actual praxis of the canonical approach. Fish’s hermeneutic claims to provide a description of what is always happening when people read a text—to have rhetoricised criticism—but it does not claim to be able to tell any interpreter how to interpret (or even how to argue). If a historian and an exponent of the canonical approach both attempt to read the same text, Fish cannot tell them which of them is right or provide means by which their readings can be independently validated.

Because Fish still tends to read texts in the style of the slowed down manner of his early work on 'affective stylistics' (cf. Moore, 1986:712-13), the impression can be gained that this is the only way to read. But this would be incorrect; it is only the assumptions of a specific community which can define the right way to read and if a reading strategy does justice to those assumptions then it can continue in use regardless of its nature. (It is interesting to note that while the method of 'deconstruction' is, in terms of the theory of relevance, technically 'irrelevant', it is nevertheless practised by many.) In a sense then, it is the canonical approach which fully provides the way to read the biblical texts with only the hermeneutical justification for that style of reading being provided by the work of Fish.

### C. Loss of *Sola Scriptura*

The second consequence is to call into question the slogan of the Reformers, *Sola Scriptura*, scripture alone. If the text speaks only in a community setting, then this slogan—and the objectivist hermeneutic which has undergirded its modern use—can only be understood rhetorically as ideologically motivated, as hiding its own situatedness; the slogan must therefore be dropped or at least modified. S. Hauerwas and S. Long have used Fish's work to demonstrate the importance of the community of the Church in interpretation, arguing that 'Fish and the Roman Catholic Church [and the Orthodox Church, cf. 138] agree that a text cannot exist outside of an interpretive community. It is never read apart from a normative stance' (1989:136). But in their discussion of the Reformation, they write:

Wasn't it about making Scripture primary in the Church? The answer is yes and no. The Reformers were rightly concerned that Scripture act as a judge on the Church. Calvin argued that Scripture has authority from God and not the Church. Yet the truth of Scripture is only known through the Spirit, who, as Calvin says 'must penetrate into our hearts and persuade us that the Scriptures faithfully command what has been divinely commanded'. But Protestantism has tended to think that 'the spirit' could be identified with the text apart from the transformed heart.

Andrew Louth...argues that the *Sola Scriptura* principle gives rise to the notion of 'the objective meaning of Scripture' (1989:139).

Strangely, Hauerwas and Long then state that 'the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is a heresy which is the seed bed of fundamentalism' (1989:139). I say 'strangely' because it is the later development of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* into the doctrine of the objective text which they seemed to see as the heresy, rather than the doctrine as used by Luther and Calvin. This use of Fish, however, does allow one to see the difficulties of those who choose to absolutise the slogan; in contrast to the openly fishian Orthodox and Catholic Churches, who recognise the place of the community in interpretation, stands those such as D.A. Brueggemann who argues that 'the consistent message of Scripture is that it is God's own authority that demands their adoption. The text is a given because God himself has given it' (1989:326). But we must ask Brueggemann, 'if it is not the reading of an interpretive community of faith, whose understanding of the consistent message is this?' Clearly, any attempt to absolutise the text in this way is highly questionable in the light of the present state of the foundationalist/non-foundationalist debate in philosophical hermeneutics.

However, Hauerwas and Long's discussion of the role of interpretive communities is somewhat disingenuous. Childs writes about Barth: 'He was always against verbal inspiration. It was a misunderstanding of the function of the Bible. It made the Holy Spirit superfluous, [and] separated the Bible from the people of God, to whom it was given' (1969b:32). This is, it seems to me, Hauerwas and Long's position on developments from the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. But Childs adds: 'Barth always opposed the Roman Catholic view of the teaching magisterium, because it cramped the Spirit and its work,... one didn't confront doctrine but the Living God' (1969b:32). It seems likely that Childs's interpretive communities would have as their validating principles only the *Sensus Literalis* of the canonical scriptures, the scope of the text, Jesus Christ, Lord of the Church, and the Holy Spirit who actualises the text to its readers, and not the objectivity of the text or the magisterium. Thus, W. Kaiser's

complaint that Childs's approach leads back to Rome to authenticate the canon misses the point entirely (1981:81)!

#### D. Apologetic in a Fishian mode

The third consequence of Fish's approach is in the area of apologetics. Childs has constantly been accused of fideism by historical critical scholars; the debate between Childs and Barr has been described by Rendtorff as resembling a 'religious war' (1993:171,195; cf. also Sheppard, 1983). According to Barr, the word 'canon' effectively means 'Childs is right' (1980:15-16; 1983:147), with Childs handling historical criticism as a matter of appropriateness, and not of truth. Unfortunately for Barr, it is equally clear in the light of Fish's work that he can also be accused of fideism on exactly the same grounds. His continued insistence on using historical criticism must be translated as 'Barr is right', a point which Childs noted as long ago as 1972 when he wrote of the 'dogmatism' of historical criticism (1972a:713).

What both participants in this 'dialogue' need is to recognise and fully accept the contextual and ultimately dogmatic nature of their own positions (on the basis of their published works, Childs should find accomplishing this the slightly easier of the two). As Topping has pointed out, what is at stake here is a choice between two principles (1992:248-51). Barr is arguing for—or, more often, assuming—the foundational role of the Enlightenment tradition of free critical 'reason', and this supposedly supplies a flat ground upon which all must base their work. It is especially noteworthy that when Barr continually says of Rendtorff that he gives no reason for using the canonical text theologically (1999:441-47), he appears to give no great thought as to how he himself would answer this question *presumably because he regards his own position as obvious*. In contrast to Barr, Childs is arguing for the reformation principle of the primacy of scripture over reason. Fowl's characterisation

of discussion between Childs and Barr as ‘two people talking round each other’ is fully—and ironically—accurate (1985:176, footnote 13).<sup>99</sup>

But for Fish, Barr’s ‘obvious’ is not obvious at all. Barr’s flat ground does not exist, and thus Childs cannot be censored for not working according to Barr’s rules. Given the loss of a rationalistic ground upon which all discourses (including ecclesiastical ones) must be based, the language of fideism is clearly not applicable to the Barr-Childs debate, and is probably not applicable to theology in a general sense at all (rhetorically, though, it remains a powerful tool). A more constructive debate between these two scholars would recognise that the use of equally monistic language in advocating both historical criticism and the canonical approach cannot be based upon an intrinsic ‘text’ or on an obvious philosophical foundation. The competing truth claims of both approaches must be understood as theological in nature and argument begun there. Whether a possible synthesis lies at the end of such a road is, however, far beyond the scope of this thesis. For now, it is sufficient to note that Barr’s own position means that his attacks on the canonical approach are often largely misguided and need not be considered damaging.

#### E. Autobiography and the Canonical Reader

Given this re-description of Childs’s project and indeed his canonical text as the product of an interpretive community, the identity and ideology of that community is obviously relevant to the construction of the text under study. In the case of this thesis, it is clearly of some significance in evaluating the application of the canonical approach to know who this canonical reader/interpretative community is. Autobiographical criticism is becoming rather fashionable in biblical studies at present (cf. e.g., Staley, 1995), but it should be understood that there are some dangers in the practice. First, although a person may honestly claim that he or she is about to tell you

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<sup>99</sup> It is noteworthy that each has accused the other of almost totally misunderstanding their position (Childs, 1984b; and Barr, 1999:428-29).

who they are, such description is suspect on a number of grounds. How does anyone actually know who they are? How do anyone know what it is that is significant for you—the reader—to know about them? Such questions problematise the seemingly easy task of recounting a person's story because of their inability to either describe themselves in a neutral way or to know in advance what aspects of their self and the text it constructs will result in an interpretation which demands an accounting from a reader. Second, there is a possibility that the speaker may in fact be prevaricating, and the reader will be led to read the speaker's exegesis with a skewed picture in mind as to what person is behind the text and the uses to which the text may be put. Third, there is a sense in which the beliefs of a person or a community may only be uncovered by what they do. Ideological criticism may well be the best avenue into the interests and aims of the community reading the canonical text. But, despite these problems, it seems useful to place a description of the canonical reader, my 'self', here. The interpretive community/ies I represent and the text that they construct, read, and apply should both be open to criticism. Here is a beginning to that process.

In his introduction to *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Fish includes a list of words which illustrate some of the interpretive communities of which he is part (1989:30); what follows is a version of that list with myself as subject. I am a male, a husband, a son (eldest of two), a father (to one daughter), a brother, an uncle, a friend. I am white, English, a British subject, thirty-two years old, over-weight, short-sighted, middle class (I guess), a student in a secular department of Biblical Studies, a house-owner, a neighbour, a car owner, a city-dweller, (relatively) well-travelled, a trained photographer, an Anglican, a charismatic, an evangelical, a convert, and many more. But perhaps the most significant aspect of autobiography for my attempt to carry out a canonical approach to the biblical texts relates to the somewhat artificial position in which a student becomes a 'worshipping scriptural community' in himself in order to read the canonical texts, while attempting to preserve, if only in order to write my conclusion, the critical distance required by the rules of my Ph.D. I can say immediately that I want this approach to succeed, to be the rebuilding of the texts



which three years of undergraduate de(con)struction seem to have left as rubble. Certain aspects of the approach resonate strongly with my own Christian experience and, it has to be said, certain aspects of the positions of Childs's opponents jar very deeply with my personal philosophy. But my acceptance of Childs's approach is not at any price. I want to see the approach work and work well. In that sense then I am still standing back from a full acceptance of the approach. But it is in that sense that I also believe that I can critique the approach from—to a certain degree—within.

It remains to be seen how relevant the above exercise is to the conclusion of this thesis. However, such information is an essential part of what gives the following reading its shape, and is also responsible—at least in part—for the use to which that reading is or is not put.

#### F. Translating 'Objectivist' Terminology (Set One) into the 'Perspectival' (Set Two)

The final consequence of accepting a Fishian hermeneutic for the canonical approach is that Childs's set one terminology—that relating to 'objectivity'—must be recast in terms sensible to the kind of language which can be used to describe a consistent set two formulation of the canonical approach, to dress the canonical approach in 'perspectival' clothes. 'Text,' 'best text,' and 'illumination' are all terms which are problematic as they stand and require redefinition. Although it is possible at this point to predict *some* of the required terminological changes (the solid text becomes the *fishian* text), it seems more advisable to await the fuller discussion made possible by the exegetical component of this thesis.

#### G. Summary

It now seems clear that Childs's canonical approach with its two terminologies can be understood hermeneutically in such a way as to leave it essentially unchanged.

An objectivist reconstruction seems untenable in the current philosophical climate and so the redescription carried out here has been in terms of perspectivity; any objectivist terminology must therefore be understood as referring to the ‘object’ of a specific community, the Christian church.

In practice, the canonical approach is the ongoing exegetical project of a group of Church communities, each of which accepts the final form of the text as part of its normative constitution. The apologetics of the canonical approach need only be formulated in terms of its fidelity to the traditions of such a church and its ability to account for present experience of the world (cf. Tracey, 1975:23). Though the identity of each of these communities is inevitably reflected in their constructions of the canonical texts which forms their dialogue partner, this does not really matter because they are also encountering and reading the Old and New Testaments as two ‘solid’ historically grounded texts. If they insist on reading them to suit themselves, no-one can actually stop them, but there are limits—community specific ones, of course—about what the wider collection of Christian communities will accept as orthodox. In Hauerwas’s *A Community of Character*, he notes how, in R. Adams’s book *Watership Down*, the founding mythical stories of the Prince Rabbit used to tell the rabbits who and what they are *as rabbits* are either radically re-interpreted or left unread in communities which are no longer true to the traditional definitions of ‘rabbithood’ (1981:9-35). If a Christian community no longer tells the story in a way consonant with the—highly varied—tradition(s) of Christianity, then it will no longer be regarded as orthodox.

What remains to be seen are the effects of this view of the canonical approach on exegesis. Since good examples of the canonical approach are few in number, the remaining exegetical chapters of this thesis have a twofold purpose: first, to investigate the realities of carrying out a canonical exegesis per se. But, second, to be aware of the effect of contextual factors upon exegetical decisions. Am ‘I’ reading this text to suit myself?

## Chapter 4

### Preliminaries to a Canonical Exegesis of the ‘Sodom Narrative’

#### (Genesis 18-19)

##### I. The ‘Sodom Narrative’

###### A. Defining the ‘Sodom Narrative’

In chapter 2, two arguments were put forward which require preliminary consideration before turning to actual exegesis: the first concerned the *essential* role of narrative presuppositions, and the second, the *useful* role of diachronic studies of the text in shedding light upon the final form. With regard to the former, it was argued that a canonical exegesis of any given narrative text must always take account of its position within the largely sequential narratives contained within the Old Testament. It is necessary, therefore, to attempt to outline some of the presuppositions which underlie a canonically ‘later’ text such as Genesis 18-19. With regard to the latter, Childs’s emphasis on reading the canonical text against a detailed critical tradition history was rejected in favour of Provan’s view of diachronic studies as illuminating the text by bringing tensions within the text to light; any such areas of the text would then merit careful consideration in any account of a canonical text. Laying out the result of diachronic study before beginning exegesis as has been done here is not as essential as a preliminary detailing of narrative presuppositions. After all, other sources of illumination do not merit such treatment, being dealt with in the exegetical commentary of chapters 5 and 6 as and when they prove useful. But because of the numbers of such diachronic studies and because the question of how useful such studies are as a source of illumination is of particular interest to this thesis, I have decided to use only a single, though highly significant, diachronic study—that of Gunkel’s *Genesis*—as a ‘partner’ to the canonical exegesis offered here, as a test case.

An additional reason for placing the result of such a study on Genesis 18-19 in this preliminary section is its sheer complexity; if Gunkel's insights were to be raised on an ad hoc basis, a disproportionate amount of time would probably have to be spent explaining why these results arose. By providing an outline of Gunkel's work here, later references to the results of his diachronic study can be integrated into the commentary without such disruption.

Before turning to these two tasks, it is necessary to first justify the actual parameters of the text under examination. On beginning this study, my intention was to study the concept of God as Judge in both Testaments. With this in mind, this part of Genesis was chosen as a core text because it seemed an eminently suitable text from which to begin to investigate this concept within biblical texts. Its importance is in part due to the baldness of Abraham's question in Gen. 18:25, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?', but also significant is its relevance to the biblical picture of YHWH's judging of the later Israel descended from Abraham. It may also be added that this narrative is the first major text dealing explicitly with God's justice in the Old Testament. But after deciding on using this area of the text, the question arises as to how much text should be included in a detailed canonical study.

For most commentators, it is apparent that Abraham's question is located within a narrative unit extending from 18:1 to 19:38, and linked by the presence of the three ('two' in Gen. 19:1) visitors. Two points should be noted, however: first, W. Brueggemann has argued that Gen. 18:1-15 is only loosely linked with the subsequent narrative about the fate of Sodom, preferring to see it as the close of a narrative unit beginning with 16:1 (1982:162). In one sense, Brueggemann's position shows how arbitrary some of these decisions about 'narrative units' are; Abraham is introduced in v. 1 as an unidentified 'he', is then named only in v.6, but is nevertheless clearly identified by the grammatical antecedent of the pronoun in Gen. 17:26. But as J.A. Loader points out—and as my own exegesis will show—the current location of 18:1-15 makes it of fundamental importance in interpreting the debate over Sodom and the subsequent destruction of the cities of the plain (1990:15). Second, the concluding

story of Lot and his daughters in 19:30-38 takes place after the departure of the visitors, but is clearly both separate from the ensuing narrative of Abraham's sojourn in the Negev and dependent upon (and serving as closure for) the story of the destruction of Sodom itself.

In conclusion, though Gen. 18:25 (and 23-33 around it) may be at the heart of this narrative unit, to offer an adequate understanding of Abraham's question, an exegesis of—at least—18:1-19:38 proves necessary (so also e.g., Loader, 1990; Letellier, 1995; Rudin-O'Brasky, 1982; Wenham, 1994:32-65). Time and space limitations here mean that earlier material can only be dealt with in a preliminary and summarising fashion. Canonically, Gen. 18:25 forms part of the patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12-50) and is preceded by the primeval history of Genesis 1-11. In what follows an attempt is made to describe some of the necessary presuppositions of what I shall term the 'Sodom narrative' (Gen. 18:1-19:39) as they are detailed in Genesis 1-17.<sup>100</sup>

## II. Basic Readerly Presuppositions

### A. Areas of Knowledge Presupposed

The knowledge presupposed and therefore necessary to make sense of this text canonically falls, I would suggest, into four areas: first, knowledge of YHWH's promise to Abraham of descendants, relationship, and land; second, the reason why

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<sup>100</sup> It is a basic contention of this interpretation that the movement between the terms 'Sodom', 'Sodom and Gomorra', and 'Cities of the Plain' is basically irrelevant to the sense of the text, with the sole exception of the town of Zoar. This is made plain by the way in which Sodom's fate, as the city visited by the two men/angels, is linked with the Cities of the Plain in Gen. 19:24-25, and by the way in which the Old Testament relates the paradigmatic wickedness and punishment of these cities to different combinations of names (e.g., Sodom only, Isa. 3:9; Lam 4:6; Sodom and Gomorra, Deut. 32:32; Isa. 1:9-10; 13:19; Jer. 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Admah and Zeboiim, Hos. 11:8; all four in Deut. 29:22; and finally, Sodom and her daughters, Ezek. 16:48-49, 53, 56). With this in mind I shall generally use the term 'Sodom' to indicate the target of God's justice and any occurrence of each of these three terms may be taken to indicate all of them unless otherwise specified.

such a promise to Abraham was necessary in the first place; third, the relationship between Abraham and his kinsman Lot; and four, a general knowledge of later Yahwistic religion, including geographical and linguistic competency. The aim of what follows is to simply give content to these four areas of knowledge, with the exact role each plays in the interpretation of the Sodom narrative only becoming clear as detailed exegesis proceeds. A feature which is also of some significance in the interpretation of Genesis 18-19, the narrative aside in Genesis 13 of Sodom's destruction (v. 10) and of its sinfulness (v. 13) just before Abraham meets the King of Sodom (Gen. 14:17-24), will also be examined.

## B. The Promise to Abraham

The Sodom narrative includes references to events in the lives of Abraham (Abram until 17:5) and his wife Sarah (Sarai until 17:15),<sup>101</sup> and these should be understood in the light of the promise given to Abraham by YHWH, initially in Gen. 12:1-3, 7.

Now YHWH said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred<sup>102</sup> and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great. Be a blessing and I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves...(12:1-3)'. Then YHWH appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land' (12:7; 'Canaan', cf. 12:5-6).

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<sup>101</sup> For the sake of clarity, only the names Abraham and Sarah will be used. Since Genesis 17 and their renaming plays a relatively minor role in Genesis 18 and 19, this should result in no skewing of the canonical text.

<sup>102</sup> Hamilton suggests that *וּמְטוֹלְדָתָךְ* may be seen as a hendiadys with *מֵאֶרְצְךָ* and therefore translated as 'homeland' in the sense of Abraham's native land (1990:369). But his two suggested parallels, 24:7 and 31:13 differ in prefacing *טוֹלְדָת* with *אֶרֶץ*, and there seems little reason to regard this term as relating only to *מֵאֶרְצְךָ* rather than to the following *וּמְבֵיית אֲבֹתֶיךָ*. The term 'kindred' is therefore preferable (cf. BDB 409b).

Gen. 18:19, which contains YHWH's thoughts on his choosing of Abraham, constitutes, according to D.J.A. Clines, an 'allusion' to this promise (1978:37).<sup>103</sup>

For Clines, the promise to Abraham (and reiterated to the subsequent patriarchs) consists of three parts: the promise that Abraham would have 'descendants' and be a great nation,<sup>104</sup> the promise of 'relationship' between the deity and Abraham and his descendants,<sup>105</sup> and the promise of a 'land' to the nation descended from Abraham, the land of Canaan (1978:33-43; on the promises cf. also Alexander, 1982:28-32; Westermann, 1980).<sup>106</sup> Clines argues that, although these three are implied within each other, it may be said that Genesis 12-50 is predominantly concerned with 'descendants' (especially in the form of the tension in Abram's relationship—or lack of one—with his 'heir'), Exodus and Leviticus with 'relationship', and Numbers and Deuteronomy with the 'land' (1978:29; cf. 45-60). From the imperatives which frame the initial promise, 'go (לך) ... be a blessing (וְהָיָה לְבְרָכָה; 12:1-2)'<sup>107</sup> and later similar formulations (17:1, 18:19), it is apparent that these

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<sup>103</sup> It is interesting to note that a second edition of Clines's *Theme of the Pentateuch* has now been published in which he suggests that he would no longer be able to suggest a single theme without seeking to deconstruct it (1997:127-41). In the light of the hermeneutical argument of Chapter 3, it should be clear that while expending the energy to carry out that project is Clines's prerogative, it does not mean that his work cannot be used as part of a canonical reading; as I noted earlier, deconstruction is secondary to interpretation and technically irrelevant in the constitution of meaning within any interpretive community (see page 134).

<sup>104</sup> Clines cites the following as direct references within the Pentateuch to the 'promise of descendants': Gen. 12:2, 7; 13:15; 15:4f, 13, 16, 18; 16:10; 17:2, 4-7, 16, 19f, 21:12f, 18; 22:16ff, 26:3f, 24; 28:13f; 35:11; 46:3 (1978:32-33).

<sup>105</sup> 'Relationship': Gen. 12:2f, 17:1-11, 16, 17ff, 26:2, 24; 28:13, 15; 35:9f; 46:3; 48:21; Ex. 3:6, 12, 15f; 4:5, 23; 5:1; 6:6f; 7:16; Lev. 26:12. (1978:33-34)

<sup>106</sup> 'Land': Gen. 12:1, 7; 13:14f, 17; 15:7, 13, 16, 18; 17:8; 22:17; 26:2ff; 28:13, 15; 35:12; 46:3f; Exod. 3:8, 17; 6:6ff; 23:23-33; 34:24 (1978:36-37). Clines also lists around two hundred 'allusions' to the promises throughout the Pentateuch. (1978:37-43). Davies suggests that 'at this stage there is no commitment to give Abraham the land he is going to' (1995:98), but there seems little difficulty in seeing the promise of 12:1 as implicitly promising the land to Abraham.

<sup>107</sup> The rendering of the latter as an imperative by the MT has not, however, been universally accepted as correct. The 2<sup>nd</sup> person m.s. imperative form וְהָיָה is often repointed as a 3<sup>rd</sup> m.s. perfect (וְהָיָה as with the SP) and rendered as either a declarative 'and it [your name (v 2c)] will be a blessing' (cf. Skinner 1910:244, Speiser, 1964:85-86) or as a consequence giving '...so that it will be a blessing' (Yarchin, 1980:166). A further alternative is supplied by Wolf who translates the imperative as 'so that you will effect blessing' (1966:137, footnote 28; cf. also Westermann, 1985:144).

Although some of these suggestions may have merit, the primary reason for their being offered—resolving the perceived problematic MT—is questionable. The use of such a combination of

promises are contingent *from the very beginning* upon the behaviour of Abraham and his descendants (*contra* Alter, 1990:150). The promise is not earned, being freely given, but its fulfilment is dependant upon a correct response from the patriarch.<sup>108</sup> Clines sees the theme of the Pentateuchal narrative as a whole as illustrating the *partial fulfilment—and hence, the partial non-fulfilment—of these promises to the patriarchs* (1978:29).<sup>109</sup>

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imperative forms has parallels in Gen. 17:1 ('Walk before me and *be perfect*') and Exod. 3:10 (*Come, I will send you to Pharaoh. Bring forth my people*'), and the imperative form of  $\text{הָיִה}$  occurs in Gen. 17:1; Exod. 24:12; 34:2; Judg. 17:10; 18:9 (cf. Hamilton, 1990:369). But the probable main cause of emendation is undoubtedly the problematic (for some) question of contingency in the promise to Abraham in 12:1-2; Gunkel, for example, saw the promise in the final form of the text as a once freely given promise tainted by an overlay of contingency placed there by later legalistic redactors. This type of approach may be able see 12:1-3 as free of this contingency, but when imported into a synchronic study such as that of Alter, it leads to the dubious conclusion that the appearance of contingency in Gen. 18:19 can only mean that something new has been added to the covenant (1990:150).

In a canonical reading, however, the assumptions which undergird Gunkel's conclusion do not hold and it seems unproblematic to translate  $\text{הָיִה}$  with the MT as an imperative and to see contingency as constitutive of the covenant from the very beginning (for other recent studies which translate the text in this way, see Turner, 1990a:54, footnote 5).

<sup>108</sup> As Hamilton puts it:

[T]hese promises are absolute and not conditional. This emphasis shifts the promises away from the idea of a reward (something earned), to the idea of a gift (something unsolicited)..... This is not to say that Abraham is absolved of all responsibility. He is 'to walk before God and be blameless' (17:1). He must 'keep the covenant' (17:9). He is to do 'righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him' (18:19). A causal nexus between obedience and fulfilment is suggested by '*because you have done this...I will indeed bless you... because you have obeyed my voice*' (22:15-18)..... My point is not that human responsibility is obliterated. After all, even in a unilateral covenant there must be some reciprocity. What if Abraham had not gone out as the Lord told him? What if he had not believed? What if he had consistently chosen not to walk before God and be blameless? These options must have been open to Abraham unless we are prepared to say that as the chosen of the lord (18:19) God's grace was irresistible. My point is that human responsibility is repeatedly subordinated to God's word of promise. (1982:92-93—his italics).

<sup>109</sup> In contrast, Blenkinsopp argues that the 'possession of the land of Canaan is the basic component in the theme of the ancestral history,' (1992:111) the fulfilling of the promises being dependent upon Abraham's initial obeying of the command to leave his own country and go the land which God will show him. But this seems unnecessarily reductionistic; after all, what use is a land without descendants to populate it? What use is either of these things without the blessing of God? In Clines words, 'here in the Pentateuch the triple elements are unintelligible one without the other, never strongly differentiated from one another in their manifestation within the text, and each in their accumulative effect, with the implication of the others' (1978:31). But since the Pentateuch finishes on the edge of Canaan without the actual possession of the land, but after the growth of descendants to a great number and the giving of the Law at Sinai, it seems that the principal part of the promise *unfulfilled* does indeed relate to the land.



### C. The Reason(s) Why a Promise to Abraham is Necessary

One aspect of the promise made by God to Abraham which is not mentioned by the Sodom narrative is the reason(s) for it being given in the first place. This information is provided by the narratives of Genesis 1-11 in which the reason(s) for the promise can be found. Clines has argued that the theme of the early chapters of Genesis is actually a combination of two separate ones; the first involving the outworking of a 'spread of sin—spread of grace' theme and the second a 'creation—uncreation—recreation' motif (1978:76-77). According to Clines, the spread of sin—spread of grace can be seen in the mitigation which is freely offered by God in his judgement of each of the five instances of ever worsening sin which occur in Genesis 1-11 (1978:73-76). Two further aspects of this series of judgements should also be noted. Firstly, as Westermann has noted, it appears to be in the character of God to act as a judge over humanity, seeking out and punishing evil-doers (1980:46-48). That God is also thought of as a judge between human beings is made plain by Sarah's invocation of the deity in her dispute with Abraham in Gen. 16:5. The second aspect is, as Clines points out, that when God judges individuals, the punishment is 'highly personalised', whereas when punishing a community, differentiation may or may not take place between the guilty and the innocent: the righteous Noah is rescued from the flood generation, but all humankind have their life span limited due to the sin of the sons of God (1978:63-64).

The creation—uncreation—recreation theme is demonstrated, according to Clines, by the loss of relationships which begins with the Eden narrative, and eventually results in the return of chaos as the binary basis of creation (order as 'separation and distinction') is completely undone (through 'the annihilation of distinctions') in the flood narrative (1978:74). The distinction between heavenly waters and the earth (Gen. 1:6-7) is erased as the 'windows of heaven' open (7:11) and between the lower waters and the earth (1:9) as the 'fountains of the great deep' open (7:11). Clines notes J. Blenkinsopp's comment: 'The world in which order first arose

out of a primeval watery chaos is now reduced to the watery chaos out of which it arose—chaos come again' (1978:74; citing Blenkinsopp, 1971:46). Four elements mark Clines's 'recreation': the initial separation of the waters from the land (8:3,7,13;), the renewal of the order to be fruitful and multiply (8:17), the binary structures of creation being guaranteed by the Deity (8:22; cf. 9:8-17), and the utterance of an altered version of the creation plan for humanity and the creation (9:1-7). But even when re-creation takes place Clines concludes that the danger of uncreation remains because humanity itself remains unchanged (1978:76).

When these two themes are combined, however, Clines notes that the reader is unable to determine the resulting theme of Genesis 1-11. When read as a complete unit and apart from any other text, the theme of Genesis 1-11 may be either negatively construed as the spread of ever-increasing sin leading to uncreation whatever God does or understood in positive terms as the ever-increasing spread of God's grace in response to the growing sin of humanity (1978:76-77). But when placed before the promises of the Patriarchal narratives (e.g., Gen. 12:1-3) the positive reading is clearly preferable. Clines defines the theme of Genesis 1-11 when followed by Genesis 12-50 in the following terms.

No matter how drastic man's sin becomes, destroying what God has made good and bringing the world to the edge of uncreation, God's grace never fails to deliver man from the consequences of his sin. Even when man responds to a fresh start with the old pattern of sin, God's commitment to his world stands firm and sinful man experiences the favour of God as well as his righteous judgement (1978:76).

In Clines's view, the promise to Abraham 'functions as the "mitigation" element of the Babel story, and... demands to be read in conjunction with Genesis 1—as a re-affirmation of the divine intentions for man' (1978:78-79). Thus the promises to Abraham reassert the role of humanity in creation, albeit with the divine intentions working through one man and his descendants, with humanity receiving the over-spill (12:3). V.P. Hamilton writes:

The election of Abraham is not designed to isolate this family from the other families of the earth. On the contrary, this family is to become the vehicle by which all the families of the earth may be reconciled to God. In Abraham and in his descendants 'all the nations of the earth are to be blessed'. Thus the selection of Abraham's family is a means to an end in God's overall plans for his world. How will this blessing come about? Gen. 12:1ff makes it clear that reconciliation with God is possible only when there is reconciliation with Abraham, or at least the absence of strife. One cannot be reconciled with God and be at odds with Abraham. 'I will bless/curse those that bless/curse you,' is the promise of ch. 12 and elsewhere. Abraham and his descendants are nothing less than a mediator and catalyst of God's promised blessing. Chs. 12-50 perhaps should not be read as 'Paradise Regained,' but they may be read as 'Reconciliation Regained' or 'Hope Regained'. Chs. 12-50 do not recapture chs. 1-2, but they do resolve the dilemma of chs. 3-11, which is the problem of escalating trespass for which a lasting solution is needed (1990:52).

Abraham and his descendant Israel are therefore of great importance in the mitigation of the sins of the past through God's grace and the return to recreation from the chaos of uncreation.

#### D. The Relationship Between Abraham and Lot

The absence of Lot from Genesis 18 and his sudden appearance in Genesis 19 indicate that some knowledge is being assumed concerning Lot's relationship to both Abraham and YHWH's promise of descendants. Lot is first introduced in the genealogy of Abraham's father, Terah, as his grandson, the son of Abraham's brother, Haran (11:27); a third brother is the then childless Nahor. Immediately, Haran's death is related (11:28) along with the information that Abraham is married to Sarah who is barren (11:30). As N. Steinberg notes:

the somewhat awkward manner in which Lot's name suddenly occurs in v. 27 and in which the genealogy mentions Sarai's barrenness in v. 30 suggests that the future of the second generation [from Terah] will probably be secured through Lot; Lot will function as the heir that Abram will never father through his wife (1993:48).

It is in this familial context that Lot, the sole grandson and eventual heir of Terah, is taken—along with his uncle Abraham—by his grandfather to the land of Canaan; Nahor, however, remains behind, lost to the narrative until he re-appears in Gen. 22:20-24; 24 as the grandfather of Isaac's bride-to-be, Rebekah. The group only go so far as Haran (11:31-2), however, and it is Abraham who now leaves his father and goes on to Canaan. It is at this point that what L. Silberman has termed 'the teasing motif of the presumed heir' enters the narrative in earnest (1983:19). Upon being told to leave his kindred—presumably also including Lot—to go to Canaan, Abraham actually takes Lot with him, an action which is, as L.A. Turner notes, from a 'rigidly literal point of view... inherently contradictory' (1990a:62; cf. also Davies's 'a generous interpretation of "leaving kindred"! ', 1995a:97).<sup>110</sup> Turner is surely correct, however, when he then interprets Abraham's behaviour, not as a blameworthy contradiction of YHWH's commands, but rather as indicating that Lot was considered by Abraham to be his heir at this point. And since the promise of descendants in 12:1-3 does not actually specify that the descendants will come from Abraham's own body, taking Lot with him as heir is the natural course of action for the patriarch.<sup>111</sup>

During a brief sojourn in Egypt when a famine occurs in Canaan, Abraham protects himself and his heir, Lot, by offering his barren wife to the Pharaoh, gaining riches in return (12:10-20).<sup>112</sup> Steinberg suggests that Abraham is here actively trying to get rid of his barren wife so that he can re-marry (1993:54), though the many multiple marriages in Genesis perhaps suggest that such a move is unnecessary.

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<sup>110</sup> Turner notes that Coats 'fails to see the inherent contradiction in his statement, "Abram executed the instructions [of Gen. 12:1-3] as received and took Lot with him"' (1990b:86, footnote 2; citing Coats, 1983:108). He is certainly not alone in this (cf. e.g., Alexander, 1982:22).

<sup>111</sup> Failure to recognise the presence of this motif leads to Alexander's conclusion that with 'the exception of 18:1-16, the Lot episodes reveal no interest in the subject of Abraham's heir', because though 'Lot is the son of Abraham's brother Haran, he is apparently not reckoned to be Abraham's heir' (1982:22). In actual fact, the idea of Lot as heir is fundamentally important in understanding his relationship with Abraham, especially in its role in a proper characterisation of Lot's departure from Abraham and the promise of YHWH.

<sup>112</sup> At this point Sarah is not an essential part of the promise—since Lot is Abraham's heir—and so there is no necessity for the patriarch to worry that his offering of her to another man endangers its fulfilment. As Clines points out, the message of this story is that it is the ancestor who is presently in danger, and not Sarah (1990:69-72).

YHWH, however, has other ideas as to Sarah's rightful place and, after the discovery of the ruse, Abraham, Lot, and all their people are expelled from Egypt with all their belongings and return to Canaan. Following arguments among their respective workers, Abraham generously offers Lot the choice of part of the whole land (כָּל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן in v. 9), the promised land of Canaan (cf. אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן in v. 12), either to the left, the north, or to the right, the south (13:8-9; cf. Helyer, 1983:79). This appears to confirm that Lot's status was that of heir. As Blenkinsopp puts it: 'By inviting Lot to occupy the land to the North or the South Abraham intended to share the land of Canaan with him as presumptive heir' (1992:101). But Lot, upon seeing the Eden-like, well-watered lands of the Jordan valley, chooses instead to go eastward (מִן־הַיַּרְדֵּן), to leave the land of Canaan and go to live amongst the cities of the plain (13:12). In consequence, Lot has forsaken the land and is no longer an option as the heir of Abraham who will inherit Canaan (Helyer 1983:79-80,86; cf. also Coats, 1985:127; Vawter, 1977:184-85; Steinmetz 1991:57).<sup>113</sup>

Turner argues that the subsequent comment of YHWH that Abraham will possess all that he can see (13:14) indicates that Sodom is now to be included in the Land of the promise, and that Lot, despite the choice he has made, may still be considered an option as heir by Abraham (1990a:67-68; cf. also Alexander, 1982:39). But it is not necessary to see a contradiction between the land Abraham has already offered to Lot and all that he can now see including what Lot saw (i.e. Sodom); the former can be understood as modifying the latter and limiting it to the original land of the promise. This option is to be preferred because Turner's argument requires that the heir of Abraham in 15:1-2 is still Lot (1990a:68-72). This reading he asserts by ignoring the problematic וּבֶן־מִשְׁקַבְיָתִי הוּא הַמִּשְׁקַבְיָתִי of 15:2 and reading בֶּן בְּיָתִי, 'son of my house', as a reference to Lot. But בֶּן בְּיָתִי in its only other

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<sup>113</sup> In later tradition, Lot's decision to choose Sodom was viewed with considerable suspicion. Rashi notes that Lot journeyed east, 'away from the Primal Being [a word play]. [Lot] said, "Neither Abraham nor his God"' (Leibowitz, 1973:175). But some exegetes also suspected that Lot was actively choosing to live in a wicked Sodom 'so that he might do as they did' (*Midr. Tanh. Vayyera* 12).

occurrence in the Old Testament indicates ‘slaves’ (Eccl. 2:7), and simply ignoring the rest of this verse is unlikely to gain Turner’s interpretation acceptance.

Turner could perhaps turn to Davies’s alternative suggestion, that Abraham is here deliberately taunting the deity by talking, despite Lot still being his heir, of a slave captured during his excursion to the north of Damascus in Genesis 14 (1995a:104). But it seems much simpler to conclude that Abraham is stating the truth rather than offering what would be a rather transparent lie; after all, for Turner, it is YHWH who widened the land of the promise to include Sodom in Gen. 13:14: Should not the deity, therefore, know who is Abraham’s heir? Davies’s view of Eliezer’s origins does not actually require that Lot still be Abraham’s heir at all because the mention of ‘Eliezer’ could just as easily be seen—as it traditionally has been—as Abraham’s complaint that he has no heir, but a captured slave. It is better to see Lot as having separated himself from the promise through his choice of Sodom as a place to dwell outside the land of Canaan. That this is a bad choice is emphasised by the narrator’s comment about the sin and destruction of the cities of the plain (13:10, 13). In Lot’s absence, the promise of descendants is repeated to Abraham (13:16), emphasising that the promise itself is not rendered null and void by Abraham’s lack of a familial descendant.

When Lot is captured by the four kings who ransack the cities of the plain, Abraham shows considerable concern and fights to get his kinsman back, defeating the kings and recovering all that they had plundered (14:1-16). Although Turner sees this as evidence that Lot is still possibly Abraham’s heir, such a conclusion begs the question, are only kinsmen who are heirs to be saved? Turner suggests that this is indeed the case, arguing that Abraham’s decision to sacrifice Sarah in Genesis 12 indicates that he would have been unlikely to risk his life for Lot in Genesis 14 (1990a:68-69). But there is a world of difference between a straight fight between Abraham’s armed men and the raiding kings and his time as a sojourner in Egypt; the former is a much stronger position for Abraham and he is therefore likely to fulfil his familial obligations. Later in Genesis 20, again under pressure but this time in the Negev, Abraham will repeat his earlier choice to forsake his wife Sarah *and now* the

promise of a son through her (Gen. 17:17; 18:10-14), take comfort in the son he has gained in the meantime, Ishmael (Genesis 16), and leave her to her fate, regardless of YHWH's wishes. It is worth noting that Turner's position suffers from its consistently negative picture of Abraham; rather the patriarch's character is inconsistent in these narratives, being praiseworthy in one scene (e.g., Genesis 13, 15, 22) and blameworthy in another (e.g., Genesis 12, 17, 20).

In Genesis 15 Abraham responds to a further re-affirmation of the promise by complaining that his heir is (now) a slave, a 'son of his house', whom I will follow the majority of commentators in designating as 'Eliezer of Damascus' (15:2). In response, YHWH promises Abraham an heir from his own body, but does not yet reveal that the child will be born to Sarah.<sup>114</sup> In Genesis 16, Abraham, in the light of Sarah's barrenness, has a son, Ishmael, by his wife Sarah's servant, Hagar. Sarah's jealousy leads to Hagar being banished, but YHWH bids her return, and so Abraham continues to live with his wife but with Hagar's son, Ishmael, as his heir. Some thirteen years later, however, YHWH informs Abraham that the heir to the promise will not be Ishmael, but rather the son of Sarah (17:16). Abraham, though, is happy with his son, Ishmael, and since he also knows of Sarah's life-long barrenness and her now advanced age, he responds first with disbelieving laughter (17:17),<sup>115</sup> and then by seeking God's blessing for Ishmael (17:18). Though this is granted, the announcement that the promise will be fulfilled through a son born to Sarah stands (17:19-21). At the beginning of Genesis 18, Lot is in Sodom and Abraham is at the oaks of Mamre in

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<sup>114</sup> Steinmetz plausibly suggests that it was 'Lot's departure [which] initiated Abraham's quest for a son' (1991:69).

<sup>115</sup> Some have preferred to see this verse as indicating Abraham's joy at YHWH's promise of a son to Sarah (e.g., Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:229; Calvin, 1965:459-60; Luther, 1961:153-54; Speiser, 1964:125), sometimes citing as support the lack of censure from YHWH at what would be words of disbelief compared with the deity's response to Sarah's laughter in 18:15 (Hamilton, 1990:477).

But I shall argue that it is also possible to see the response of 18:15 as being aimed at both Sarah and Abraham, and consider Abraham's subsequent words as more likely indicating the kind of disbelief which the patriarch will show in offering Sarah to Abimelech in Genesis 20 (following, e.g., Jeansonne, 1990:21-22; Steinmetz, 1991:79; Westermann, 1985:268; Wenham, 1994:25-26). Once it has been recognised that the patriarch is not a monolithic moral giant, such contrary behaviour is clearly the norm in his relationship with YHWH (compare high points like Genesis 13, 15 and 22 with lows like Genesis 12 and 20).

Canaan with his present heir Ishmael, awaiting—though without any real expectation—Sarah’s son.

E. Presupposed Knowledge (Later Mosaic Religion, Hebrew, Geography, etc.)

Moberly has argued that Genesis 12-50 contains stories of the Patriarchs as told from the perspective of what he terms ‘Mosaic Yahwism’, the post-Sinai religion of Israel, according to which YHWH was unknown by that name to the patriarchs (1992a:67-78). These chapters are bracketed by the thoroughly Yahwistic Genesis 1-11 (so Moberly, 1992a:69, 167) and the ensuing Mosaic Pentateuchal story, and contain narrative features which can only be correctly interpreted by the canonical reader when read with some knowledge of the (canonically) later position of Mosaic Yahwism. The most obvious subsection of knowledge presupposed is that of a detailed knowledge of the biblical language, though this knowledge must be carefully balanced against the fact that many of the occurrences of particular words in such as Genesis 18-19 will be, canonically, the very first. Additional presupposed knowledge outlined by Moberly includes:

- 1) the attribution of knowledge of the divine name, יהוה, to the Patriarchal era in direct contradiction of Exodus 3 and 6 (cf. 15:7, 28:13; but especially the explicit statement of 4:26 that ‘people began to call upon the name of YHWH’, 1992a:38-39; cf. 1992a:70-78).<sup>116</sup>
- 2) a reference to the keeping of the Law by Abraham (Gen. 26:5; 1992a:136; cf. also 143-45).

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<sup>116</sup> Seitz has recently argued, against Moberly, that the name YHWH was known to the patriarchs, but with the fullness of its meaning only being revealed to Moses in Exodus 3 and 6 (1998:229-47). Although Seitz may, arguably, have offered a more ‘canonical’ solution to this problem than Moberly, it is noticeable that he has not chosen to argue that the place in Genesis 14 called Dan was actually called that at the time. Indeed, according to Judg. 18:27, it was called Laish *until* it was sacked and rebuilt by the Danites during the conquest. The tendency of the text identified by Moberly seems real enough and his argument still seems cogent in terms of the *origins* of the text. But Seitz may have discovered the canonical meaning of the text in what is essentially a side-effect of this particular way of updating the text.



- 3) the use of place names which have yet to be founded (e.g., Dan in 14:14; cf. Judg. 18:29; and Bethel in 12:8; cf. 28:19; 35:6; 1992a:77-78).

These textual features should be taken to indicate a clarification of the text for a later audience through the use of titles, concepts, and geographical locations contemporaneous with that audience: YHWH being used in Genesis 12-50 to emphasise the oneness of the Patriarchal and the Mosaic deities, the concept of keeping the law to give the author's judgement that Abraham had walked on the way of the LORD, and the location of geographical action to simply render the action clear on the stage of the land of Israel. This emphatically does not mean, however, that any differences between Patriarchal religion and Mosaic Yahwism should be ironed out, but rather that certain conclusions which might be gained from a sequential narrative reading must be seen as erroneous: Abraham did not actually know the tetragrammaton, keep the Mosaic Law fully, or ever go to Dan (only to the place where it would later be located). As the narrative progresses, the canonical reader needs to be sensitive to the role of Yahwism as part of the spectacles through which the Patriarchal narratives are interpreted.

#### F. Narrative Asides and the Interpretation of Genesis 18-19

There are two significant asides offered in Genesis 13: first, the reader is told that Lot is moving to Sodom *before it had been destroyed by the Lord* (v. 10). Second, the information that the men of Sodom were wicked and great sinners against the LORD is supplied (v. 13). With this knowledge in mind, the reader approaches the Sodom narrative knowing that YHWH destroys the city at some future point, presumably because of the evil of its people. But if the narrative is to be taken seriously *as narrative*, the reader cannot simply impose this information upon the characters within the narrative. Thus the deity and Abraham do not yet know that Sodom is to be destroyed and YHWH's stated intention to investigate is made in all

seriousness; it is common to find commentators assuming that YHWH has already decided to destroy Sodom before even speaking to Abraham on the subject (cf. e.g., Westermann's 'God now communicates to Abraham [in vv 20-21] the decision that he has made to destroy [vv 17-19]', 1985:289). Since Abraham has already met the King of Sodom (14:21-4), however, the canonical reader is able to assume that he has already met the men of Sodom and is—at the very least—aware of their sin. This will prove significant in explaining Abraham's actions in Gen. 18:23-33. My brief sketch of narrative presuppositions complete, I now turn to the diachronic study of Genesis 18-19.

### III. Diachronic Approaches to the Sodom Narrative: H. Gunkel's *Genesis* as Exemplar

#### A. Diachronic Studies as a Preliminary to Exegesis

It is tempting to suggest that in recent years diachronic studies have proved unfashionable, but this could only be offered as a very qualified conclusion; many are still working on these approaches to Genesis, the Pentateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, and indeed any part of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, partly as a result of the move towards holistic varieties of literary study and partly because of a loss of confidence in the conclusions of years of source, form and redaction-critical study, there has been a considerable move by scholars away from these methodologies. It is, therefore, certainly true to say that these approaches no longer hold the well-nigh undisputed sway over scholarship which they held around the second half of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, to avoid the confusion of dealing with every diachronic study of Genesis 18-19—of which there remain a vast number, with no doubt still more in

production<sup>117</sup>—I have decided to explain in detail here the results of a single diachronic study with the intention of testing Provan’s claim that tensions recovered in such a project may usefully illuminate the canonical text. The study in use is perhaps the culmination of the nineteenth century’s interest in the diachronic, the highly influential commentary on *Genesis* by Gunkel, first published in 1901 (although other important interpretations of this text considered in Chapters 5 and 6 are also based upon diachronic studies, e.g., von Rad and Ben Zvi, their diachronic aspects will remain in the background and not be treated systematically).

Often credited with being the father of the form critical method, Gunkel wrote his commentary against a background of source critical studies which had sought to divide the book of Genesis into a variety of *written* historical sources (J, E, D, and P being instantly familiar to even the most modern student of the Pentateuch). For Gunkel, however, Genesis had a much more complex and ancient tradition history. In the first chapter of his commentary, he outlines his overarching view of the text as ‘eine Sammlung von Sagen’, and proceeds to examine each section of the narrative in this light, but always referring back to the claims of the source critics. The value of Gunkel’s evidence varies considerably and certainly highlights the difficulties of form and source criticism methodologies. The point here, however, is to note which aspects of the text Gunkel found significant—that they may be questionable even by the rules of his own diachronic approach is not in itself of concern here. His division of Genesis 18-19 into five sections—(a) 18:1-16aa; (b) 18:16ab-33; (c) 19:1-28; (d) 19:30-38; (e) 19:29—will be followed here.

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<sup>117</sup> Recent diachronic studies which focus on these chapters include: Van Seters, 1975; Schmidt, 1976; Haag, 1981; Rudin-O’Brasky, 1982; Schweitzer, 1984; Westermann, 1985; Loader, 1990.

## B. 'The Visit to Abraham and the Gift of a Son' (18:1-16aa)

One of the most significant textual features for Gunkel's diachronic account of this section of the Sodom narrative (1997:192-200) is the alternation which occurs between singular and plural verbs and suffixes in references to the three men in this opening section (but also in 18:16b-19:28). Source critical scholars such as Kraetzschmar (1897) had attempted to deal with this feature of the text by dividing the narrative into two versions, a 'Yahwist' text (singular) and a 'three men' text (plural). Gunkel objects to this division on the grounds that the present story was a 'unified, well organised whole'; rather he describes the narrative using such terms as 'artful', 'fine detail', 'wonderful', even 'superb'. He argues that the alternation between singular and plural is haphazard, rejecting all attempts to read the text as coherent on this point. Earlier scholars who had argued that one of the three men was their leader and the singular person addressed by Abraham in 18:3 were incorrect, according to Gunkel; if one was leader, why did all three accept the invitation in v. 5b? Equally, those who had argued that all three represented the deity were judged wrong because, for Gunkel, the ancient Israelites could not have held such a tripartite conception of the divine. Given these conclusions, Gunkel opts to see the text as a legend (Sage) which had been subsequently redacted, and is left with two options; either the singular was the original and the plural the work of a redactor (as argued by Fripp, 1892) or the plural was the original with the singular as redaction. Because of his view of the history of religions as an evolutionary process, the latter is his preferred option; polytheism is seen as older than monotheism and so as the more likely background for the original version of the legend, the visit of three gods to test an individual who proves through his hospitality his worthiness to be given the gift of a son.

Within this basic understanding of the text as a polytheistic legend subsequently redacted by monotheists, Gunkel utilises certain features of the text to define the pre- and post-history of the legend. The antiquity of the basic layer of the originally polytheistic Israelite legend in which the three men/gods visit Abraham is demonstrated

by several textual features: first, the three gods are not yet omnipotent, having to ask Sarah's whereabouts. Second, the invitation to the men to lie down to eat is contrasted with the prophet Amos's comment that this style of eating was a new fashion in Israel (Amos 6:4), farmers previously having sat to eat (cf. Gen. 27:19; Judg. 19:6; 1 Sam. 20:5; 1 Kgs 13:20). Third, the plural trees at Mamre in v. 1a (and in Gen. 13:18 and 14:13) are contrasted with the single tree mentioned by Abraham in v. 4, Gunkel noting the existence of a late tradition of several trees and arguing that the pluralising is the result of later redaction. Indeed the superscription of v. 1a as a whole is regarded as a late addition.

Gunkel does not, however, see the legend as a creation of the Israelites themselves, but rather as a Hebrew appropriation of an 'ancient oriental narrative'. Primary evidence here is not textual, but the existence of a Greek parallel in which Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon visit Hyrieus, an old Boeotian man, and grant him his wish of a son. Gunkel postulates an underlying legend of which the Greek and Hebrew are recensions. The origins of the Hebrew legend lay in the setting of the visit at Hebron, and are the result of a need to justify cultic sacrifice in that place; since Abraham fed Israel's deity there, the sacrificial table should naturally be placed there. But this parallel leads Gunkel to the conclusion that the legend was unaware of any altar already built by Abraham at Hebron and, with his view that the text also shows no awareness of any previous promise of a son, contributes to his belief that the Israelite legend is independent of the Abraham narratives in Genesis 12-17.

Two additional elements of the 'text' of the legend also impact upon its relationship to the following narratives: first, Gunkel sees no evidence in the text that Abraham had ever recognised his visitors, and this he contrasts sharply with Abraham being fully aware of YHWH's identity in vv. 16ab-33. Second, he notes that the promise to return in vv. 10a and 14 was not fulfilled in later chapters of Genesis (ignoring the return of YHWH to Sarah in Gen. 21:1) and surmises that the legend had once continued with an account of the return of the men after Sarah had born a son in

which Abraham did recognise their deity. Gunkel concludes that the Hebrew legend was once completely independent (and much longer).

Later, however, this legend was absorbed into the Patriarchal narratives, and a number of redactions made. Already mentioned is the ‘haphazard’ addition of singular forms in relation to the three men, which appear to lead in the direction of a monotheistic view of the divine. The occurrence of YHWH in the ‘late’ superscription in v. 1a, and in vv. 13 and 14 lead Gunkel to characterise the final narrative of Genesis 18:1-16aa (and indeed virtually all of 18:1-19:38) as largely the product of a redactor, J (the first ‘Yahwist’).

The final placement of Gen. 18:16aa, however, must have taken place after the latest layers of the Pentateuchal narrative (which Gunkel designates P following the source critics) were written. (Gunkel argues that the Pentateuch reached its final form some time after Ezra but before the Samaritan schism.) P leaves the text of 18:1-16aa largely untouched except for one notable gloss. In v. 6 Sarah is told to make food using flour (קֶמֶחַ), fine flour (סֹלֶת). But Gunkel points out that the latter term does not occur in the oldest texts. Rather it occurs in P and in Chronicles as the flour used for sacrifice. He proposes that later readers of the text objected to Abraham only offering קֶמֶחַ to his God, and emended the text so that Abraham would offer סֹלֶת, fine flour, in line with their own practices.

The main points of tension and ambiguity noted by Gunkel in 18:1-16aa can be summarised as the following:

- 1) Singular/plural verbs and suffixes and the three men/YHWH (also in next two sections on 18:16b-33 and 19:1-28)
- 2) Plural trees (18:1a) and a single tree (18:4)
- 3) Promised return of men (18:10, 14) not fulfilled
- 4) Lack of recognition of deity by Abraham contrasted with recognition in 18:16b-33

### C. 'Abraham-Hebron Legend to the Lot-Sodom Narrative' (18:16ab-33)

The remainder of Genesis 18 Gunkel sees as effecting a transition between the legend of the visit in 18:1-16aa and the legend of the destruction of a city, underlying Gen. 19:1-28 (1997:200-205). This transition form therefore came about as the result of the work of the redactor J whom Gunkel believes to have created the Abraham cycle. But the transitional elements of J's work do not include all of the text as it stands. Gunkel designates only vv. 16ab,b, 20-22a and 33b as original to J as they stand, being J's adaptation of an earlier text through the addition of the singular (v. 21) and YHWH (v. 20). It is important to note that this transition does not assume that YHWH has already decided to destroy Sodom, but only that the deity intends to investigate the outcry against that city (the mention of Gomorra in v. 20 Gunkel dismisses as a later accretion). In this 'original' J link, YHWH is demonstrating his confidence in Abraham by revealing his plans to the patriarch.

Following Wellhausen, Gunkel treats the remnants of this section of the Sodom narrative as two later insertions into J's text. The first addition was the so-called divine soliloquy in vv. 17-19, six reasons being given for this conclusion: first, the diction of the passage is somewhat different, and recalls for Gunkel the generalities of the Deuteronomist. Second, in vv 17-19, the deity has already decided to destroy the city, according to Gunkel, contradicting vv. 20-21 and indicating that the interpolating hand had read the original only cursorily. Third, the general incompetence of the writer of vv. 17-19 is confirmed for Gunkel by YHWH's use of the third person when uttering a soliloquy in v. 19. Fourth, in contrast to the conditional nature of the promise in vv. 17-19, the older material reflects a period when the deity was the national deity without condition. Fifth, vv. 17-19 allude to the promise of Gen. 12:1-3, a point which Gunkel describes here as being in contrast to the earlier Hebrew legend of 18:1-16aa which does not know of any such promise. Sixth, in contrast to J's account in which the deity is not recognised, these verses envisage YHWH talking openly to Abraham, and full recognition of the deity on the part of the patriarch.

The remainder of the text contains the dialogue between YHWH and Abraham (vv. 22b-33a), and is seen by Gunkel as a late insertion dealing with a specific abstract problem, that of how a minority of individuals may avert the fate of the godless. Evidence for this conclusion includes: first, there is considerable confusion between the men and YHWH: in v. 22a the three men leave, contradicting 22b where YHWH remains. Similarly, in v. 20 it is the three men who are to go to Sodom but in 18:22b-33 it is YHWH who is to go. But according to 19:1, only the two angels go to Sodom, YHWH having stayed to talk with Abraham (v. 22b), after which the deity leaves (v. 33a), but not for Sodom (cf. 19:1)—this therefore cannot be a unified text, according to Gunkel. Second, 18:22b-33 assumes the destruction of Sodom as 18:17-19 but *contra* vv. 20-21. Third, in 18:22b-33 Abraham clearly recognises YHWH while in vv. 20-21 the deity remains unknown (as 18:1-16aa). Fourth, the concept of God involved is very different to that in 18:1-16aa. There YHWH eats, but here he is judge of the whole world. Fifth, Gunkel thinks that the appeal for Sodom would have made no sense to an ancient mentality. Further indications of a late provenance include the prevalence of abstract thoughts over actions in this text. In fact, Gunkel sees this text as concerned with the concept of individualism, a type of thought which, in Gunkel's day, was seen as arising only in the post-exilic period, much later than J. In conclusion, Gen. 18:16ab-33 had three stages of growth: an original transitional section written by J, the incorporation of vv. 17-19 by a later, and careless, writer, and finally, the addition of the dialogue of vv 22b-33a (Gunkel does not actually specify an author here, merely noting similarities with the thought of Jeremiah 18 and Ezekiel 14 and 18. But his belief that Lot is here saved for his own righteousness and his later designation of 19:29 as the product of a P who believed that Lot was saved for Abraham's sake alone indicates that the author of this section was thought to pre-date P).

The main points of tension and ambiguity noted by Gunkel in 18:16b-33 can be summarised as the following:



- 1) Men / YHWH confusion over staying / leaving and visiting Sodom / not visiting Sodom (as 18:1-16aa and 19:1-28)
- 2) Investigation of Sodom (18:20-21) / Destruction of Sodom (18:17-19, 22b-33)
- 3) 3<sup>rd</sup> person used in soliloquy (18:17-19)
- 4) Conditional promise (18:17-19) / unconditional relationship with national deity (e.g., 18:1-16aa)
- 5) Recognition of YHWH (18:22b-33) / non-recognition (18:1-16aa, 20-21)
- 6) YHWH eats (18:8) / YHWH judge of whole world (18:25)
- 7) Abstract thoughts (18:22b-33) / action of narrative genre

#### D. 'Sodom's Destruction and Lot's Deliverance' (19:1-28)

The story of the destruction of Sodom and the salvation of Lot (seen here as righteous) has, according to Gunkel, suffered the same fate as the legend which underlies Gen. 18:1-16aa; it now exists in an expanded and redacted form (1997:205-15). The principal addition to the text as it once stood is the material relating to Zoar in vv. 17-22, seen as an 'outgrowth on the trunk of the old legend' (v. 23b which also mentions Zoar was also an late addition by this redactor). This passage is deemed secondary because it interrupts the cohesion of dawn in v. 15 and the sunrise in v. 23, because Lot's speech is considered too long to be part of the fast talking legend genre, and because Lot's motivation for eventually leaving Zoar is unclear. The theme of 'don't look back' which dominates this passage also contributes to Gunkel's decision to see the story of Lot's wife as an addition, a decision which also notes the grammatical difficulties left by the unclear referent in 19:26 ('his wife').

The earlier material in 19:1-16 also contained a number of features which draw Gunkel's attention. Overall, Gunkel considers the Hebrew legend (which he believes has grown out of some pre-Israelite legend of the destruction of a city) as a having a beautiful, clear structure. This artistic unity is important because once again the number and designation of the men who come to visit the city is of some importance.

Gunkel repeats his argument of Gen. 18:1-16aa that the original legend contained three men (once deities), and that the text was subsequently amended by the later alteration of 'men' to 'angels' in vv. 1 and 15. Similarly, he sees the use of singular forms in vv. 17-22 as a problem ameliorated by their haphazard use ('no guiding principle'). These features lead him to again reject the two version theory resulting from the source criticism of Kraetzschmar (1897). A number of small glosses are also noted as additions to the legend material; 'men of Sodom' in v. 4; 'against Lot' in v. 9a; and most importantly 'and Gomorra', a feature which Gunkel sees as an attempt at harmonisation with a different tradition, but which obscures the fact that in the legend underlying vv. 1-16, only Sodom is in view; if Lot leaves *the city* he is safe, the idea of having to leave the valley being a later addition connected with the Zoar tradition of vv. 17-22.

The story of Lot and Zoar in vv. 17-22 are seen by Gunkel as being quite ancient. The words, 'I am unable', Gunkel considers unlikely to have been written by the Yahwistic writer, and so these verses were added to the Sodom legend at an early date. Originally, they would have utilised plural forms for the men throughout. In considering the provenance of the Zoar legend, Gunkel assumes that following the natural disaster which had given rise to the Hebrew version of the destruction legend, Israel had seen a spot which had escaped destruction; the story of Zoar is thus a geological legend, with an etymological component explaining the origins of the name Zoar as small. The death of Lot's wife in v. 26 is designated a late geological legend which must have explained some phenomenon by the shores of the Dead Sea.

In vv. 27-28, Abraham returns to the place where he had previously looked out over Sodom. These two verses Gunkel sees as largely originating from the hand of the 'poet of the Abraham-Lot cycle', J, concluding the transitions between the Abraham-Hebron and Lot-Sodom legends found in Gen. 18:16ab, 20-22a, 33b. V. 27b, however, is a later addition because it assumes the existence of Gen. 18:22b-33a. Also attributed to the hand of J are the singular forms used in relation to the two men.

The main points of tension and ambiguity noted by Gunkel in 19:1-28 can be summarised as the following:

- 1) Tension between YHWH, two angels, three men (as 18:1-16aa and 18:16ab-33)
- 2) The extended gap between 'dawn' in 19:15 and 'sunrise' in 19:23
- 3) The slowness of the speech in 19:17-22, 23b (and dominating theme of 'don't look back') / fast action of 19:1-16.
- 4) Lack of motivation for Lot's departure from Zoar (cf. 19:30)
- 5) Leaving of city / leaving of valley (inclusion of gloss term 'Gomorrah' and Zoar narrative of 17-22, 23b)

#### E. 'Lot's Daughters' (19:30-38)

The fourth section of Gunkel's Sodom narrative contains an account of the origins of Moab and Ammon through the incestuous sexual relationships between Lot and his two daughters (1997:216-18). Gunkel describes the text as containing an artful account in epic style, and designated it an independent ethnological legend; v. 30a belonged to the Zoar addition of 17-22, but v 30b belonged to the original account of vv. 31-38. He notes, however, that the naming of the sons in a fashion which proclaims their incestuous origin seems to indicate pride in the actions of the daughters rather than condemnation (though he seems also to think that Lot is being exonerated by the text). He therefore suggests that the legend was Moabite in origin, and had reached its present place largely unaltered at the hands of the compiler of the Abraham cycle.

The main point of ambiguity noted by Gunkel in 19:30-38 can be summarised as the following:

- 1) Is the dominant note of the story of incestuous relationship one of pride or shame?

## F. YHWH's Remembrance of Abraham and the Salvation of Lot (19:29)

The final section of Gunkel's diachronic account of the Sodom narrative contains a single verse, 19:29 (1997:258-59). For terminological reasons (notable  $\text{עַרֵי הַקְּפָר}$  as a designation of Lot's dwelling place only here and in P's 13:12ba), this verse is linked with 13:6, 11b, 13a,ba under the heading of the salvation and deliverance of Lot and attributed to P, who believed that Lot was saved, not because of his own righteousness or Abraham's argument, but because of Abraham alone.

The main point to note here is:

- 1)  $\text{עַרֵי הַקְּפָר}$  alongside the (usual) Sodom and (the later addition) Gomorra

But since, as I have already noted, I will be considering the terms Sodom, Sodom and Gomorra, and the cities of the plain as essentially synonymous in narrative terms, Gunkel's position here can already be disregarded as unimportant.

With the completion of the above discussions of relevant narrative presuppositions drawn from Genesis 1-17 and the insights of diachronic studies of the text of Genesis 18-19 itself, it is now time to turn to exegesis of the Sodom narrative itself.

## Chapter 5

### A Canonical Exegesis of the ‘Sodom Narrative’, Part 1: Genesis 18

#### I. The Reception and Recognition of the Visitor(s) to Abraham (18:1-8)

##### A. Abraham’s Encounter

Genesis 18 begins with a threeway encounter between this canonical reader, YHWH, and an individual male designated first ‘him’, then ‘he’. The niph'al of **רָאָה** often indicates the deity’s revealing of himself to humanity (cf. Gen. 12:7; 22:14; 35:1, 9; 48:3; Exod. 3:2; 6:3; 16:10; Lev. 9:4, 6, 23; 16:2; Num. 14:10, 14; 16:19; 17:7; 20:6; Judg. 6:13; 13: 3, 21; 1 Sam. 3:21; 2 Sam. 22:11; 1 Kgs 3:5; 9:2; 11:9; Isa. 60:2; Jer. 31:3; 2 Chron. 1:7; 3:1), and here that revelation is both to the unknown ‘him’ and the reader. The identity of the one to whom YHWH appears in v. 1 is not specified until v. 6, but has its grammatical antecedent in the figure of Abraham in 17:26. This feature, along with YHWH’s reference to there being roughly the same time period before the birth of Sarah’s son in both 17:21 (**בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחַדָּתָיִת**) and in 18:10, 14 (**כְּפַעַת חַיָּה**), indicates a temporal proximity between these two narratives (contrast the thirteen years between Genesis 16 and 17). This proximity links the ‘appearance’ of YHWH in 18:1 to the sealing of the covenant with Abraham through circumcision in 17:24-27 (cf. Keil-Delitzsch’s ‘shortly afterwards’, 1980:228). The reference to his **אֵהָל** and its geographical location, **אֵלֵי מַמְרֵה** (cf. Gen. 13:18), serves to position Abraham as the one who has, unlike his nephew Lot (13:11), remained within the land of Canaan and received YHWH’s covenant. The altar built by Abraham at Mamre long before (13:8) is an indicator of the ongoing presence of YHWH with the patriarch, foreshadowing the role of the later tent of meeting (e.g., Numbers 27) and the Jerusalem Temple (e.g., 1 Kings 6-8) in the lives of his descendants (so Gossai, 1995:39).

The reader finds Abraham seated in the entrance to his tent ‘in the heat of the day’ (or perhaps at ‘noon’; cf. 2 Sam. 4:5). H. Gossai notes that this was the time of the day for a pleasant stroll in the Garden of Eden (1995:67; citing Gen. 3:8), but Mamre is certainly not Eden. J. Morgenstern, however, is at the opposite extreme when he describes the scene as taking place ‘just at noon, when the sun is hottest and in Palestine, beats down cruelly upon the head of the venturesome traveller, and consumes his energy and vitality (1965:116). In the Judean mountains, noon is neither paradise nor inferno, but rather is typically Mediterranean with work beginning early and finishing late with a substantial break at midday. Abraham’s morning is finished and he is taking his ‘siesta’ (Wenham, 1994:45) when he looks up and ‘behold’, he sees three men standing before him (18:2).

#### B. Encountering the One and the Three

Who exactly are these three ‘men’ and how are they to be related to the announced appearance of YHWH in v. 1? While it is true that dealing with this tension occupied much of Gunkel’s diachronic study, it is also true that the tension is one of the most obvious in Genesis 18-19. Gunkel’s answer—to basically conclude that the use of the singular and plural in the final text is the result of no coherent rationale and therefore meaningless (cf. also Skinner’s acceptance throughout of the pluralising Samaritan tradition, 1910:300)—is not one which this reader can follow. In producing a truly canonical reading, the following textual features require consideration and must be accounted for (Gunkel’s tensions led to splitting the text, but here they will probably lead to a reading which can result only from the contradictory placement of these details in their canonical form):

- 1) Abraham’s use of a singular verb and two second person singular suffixes (עֲבָדְךָ, תִּעָבֶר, בְּעֵינַיִךְ) in 18:3 before a change to plural forms in 18:4-9.

- 2) The pointing of the consonants יְהוָה in 18:3 (rendered as יְהוָה by the MT).
- 3) The change from plural (18:9) to singular speech by the visitors (18:10).
- 4) The presence of YHWH in 18:11 (and presumably in 18:10).
- 5) The departure of the men for Sodom (18:16) and YHWH's continuing to stand with Abraham (18:22).
- 6) YHWH's stated intention to go down to Sodom to investigate personally (18:21).
- 7) The arrival of two men/angels in Sodom (19:1).
- 8) Lot's plural address to the men in 19:2 (in contrast to Abraham in 18:3).
- 9) The angels's statement that they will destroy Sodom and that YHWH has sent them to destroy it (19:13) but it is YHWH who carries out the destruction (19:24).
- 10) The singular voice which speaks to Lot in 19:17, 21, following the plural activities of the two angels in 19:1-16.
- 11) Lot's response to the individual voice by addressing God in 19:18-20.
- 12) The MT's pointing indicating Lot's use of יְהוָה in 19:18 in contrast to יְהוָה in 19:2.

One possible way of reconciling the seeming contradictions between these aspects of the text is that of interpreting them in such a way as to see a scrupulous separation between YHWH and the three men. In the mixture of Jewish traditions contained in L. Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (1947), YHWH visits Abraham as he is recovering from his circumcision, but shortly afterwards three angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, appear. Seeing Abraham binding his wound, the angels depart but Abraham, after begging YHWH to stay, runs after them, believing them to be human travellers. He addresses the middle angel, Michael, who is the most important of the three and then invites them all to eat. The angels ask for Sarah before one of them, Michael, announces that she will bear a son. After Sarah laughs, it is YHWH who now speaks and asks if anything is too hard for him before rebuking her. The angels then depart, leaving YHWH to debate with Abraham—one, Michael, to heaven,

having completed his errand to Abraham (angels only have one task at a time), and two to Sodom, one to save Lot (Raphael) and one to destroy the city (Gabriel). It is Raphael who takes Lot from Sodom and then spares Zoar (1947:240-45). At no point is YHWH confused with the three men/angels, but intriguing as this interpretation is, it seems clear that the text is being used to demonstrate a relationship between God and the angels which already exists within the mind of the exegete and involves their complete separation; too much work is being done to tame the narrative for this canonical reader to accept this tradition, and it will be passed over as a serious option.

An alternative reading is that offered by G.J. Wenham, who considers YHWH to either *be* or to be *represented by* only one of the three men (1994:51; cf. also Bowie 1952:616; Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:228; Speiser, 1964:129-31).<sup>118</sup> For Wenham, Abraham's use of singular forms in v. 3 is understood as an initial address to the foremost of the three visitors—their 'leader'—followed by plural forms of address which refer to all three men (1994:46); the MT's  $\text{יְהוָה}$  is repointed as  $\text{יְהוָה}$  by Wenham on the grounds that Abraham has not yet recognised the deity. But it is with his comments upon the departure of the men for Sodom in v. 22 that Wenham explains his overall conception of the relationship between the three men and YHWH; namely, that it is 'two' men who depart for Sodom leaving one man, who alone 'is or represents' YHWH, to converse with Abraham (1994:51; cf. also R. Davidson, 1979:69). Noting that some (e.g., Gunkel) have chosen to see this confusion as the result of different traditions Wenham prefers to see it as deliberate, as expressing 'the difficulty of human comprehension of the divine word' (1994:51); a phrasing which echoes the sensibilities of the canonical approach itself. He also suggests that the visit of the two angels to Sodom in YHWH's place probably indicates the narrative's assumption that YHWH

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<sup>118</sup> In this category can also be placed the traditional Christian readings of this text in which Christ is seen as one of the three men (cf. e.g., Novation, *De Trin.* 18; Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trin.* 4.27-29; Justin Martyr, *Dial. c. Tryph.*, 55; Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 4.2). A second tradition concentrated more on the three as the trinity (cf. e.g., Origen *Cant.* 2; Cyril of Alexandria, *Contr. Jul.* 1, Tertullian, *Spir. Sanct.* 1.6; Augustine, *De Trin.* 2.10-11), a reading which reflects a view on YHWH and the three which will be treated shortly (cf. Thunberg, 1966:560-70; Loader, 1990:136-7). Von Rad notes that these readings have been 'universally abandoned' by modern exegesis (1961:201), though the accuracy of this claim may well depend upon how one defines the term, 'modern exegesis'.



'could not endure the presence of such sin' (1994:51).<sup>119</sup> Wenham completes his interpretation with the following explanation of Lot's address to YHWH in 19:18:

Only one of the angels issues the commands [19:17], and it is to him that Lot speaks.... As pointed, אֱלֹהִים is the proper way to address God..., and Lot's subsequent intercession is directed to God [here then Wenham implies that the MT has interpreted correctly.] Whether the narrative is suggesting that the Lord has now rejoined the angels outside the city, or whether Lot is just being very polite, is very obscure. Could he really know who he was talking to in the gloom before sunrise? The mystery is probably deliberate (1994:58).

Wenham's reluctance to see the two angels of 19:1 as representatives of YHWH is problematic, however, and results in his being unable to account for some of the tensions within the narrative. For example, YHWH's claimed inability to visit Sodom because of the presence of sin does not fit well with his stated intention to go there personally (Gen. 18:21) nor with his personal investigation of the tower of Babel incident (Gen. 11:1-9) and his face-to-face conversation with Cain (Gen. 4:9-15). But the most significant difficulty with Wenham's position occurs with his viewing *only one* of the men as YHWH or as a representative of YHWH. Because of this exegetical decision, Wenham is forced to account for the sudden arrival of YHWH in 19:18 by either a descent into textual obscurity or the creation of a gap-filling reappearance by the deity. Is the 'mystery' seen here by Wenham genuine or is it simply the inevitable consequence of his reading?

It is interesting to note the response of C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (who also see YHWH as only one of the three visitors) to what is essentially Wenham's quandary, the inexplicable reappearance of the deity. They note that what seems to occur in Gen. 19:18 is 'a re-appearance for which there is no evidence'. They conclude that the 'only

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<sup>119</sup> A different way in which Wenham's position here could be justified would be to accept Bowie's statement that the author does not represent YHWH 'as following the angels to Sodom, an omission which was doubtless due to his horror at the thought that the Lord should have been subjected to the shocking insult recorded in vss. 4-9' (1952:626). But this option is also open to the criticisms which will result in my rejection of Wenham's overall account of the three men and YHWH, and so would not help his case.

supposition that remains, therefore, is that Lot recognised in the two angels a manifestation of God, and so addressed them (v. 18) as Adonai (my Lord), and that the angel who spoke addressed him as the messenger of Jehovah in the name of God, without its following from this, that Jehovah was present in the two angels' (1980:234). But, of course, it is then no longer clear what the difference is between the one figure who supposedly is or represents YHWH in Genesis 18, as both Keil-Delitzsch and Wenham argue, and the two figures whom Keil-Delitzsch now see as representing a 'a manifestation of God' in Genesis 19. The fact that the words spoken are not comparable in content ('promise—dialogue' in Genesis 18; 'instruction' in Genesis 19) is only indicative of their narrative setting, and not of the actual presence of the deity. Keil-Delitzsch take Wenham's position to its logical conclusion, but problems remain.

For J.H. Sailhammer, the three men are *all* to be seen as mediating the presence of YHWH to Abraham (1992:161-65; cf. Driver, 1909:192, 196, 200). When 'they' speak in 18:9 and 'he' (YHWH) speaks in 18:10, Sailhammer suggests that 'one has the impression within the narrative as a whole that this "he" has spoken on behalf of the men and consequently, the men spoke for "him."' Yet the three men all remain distinct from the deity because YHWH is not limited to speaking through them, even within this narrative (1992:168). When the three men leave for Sodom but YHWH remains with Abraham, Sailhammer concludes that this demonstrates that the 'narrative teaches that the LORD can speak to Abraham with or without the men' (1992:164). The two men who visit Sodom in 19:1 are thus still representative of the YHWH who said that he would go and investigate Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 18:21). But the problem of the missing man (three left Abraham but only two arrived in Sodom) haunts Sailhammer's reading and he eventually proposes a rather cumbersome solution, suggesting that, since YHWH has said he will go and investigate both Sodom and Gomorra, the third man went to the latter and ensured the justness of YHWH by investigating there (1992:169).

As with that of Wenham, Sailhammer's proposal involves the creation of a considerable gap-filler to make sense of the narrative (the investigation carried out by the 'third man'). His invocation of Gomorra as a place needing investigation in order to ensure the justice of God seems of little interest to a narrative in which the city of Sodom forms the focal point; the terms 'Sodom', 'Sodom and Gomorra', 'cities of the valley', and 'all the valley', all seem essentially interchangeable. Sailhammer's reading is problematic, not because he sees the men as representative but distinct from YHWH, but because he makes the further move of seeing all three men depart from Abraham in 18:22a, two to go to Sodom and one to Gomorra, with YHWH left behind to speak to Abraham without any man present.

By taking a slightly different position, however, a less cumbersome—and therefore more convincing—reading, based upon that proposed by A. Dillmann (1892:266), may be adopted. With Sailhammer, it should be accepted that Abraham's three visitors represent YHWH in the situations and people they encounter. (That the men actually embody YHWH is unlikely because Gen. 19:1 makes clear their angelic nature; here I shall consider them only to be representatives, who mediate the presence of YHWH.) The guests ask for Sarah (18:9), before one of the men—designated in Hebrew only as 'he'—speaks as an individual representative of but also 'as' YHWH and promises a son to Sarah (18:10). Following Sarah's laughter, YHWH, in the person of that one man, rebukes her. All three rise to go to Sodom (18:16), and we hear the thoughts of YHWH (18:17-9) and his announcement to Abraham (18:20-21). But it is with the departure of the men to Sodom that Sailhammer's problematic 'third man' is encountered. Here, however, it should be asserted that Abraham in preventing YHWH from departing also detains one of the men as Wenham suggests (cf. Westermann, 1985:290). In the ensuing discussion, it is this man 'as' YHWH before whom Abraham stands, and not a man who *alone of the three* mediates the presence of

YHWH as Wenham's reading suggests.<sup>120</sup> Two men thus leave for Sodom and their actions are also to be seen as those of representatives of YHWH. In this sense, therefore, the deity does go to Sodom (19:1; cf. 18:21 and *contra* Wenham), investigates the outcry—or rather receives confirmation about it (cf. 19:4-11)—and destroys the 'cities of the plain' (19:13, 24-26). Sailhammer's concept of the interchangeability of voices is thus taken up fully here: the three, (any) one—or two—of the three, and YHWH are all interchangeable in voice, but they are addressed by Abraham in singular terms if his emphasis is upon addressing YHWH or in plural terms if he is addressing the needs of the three men.

In suggesting a similar position, S.R. Driver adds a further nuance in order to deal with the angels's statement in Gen. 19:13 that it is YHWH who has sent them to Sodom. Reading the MT's יְיָ (‘Lord’) in both 18:3 and 19:18 as יְיָ (‘my lords’), he concludes that ‘Jehovah is not so distinctly present in either of the two angels in ch. 19 as He [sic] is in at least one of the three in ch. 18[:10-15]’ (1909:200). Preferable, however, is a recognition of the significance of the ignorance of both Lot and the men of Sodom about the real identity of the visitors (Abraham's ignorance or lack of it will be dealt with shortly). In Gen. 19:1, the narrative identifies the visitors as angels, but they are called ‘men’ by Lot (19:8) and the men of Sodom (19:5). Lot initially addresses the men with plural forms because he does not recognise them as representatives of YHWH (as the MT's יְיָ recognises), and it is only following their subsequent actions and pronouncements that he eventually identifies and addresses them ‘as’ יְיָ, as ‘YHWH’ in 19:18. In 19:13, the angels therefore speak as the ‘men’ whom they appear to be in Lot's eyes, and it may be concluded that it is only to avoid prematurely declaring their identity to the one who must eventually come to identify them ‘as’ YHWH that they speak as they do; Lot's distance from YHWH, a recurrent theme of Genesis 13-19, accounts for the appearance of difference between

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<sup>120</sup> Sailhammer's point that YHWH can speak to Abraham with or without the men is, therefore, without foundation here, though of course it can be easily supported elsewhere in the Abraham narratives (e.g., Gen. 12:1, 7; 13:14; 15:1; 17:1; 21:12; 22:1, 2, 11, 15).

the men 'as' YHWH of Genesis 18 and 19. That the three men all represent YHWH fully in the type of reading suggested by Dillmann seems best to account for the anomalies of the present text; Gunkel's dismissal of this reading because of his view that it is alien to the ancient Israelite mind should—even if correct on the latter point—be in turn rejected as irrelevant to a canonical view of the text.

### C. Abraham's Recognition of YHWH

The details which necessitate such a construction of the relationship between YHWH and the three men also impinge upon a further puzzle: at what point is Abraham aware that it is YHWH who is appearing to him? For Gunkel it is apparent that in vv. 1-16aa Abraham never recognises YHWH, but in 22b-33 he obviously does so. It is clearly not possible for a canonical reading to settle for Gunkel's diachronic view here and so the choice arises between an immediate recognition in v. 1 or a gradual one during vv. 1-16 or even later.<sup>121</sup> Put differently, whom does Abraham believe the single figure he addresses in v. 3 to be?

The most common interpretation is that Abraham is initially ignorant of his guest's identity (e.g., Bowie, 1952:616, 619; Driver, 1909:192; Skinner, 1910:298-300; Morgenstern, 1965:117; Westermann, 1985:277; Davidson, 1979:63; Wenham, 1994:45; Speiser, 1964:129). Gossai's comment that 'there is no indication... that Abraham is aware of the identity of the strangers' is typical (1995:49). For these readers, Abraham only becomes gradually aware of the presence of YHWH. There is, however, no consensus as to when full recognition takes place. Is it when his visitors demonstrate an apparently miraculous knowledge of Sarah's name (in v. 9; e.g., Wenham, 1994:47), when YHWH promises a son to Sarah (in vv. 10-14; e.g., Skinner, 1910:300-301; Dillman, 1892:268), perhaps gradually through each of the following

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<sup>121</sup> It is also logically possible that Abraham was unsure about the identity of his visitors but suspected the presence of YHWH. However, in the absence of an explicit statement of suspicion it is hard to imagine what would count as evidence for this interpretation.

events (e.g., Driver's 'vv. 10, 13, 17-22,' 1909:192), or at some point unknown (e.g., Gossai, 1995:67)?

Among reasons given by interpreters for concluding that Abraham does not recognise YHWH are the following. First, W.R. Bowie's suggestion that, 'Abraham has no reason to believe they are anything other than ordinary men' (1952:616). Second, Driver's claim that Abraham would 'scarcely have presumed to offer food and drink to one whom he recognised as Jehovah', citing as support the refusal of the angel of YHWH to eat in Judg. 13:16b (cf. also Tob. 12:19 which accounts for angelic 'eating' as the product of a vision); Driver also comments that the subsequent words of Abraham in v. 5, "“after that ye shall pass on”, shew [sic] that he regarded the three men as ordinary travellers' (1909:192). Third, J. Skinner's insistence that 'the interest of the story turns largely on [Abraham's] ignorance of the real identity of his guests' (1910:299). Fourth, the invocation of Old Testament parallels involving ignorance of a guest's true identity (especially e.g., Judg. 6:12-22; 13:2-23; cf. Driver, 1909:192), or the use of ancient so-called parallel stories in Ovid (e.g., R. Davidson, 1979:63), or Ancient Near Eastern texts and even folk tales (for which Gunkel himself can be cited, 1997:192-3). A further factor which may have led some to this conclusion is the—possibly subconscious—influence of the comment of Heb. 13:2 that some have entertained angels unawares upon interpreters of Genesis 18 (but explicitly mentioned in e.g., Bowie, 1952:616; Westermann, 1985:277; Wenham, 1994:65).<sup>122</sup>

The pointing of אֱלֹהֵי as אֱלֹהִים in v. 3 by the MT is problematic for all such interpretations, however. As Wenham notes, the MT clearly suggests that Abraham recognises YHWH (1994:36; cf. Waltke and O'Connor's conclusion that every occurrence in the Old Testament of אֱלֹהִים signifies the divine appellation, 1990:124). If it is concluded that Abraham does not recognise YHWH in v. 3, then clearly either the MT's interpretation of the consonantal text or the usual understanding of the MT itself

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<sup>122</sup> Certainly commentators on the book of Hebrews often mention Genesis 18 as a example of the situation being described in 13:2 (cf. e.g., Bruce, 1964:390-91; Wilson 1987:238; and Hewitt, 1960:205).

must be rejected.<sup>123</sup> One example of the latter is to suggest, with Rashi (1900:70; explicitly) and Gossai (1995:42; implicitly), that the MT here intends the term to have a ‘profane’ referent rather than a ‘divine’ one, effectively rejecting Wenham’s (and Waltke-O’Connor’s) view of the MT’s usage of אֲדָנָי. But the more usual decision taken by commentators is to reject the pointing of the MT as either simply a ‘mistake’ (e.g., Skinner 1910:299-300), as incorrect (e.g., Wenham’s ‘the context suggests [אֲדָנָי] is more apt’, 1994:36), or as being due to the MT’s theologising tendency (e.g., Westermann, 1985:278). The exegete then interprets (and repoints) אֲדָנָי as either the plural אֲדָנָי, ‘my lords’, or as the singular אֲדָנָי, ‘my lord’. Westermann notes that if אֲדָנָי is read as the plural אֲדָנָי then the singular forms of v. 3 should also be changed to plural forms— following the SP, and the position taken by Skinner (1910:300)—but prefers himself to read אֲדָנָי, my lord (1985:278; cf. also Wenham, 1994:36; Driver, 1909:192). Despite Childs’s argument that the pointing is not a late imposition (1979:98), it is not in itself problematic for a canonical reading, committed to a consonantal text dated to around 100 CE, to alter the pointing. The real question, however, is whether or not such repointing is the required response to the text here.

It is rarely recognised that the claim that Abraham only gradually becomes aware of the presence of YHWH is as lacking in explicit foundations as the claim that Abraham recognises YHWH immediately—there is no explicit statement of Abraham’s recognition of YHWH *anywhere* within the narrative. Furthermore, J. van Seters has also described the implicit evidence upon which Abraham’s ‘gradual recognition’ is based as ‘very weak’, concluding that the text ‘does not explain at all how [Abraham] recognised the Deity. Yet in what follows [(18:22-33), he] is fully aware that it is Yahweh with whom he is speaking, a recognition that is not adequately accounted for’ (1975:211). As noted in Chapter 4, Gunkel even goes so far as to see the sharp move

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<sup>123</sup> One could perhaps imagine an argument for keeping the pointing on the grounds that Abraham has been made to use a suitable address for the Deity by the Massoretes, even though he has not recognised his visitor (somewhat along the lines of Moberly’s arguments for the treatment of the patriarchal narratives by later Yahwistic writers). However, I have not seen this suggested or even considered by any interpreter of Genesis 18-19 who regards Abraham as not recognising YHWH, most preferring to simply change the vowel points.

from ignorance in Gen. 18:1-16aa to awareness in Gen. 18:16b-33 as evidence of two separate textual traditions. There is no 'smoking gun' here; both views are based on strictly circumstantial evidence. The assumption is baseless that a 'gradual recognition' stands on firmer foundations than an 'immediate recognition'.

Similarly, other assumptions operating within the arguments for a gradual recognition seem faulty. For example, how significant is Bowie's claim that Abraham 'has no reason to believe [his visitors] are anything other than ordinary men' (1952:616)? Does Abraham's recognition of the deity usually involve his being given a 'reason' to believe? Must the men *do* something out of the ordinary before he can recognise the deity in them? It is surely significant that on no other occasion is Abraham seen to be in any doubt that it is YHWH with whom he is conversing (cf. Gen. 12:1,7; 13:14; 15:1; 17:1; 21:12; 22:1-2, 11, 15). This includes two other occasions when YHWH 'appears' to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 17:1), the second of which involved Abraham entering a covenant relationship with YHWH, an event which took place shortly before the arrival of the three men. Most significant, perhaps, is the passage in which he is told by YHWH to kill his own son, but does not even question the identity of the one who gives the command (Gen. 22:1-19). Whenever the two meet elsewhere, Abraham is able to identify YHWH immediately; perhaps this is why Abraham never has to ask the name of his guests in Genesis 18, a point recorded by Morgenstern, but with no recognition of its real significance (1965:117). The very closeness of Abraham's relationship with his God makes it unwise to cite parallels in Judges as determinative here. Abraham's history with his God is not the same as those who encounter YHWH in such passages and his situation must primarily be taken on its own merits. Rather his ability to recognise YHWH in every other relevant text should create a strong presumption towards just such a recognition here.

The invocation of ANE parallels to explain this text is problematic because the present narrative is substantially different to those stories, a point usually recognised by the very scholars who have suggested the parallel (cf. e.g., R. Davidson's, 'if the J narrator is using an ancient folk tale motif, he is adapting it to his own purposes',



1979:63). Neither is it sound practice to read uncritically the comment of Heb. 13:2 that some have entertained angels unawares into the text of Genesis 18, especially since a less difficult Old Testament precedent can easily be found in Lot's actions in Gen. 19:2-3. Abraham is not necessarily one of the 'entertainers' to whom Hebrews refers, and even if he was in the mind of the writer to the Hebrews there is no good reason why that author should decide our exegesis here. Driver's claim that Abraham would not have knowingly offered food to YHWH is rendered problematic by his own conclusion that YHWH is present in the three angels who actually eat the food which Abraham puts before them (18:8), *contra* his own invocation of Judg. 13:16 (1909:200). It is not necessary to invoke the later Jewish traditions recorded in Ginzberg's *Legends* that what occurred was an illusion in which the heavenly visitors did not actually eat (1947:243; cf. also Josephus, *Ant.* 1.197). A basic narrative assumption here is that YHWH, in the form of the three men, is capable of taking food (though Gen. 18:8 and 19:3 *are* 'the only cases in [the] OT where the Deity [sic] is represented as eating'; cf. Skinner, 1910:300). If so, Abraham's offer of food cannot indicate that he has not recognised YHWH, and Keil-Delitzsch are right in concluding that the 'eating of material food on the part of these heavenly beings was not in appearance only, but was really eating; an act which may be attributed to the corporeality assumed... although the miracle still remains physiologically incomprehensible' (1980:228). The visitors, presumably weary in the heat of the day, do eat and drink.

In the absence of strong evidence to the contrary, it would seem more reasonable to assume that Abraham recognises YHWH immediately and that the need for YHWH to be represented by the three men here can be accounted for by his subsequently stated intention to investigate the outcry against Sodom in their guise. The real 'interest' of the narrative should therefore be discerned from this position and not from one which entails a presumption of Abraham's ignorance (*contra* Skinner, 1910:299).

#### D. An Invitation Offered...

After looking up and seeing three men standing over him (עָלָיו), Abraham immediately recognises them as representing an unexpected appearance of YHWH; Keil-Delitzsch describe their position as ‘the oriental equivalent of knocking’ at Abraham’s door (1980:228; cf. also Westermann, 1985:277).<sup>124</sup> The patriarch moves quickly despite the heat, running to greet them and bowing low before them (Gen. 23:12; 37:9; 42:6). But the ironic resonances seen by Wenham as Abraham bows to his unrecognised visitors—כָּרַח, ‘to bow’, indicating ‘worship’ when used of YHWH (1994:46)—are lost in a reading which sees Abraham as knowingly greeting his deity in a manner both respectful and worshipful. The term עָלָיו can indicate a variety of degrees of proximity from mere feet away to a distant position overlooking a person. Though the former was taken up by the rabbinic tradition which saw a textual gap between the phrase ‘standing over’ and Abraham’s action in ‘running’ to the men, and envisaged a picture of the angels as withdrawing after seeing Abraham binding the wounds of his circumcision, it seems more likely that the latter should be read here (cf. Keil-Delitzsch’s ‘standing at some distance from him’, 1980:228). וַיֵּרָץ marks the beginning of a series of verbs which will emphasise Abraham’s haste to offer and then provide hospitality to his guests, forming a stark contrast to the languid opening scene of midday heat (Westermann, 1985:277). He rushes up to them to greet them and bows low before he begins to speak.

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<sup>124</sup> Their sudden appearance has occasioned comment, being seen by some as a miraculous appearance (von Rad, 1961:201; Wenham, 1994:46; and Skinner, 1910:299; who cites Josh. 5:18-19). Their common belief that Abraham does not then recognise YHWH despite this ‘miracle’ presumably leads them to adopt something like Skinner’s rather weak suggestion that this miraculous event ‘makes no impression on Abraham at the time’. If one accepts that Abraham does recognise YHWH immediately, however, then this miraculous appearance may be cited as additional evidence for that interpretation.

There is no pressing reason, however, why the travellers could not simply have walked up to Abraham without being noticed. They are, after all, said to walk to Sodom (וַיֵּלְכוּ סֹדֹמָה) rather than transfer miraculously (though Wenham does actually argue that because the distance was too great to walk between lunch with Abraham and arriving at Sodom in the evening, they actually did the latter, 1994:54). But if this view is accepted, it is not then necessary to suggest, as Wenham does, that Abraham has dozed off (1994:46)

V.H. Matthews outlines a 'protocol of hospitality' (developed from a study of Judges 4, 1991) which may be said to underlie Abraham's actions:

- 1) There is a sphere of hospitality which comprises a zone of obligation for both the individual and the village or town within which they have the responsibility to offer hospitality to strangers. The size of the zone is of course smaller for the individual than for the urban centre.
- 2) The stranger must be transformed from potential threat to ally by the offer of hospitality.
- 3) The invitation can only be offered by the male head of household or a male citizen of a town or village.
- 4) The invitation may include a time span statement for the period of hospitality, but this can then be extended if agreeable to both parties, on the renewed invitation of the host.
- 5) The stranger has the right of refusal but this could be considered an affront to the honour of the host and could be a cause for immediate hostilities or conflict.
- 6) Once the invitation is accepted, the roles of the host and the guest are set by the rules of custom. (a) The guest must not ask for anything. (b) The host provides the best he has available—despite what may be modestly offered in the initial invitation of hospitality. (c) The guest is expected to reciprocate with news, predictions of good fortune, or gracious responses based on what he has been given. (d) The host must not ask personal questions of the guest.
- 7) The guest remains under the protection of the host until he/she has left the zone of obligation of the host (1992:11).

The patriarch begins v. 3 with the conditional 'if I have found favour in your eyes' (cf. e.g., Gen. 19:19; 30:27; 32:6; 33:8, 10, 15; 34:11; 47:25, 29; 50:4), before respectfully requesting that אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה, YHWH, should not pass through (תֵּעָבֵר) from before his servant, Abraham. His request is phrased in such a way as to be wholly non-coercive, to be an open invitation which will allow the travellers to decide for themselves whether or not they should stay. These deferential words are interpreted by Westermann as being aimed at 'giving the one invited the ground for accepting the invitation'; he offers the paraphrase 'if it is alright with you to accept my invitation' (1985:278). The parallel with Noah's finding favour with YHWH (Gen. 6.8), pointed

out—incorrectly—as ironic by Wenham (1994:46), rather shows that such a mode of address is appropriate when Abraham is inviting the deity to partake of his hospitality. Neither does the invitation to stay and not pass through indicate that Abraham only regarded the three men as travellers as Driver suggests (1909:192), but rather that the travelling men and YHWH are connected in such a way that Abraham cannot address the deity in this context apart from those who represent him; there is an irreducibility about the relationship between the three men and YHWH such that Abraham quite correctly treats YHWH as a weary traveller, inviting the deity to stay (v. 3) and offering the three men water and sustenance (vv. 4-5). By calling himself a servant, Abraham not only puts himself and his house at the service of his visitors, but also explicitly identifies himself as an עֶבֶד יְהוָה, a ‘servant of YHWH’ who, in the words of Gen. 17:1, intends—despite his recurrent failings—to ‘walk before [YHWH] and be blameless’ (as עֶבֶד יְהוָה; Gen. 50:17; 2 Kgs 9:7; 10:23; Isa. 54:17; 56:6; as עֶבְדִּי, [‘his’ being YHWH]; Deut. 32:36, 43; Neh. 2:20; Isa. 65:15; 66:14; Ps. 34:23; 69:37; 105:25; 135:154; as עֶבְדִּי, voiced by YHWH; Isa. 65:8-9,13-14).

Abraham’s direct singular address to YHWH (v. 3) ceases and he offers to attend to the physical needs of the three men in whom YHWH is represented (vv. 4-5). He is still not assured that his guest(s) will stay. He deferentially offers them water for their feet (cf. Gen. 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judg. 19:21; 2 Sam. 11:8) before suggesting that they recline in the shade of a tree while he brings food for them to eat (Gen. 27:19; Judg. 19:6; 1 Sam. 20:5,24; 1 Kgs 13:20; cf. Jon. 4:6). In contrast to Gunkel’s view that a tension appears here between v. 1 (plural trees) and v. 4 (singular tree), it should rather be concluded that the tree mentioned is simply one of the אֵלֵי מְמָרָא which mark his home.

Despite Abraham’s description of the food that he will bring as a mere ‘morsel of bread’ (פֶּתֶלֶקֶם), the protocol of hospitality shows that this description should not be taken literally; it need not do justice to the amounts of food which he will actually provide for his guests. Gossai is undoubtedly correct in taking a more symbolic approach, suggesting that the term “morsel of bread” points to all that is necessary for

daily sustenance' (1995:46). Both Westermann's suggestion that this is the 'language of politeness,...meant to minimise the exhausting work of entertainment' (1985:278) and Wenham's view that it is understatement intended to avoid making his guests feel like they were imposing (1994:46) do not do justice to the protocol of hospitality operative here, reflecting more a certain Western delicacy. The guests are supposed 'to impose' and Abraham is supposed to supply them to the best of his ability; both therefore know that the latter is offering to be a 'good host' and there is no cause for embarrassment on either side.

Abraham continues speaking. He wishes his guests to partake of his hospitality so that each may 'strengthen' their 'heart' (e.g., Judg. 19:5; Ps. 104:15; 1 Kgs 13:7; cf. Driver's rendering 'support your heart,' 1909:193; and Skinner's description of bread as the 'staff' of life, citing Lev. 26:26; Isa. 3:1; 1910:300). He then informs them that they can depart following the meal he has provided, carefully setting out the temporal extent of his offer of hospitality to avoid any impression of detaining them by obligation (Matthews, 1992:4); this self-imposed time limit may be the cause of Abraham's subsequent haste. In a final rhetorical flourish, Abraham identifies the reason for their visit as being the provision of an opportunity for him to be able to deal with their needs (פִּי-עַל-כֵּן עֵבְרָתְכֶם עַל-עֵבְרָתְכֶם); as Abraham puts it in Keil-Delitzsch's paraphrase, you have come 'to give me an opportunity to entertain you hospitably' (1980:228). Abraham's implementation of the protocol of hospitality has begun well. In Gossai's words: 'in his open and urgent attention to the visitors, [the patriarch] ensures that there are no barriers and removes whatever mutual suspicion there might be' (1995:45). 'They', the three men/YHWH, reply positively and Abraham has his wish; his hospitality has been accepted.

#### E. ...and Accepted

Abraham, having presumably left his guests reclining in the cool shade of the tree, goes to prepare the meal. He does so quickly, his guest having agreed to stay

only on the proviso, suggested by Abraham, that they can leave following their meal; the patriarch does not wish to detain them unnecessarily, perhaps breaching the protocol of hospitality by default. Verbs in use here are fast and furious and indicators of direction are prevalent (cf. W. Brueggemann, 1982b:617). Abraham rushes (וַיִּמְהַר) to the tent (הַתְּאֵלֶּה), to his wife Sarah (אֶל־שָׂרָה) and tells her in a series of imperatives to hurry (מְהֵרָי), to take three seahs of flour, fine flour (כִּלְתָּ; as Gunkel has noted, used elsewhere only of cereal offerings and the bread of the presence [Lev. 24:5]; cf. also Wenham, 1994:47), and to knead it (לִישֵׁ) and make (עָשִׂי) ‘cakes’ (עֲגוֹת; cf. Exod. 12:39; Num. 11:8; 1 Kgs 17:13; 19:6; Ezek. 4:12; Hos. 7:8). The actual amount of flour involved is unclear, but there is general agreement that a large amount is in view, perhaps ‘one ephah’ equivalent to a huge ‘eight gallons’ (Driver, 1909:193; though Wenham suggest ‘six gallons,’ 1994:47) or a third of an ephah, thirteen litres (so Speiser, 1964:130) or the extraordinarily precise 3 x 374 cubic inches of Keil-Delitzsch (1980:228). Driver suggests—at least, if it is accepted that three seahs *do* equal one ephah—that this is the usual amount of a daily baking, citing as evidence Gideon’s baking of an ephah of flour for the angel of YHWH in Judg. 6:19 (1909:193). But it would say little for Abraham’s (and Gideon’s) hospitality, if they did no more than their normal daily amount of baking for their guests, and so an amount beyond the norm seems more likely. Leaving Sarah, Abraham runs (רָץ; cf. also v. 2) to his cattle (אֶל־הַבָּקָר) and selects a perfect calf, fine and tender, and gives it to a servant (אֶל־הַנְּעֵר) to prepare. This the servant rushes (וַיִּמְהַר) to do. A considerable amount of food—well described by Driver as a ‘sumptuous repast’ (1909:192)—is thus being quickly prepared for the visitors.

When ready, Abraham takes the food which he—as head of the household—has ‘prepared’ and sets it before his guests along with ‘fresh milk (חֶלֶב) to quench their thirst and sour milk (חֲמֵצָה) to refresh them’ (Westermann, 1985:279). As they eat under the tree, he stands over them in attendance to see to their needs (cf. Judg. 3:19). The effect of Abraham’s initial understatement, his rush to both greet his guests and prepare their food, and the lavish amounts of food involved combine to make

Abraham's 'typical' implementation of the 'protocol of hospitality' exemplary (so Wenham's 'just the proper way to entertain visitors', 1994:47).

## II. The Announcement of a Son to Sarah (18:9-15)

### A. A Question and an Announcement

Following the arrival of YHWH in Abraham's camp at the Oaks of Mamre in the shape of the three travellers, the patriarch invites him/them to partake of his hospitality. His wish is granted and a large meal is prepared and eaten. At some point during or just after the meal, the guests begin to speak. But rather than talk of the outside world or offer expressions of gratitude for their sustenance as might be expected, they instead ask Abraham the whereabouts of his wife Sarah (v. 9). Since Abraham is already aware of the presence of YHWH, this knowledge is not to be taken as the miraculous sign which first alerts Abraham to the identity of his visitors. Neither is it pertinent to ask why knowledge of Sarah's name is available to YHWH but not knowledge of her whereabouts, since to do so would be to ignore the way in which the book of Genesis often portrays the deity relating to humanity. In the Garden of Eden YHWH calls to Adam, 'where are you?' (3:9) and, after the death of Abel, the question, 'where is your brother?' is directed towards Cain (4:9).<sup>125</sup> These questions are all meant to be answered and here Abraham responds that Sarah is nearby, in the tent.

One of the men then speaks<sup>126</sup> and tells Abraham that 'I—YHWH, Abraham will no doubt assume—'will come back to you next year (בְּעֵת הַיָּדָה) and that by then

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<sup>125</sup> Also noteworthy is the question of the Angel of YHWH to Hagar in Gen. 16:8: 'Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' (so Westermann. 1985:279).

<sup>126</sup> Rashkow suggests that the 'he' who speaks in v. 10 is not one of the men as is usually thought, but is rather Abraham remembering aloud the statement of promise given to him in Genesis 17 by YHWH (who is therefore now the 'he' of v. 10). The narrator then recounts Sarah's overhearing of his words and the interruption caused by her laughter (1993:98-99). If it is assumed that Abraham does not recognise YHWH here, this reading is perhaps possible, but even so questions arise as to why Abraham should now begin to tell his guests of his meeting with YHWH and why he

Sarah will have a son'. The term, *בְּעֵת קָיָה*, is rare in Biblical Hebrew (only here and 2 Kgs 4:16,17; used by Elisha to describe the timing of a son to the ageing Shunamite woman); it is rendered as 'at this time, when it lives again', meaning 'next year' according to Keil-Delitzsch (1980:229; cf. also Westermann, 1985:280; Wenham, 1994:48; Driver, 1909:194);<sup>127</sup> Wenham further suggests that the statement that the visitor will come back to Abraham refers not to a simple return visit but rather to 'God's gracious intervention' in giving Sarah a son (1994:48; citing as support Zech. 1:3; Ps. 80:14[ET 15]; Gen. 21:1 records that YHWH visited [*בָּקַר*] Sarah as promised *contra* Gunkel, whose view seem to be based on the lack of a return scene). Gossai notes that the promise of a son next year leaves the deity vulnerable to failure because it is effectively reliant upon the response of the aged couple (1995:50), but, as will become clear, it is a major concern of YHWH's present visit to confront the responses of Abraham and Sarah to the promise, resulting in a subsequent—though not, total—reduction in the extent of YHWH's vulnerability.

The information that Sarah will have a son is not news to Abraham, of course, nor is its timing in being less than a year away. The announcement serves simply to repeat what Abraham has already heard before and laughed at in disbelief (Gen. 17:16, 21; *contra* Gossai who strangely states: 'Neither Abraham or Sarah had any reason to expect an heir given their age situation and the barrenness of Sarah,' 1995:48). But significantly, the narrative notes that, *וְשָׂרָה שָׁמְעָת פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו*, 'and Sarah was standing at the entrance to the tent and it [the entrance] was behind him [the speaker]', that is very close nearby. Since the guests have already ascertained that

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himself leaves the 'he' of v. 10 unspecified as YHWH (how are his guests supposed to know who 'he' is?). But if it is assumed that Abraham has already recognised YHWH—as argued on pages 175-79—Abraham clearly cannot be referring to an absent 'he' in v. 10 and Rashkow's ingenious reading must be rejected.

<sup>127</sup> Skinner's suggestion—on the basis of Mishnaic Hebrew's use of *קָיָה* to indicate a pregnant women—that there may be a reference to pregnancy here is possible (1903:301; cf. also Speiser, 1964:130), but the only other occurrence of this phrase in the biblical texts, 2 Kgs 4:16-17, places it alongside *לְמוֹעַד קָיָה*, 'at this appointed time', indicating a yearly cycle. Skinner is reduced to arguing that the later text involves a misunderstanding of this passage in Genesis, but such arguments seem unnecessarily complicated, and a simple indication to 'in a year's time' will suffice.



Sarah was in the nearby tent, the repetition of the promise appears to be primarily intended for her over-hearing (cf. Wenham, 1994:46; who initially sees the visit as being for Abraham's benefit before stating: 'The promise is for Sarah alone here'). As Sarah's response will make plain though, what is being promised *is* news to her; clearly, Abraham has *not* informed his wife of the clarification of the promise (i.e., that his heir is not to be Ishmael but rather a son born to Sarah) recently given to him in Genesis 17.

From her position by the entrance of the tent behind the speaker Sarah *has* overheard the announcement. A less than subtle characterisation of Sarah as the proverbially curious woman now appears in some commentators at this point (e.g., especially Skinner's 'with true feminine curiosity', 1910:301; cf. also Morgenstern, 1965:121; Wenham, 1994:48; Speiser, 1964:131). But Sarah is not censured for being at the entrance of the tent. In fact it was perhaps where she was supposed to be, awaiting further instructions from Abraham; this conclusion would again emphasise that the message was intended for her, the guests asking her whereabouts merely as confirmation that she was where she was supposed to be. As Westermann notes, Abraham now recedes into the background, and it is Sarah's subsequent response to the words which she has overheard which form the focus of the narrative from v. 11 to v. 15 (1985:279, 281); YHWH moves from a direct address to Abraham to an indirect address to Sarah (through Abraham) before addressing her directly (so Gossai, 1995:48). That the announcement is primarily aimed at Sarah indicates that it should not be understood as a reward of some kind for Abraham's hospitality (cf. Morgenstern's 'Isaac was God's reward for Abraham's hospitality,' 1965:122; also Skinner, 1910:298). Such a view also ignores the relationship between the promise of a son already given (11:30; 15:2-4; 16:11; 17:15, 16, 19, 21) and its contingent nature (12:3); Abraham's hospitality can only be seen as a correct response to the promise, rather than that which earns it (cf. von Rad, 1961:204).

## B. Sarah's Knowledge

The question now arises as to Sarah's awareness of the identity of her husband's guests. No explicit narration provides an answer; it must be inferred from circumstantial evidence. The most common interpretation is that she is unaware of their identity until perhaps v. 14 or even v. 15, when their supernatural knowledge gradually reveals their identity to her (cf. e.g., Speiser's '[f]or all Sarah knew, the promise of a child was a gesture made by meddling travellers', 1964:131). This lack of knowledge in Sarah is also often coupled with Abraham's own ignorance of the identity of his guests. I have already argued, however, that such theories of gradual revelation are based upon very slim evidence and—in the case of Abraham at least—that they should be discarded. But even if Abraham is aware of their identity, is Sarah?

The size of the meal Abraham has prepared is probably not significant here since it seems likely that Abraham as the exemplary host would show such favour to all whom he entertains (cf. Wenham, 1994:47). Neither does it seem likely that Sarah has been introduced to the guests, hence their question in v. 9 as to her whereabouts (cf. Skinner 1910:301). Perhaps the strongest evidence that Sarah is ignorant of YHWH's identity is that her comments directly contradict the divine words, a situation which, if her piety is assumed and she is aware of who has spoken them, has proved difficult for some commentators to imagine (cf. e.g., Gunkel's 'a grievous sacrilege', 1997:198). If a view of her as unknowing is accepted, Sarah has presumably still not realised the guests's identity when she denies that she has laughed. She only does so when she is rebuked for her denial (though of course she may still be unaware even there; this seems the implication of Westermann's insistence that 'an unveiling without any reaction from the interlocutor is excluded', 1985:281. Gunkel, of course, believes that neither Abraham or Sarah ever recognise YHWH in 18:1-16aa).

But the assumption of matriarchal piety on such grounds is rendered questionable by Abraham's own actions, which clearly demonstrate that he has no difficulty in expressing his own response of disbelief to YHWH's words. Significantly,

Abraham heard the first announcement of a son to Sarah in Gen. 17:16, 21, and his response was one of disbelieving laughter, matching that of Sarah (17:17; *contra* Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:229; Calvin, 1965:459-60; Luther, 1961:153-54; Speiser, 1964:125). Sarah's contradicting of YHWH does not, therefore, mean that she is unaware of the deity's presence. It seems more likely that Sarah's response here to YHWH in the form of the guests and Abraham's response to YHWH in Gen. 17:17 should be viewed as parallel, with YHWH's subsequent words here forming the divine response to the ongoing disbelief of both husband and wife (*contra* Wenham who sees Abraham's silence here as already implying acceptance, 1994:47). If this is so, then Sarah must be aware of the guests's identity from the outset, and her subsequent response of denial is simply a panic response, and not the response of one ignorant of the powers of the guests. Sarah knows who they are by v. 9, though whether she has been informed of the fact by Abraham or has recognised YHWH herself is left unclear.

### C. 'Old and Well Stricken With Age...'

A narrative aside (v. 11) provides the context for Sarah's response to what she has heard: both she and her husband are old and 'well stricken in age' (so Driver, citing Gen. 24:1, 1909:194), and she is no longer experiencing 'the way of women', presumably menstruation (cf. Gen. 31:35). Wenham sees this emphasis as significant, arguing that references to Sarah's age—ninety according to Gen. 17:17—must be set against references to her sexual desirability (12:11,20; also implied in Gen. 20:1-2) and the earlier statement that Noah became a father at five hundred years of age (Gen. 5:32). He concludes that it may not have been apparent to readers that Sarah was beyond childbirth and the shape of the present text is designed to leave readers in no doubt as to the impossibility of her bearing a son (1994:48). But Wenham's invocation of Noah's great age is problematic because the age of humanity was limited to one hundred and twenty years by YHWH in response to the sins of the Sons of God (cf. Gen. 6:3). Equally, although Sarah's sexual desirability seems to be confirmed by the

events of Genesis 20, this implies only that she remained physically desirable and says nothing about her ability to bear children. Sarah could not therefore be expected to have children at ninety years of age (*contra* Wenham), the reference to menstruation only serving to emphasise her physical state. She is no longer a barren woman—‘barren’ simply indicating that she is childless and has not yet conceived over a long period—but is rather a woman who is well past the age of childbearing; her giving birth to a son is now a complete physical impossibility (also Wenham’s eventual conclusion as to the meaning of the text, 1994:48).

#### D. Sarah’s Disbelieving Laughter

Sarah’s response to the announcement is to laugh (קִיְחָלָה) in ‘incredulity’ (Driver, 1909:194). Her self-description as בְּלֵהָיָה, ‘worn out’, a term used of ‘clothing’ falling to pieces in Deut. 8:4, 29:4 (cf. also Josh. 9:13; Ps. 32:3; Ps. 102:27; Isa. 1:9; 51:6), her perhaps amused consideration of עֲדָנָה, ‘sexual pleasure’, at her age, and her reference to the great age of her husband clearly cast her laughter as that of disbelief. It is at this point that the twin motifs of a son to Abraham (15:2-4; 16:11; 17:15,16,19,21) and Sarah’s inability to bear a child whether through barrenness or age (11:30; 16:1) come into focus, and centre upon the hopelessness of Sarah herself.

Despite A.A. McIntosh’s attempt to render עֲדָנָה as ‘conception’ following Pseudo-Jonathan (1974:329), Westermann’s suggestion that the hapax legomenon עֲדָנָה should be translated as ‘sexual pleasure’ is to be preferred (1985:281; cf. also Skinner’s ‘sensuous enjoyment’, 1910:302). But he does not draw out any implications of this word for Abraham’s own attitude to the promise of a son being born to Sarah already given to him in 17:17. Turner, however, argues that since עֲדָנָה presumably denotes sexual intercourse, Sarah’s response indicates that she and Abraham are no longer sexually active. He concludes that this demonstrates the completeness of Abraham’s disbelief in the promise of a son to Sarah; as he—

somewhat tendentiously—puts it, '[u]nless they expect an immaculate conception, their sexual abstinence shows that they simply do not believe the promise' (1990a:79).

But since there is no evidence that Abraham has actually told his wife of the announcement that YHWH had made to him—in itself a further demonstration of his lack of faith in the outcome of the promise—Turner is incorrect; sexual abstinence is only a measure of *Abraham's* disbelief. Until she overhears the words of Gen. 18:10, Sarah is wholly unaware of the promise that the heir of the promise is to be her son; her lack of sexual activity should only be taken—at most—as an indicator that her hopes for a child are now over (as her actions in Genesis 16 already seem to indicate). Her response of disbelieving laughter is a natural one given her age and state, made to a deity whom she clearly does not believe can fulfil the promise that she will bear a son. Her response thus mirrors that of her ninety-nine year old husband when he first heard that she would have a son (17:17). In what follows, Sarah may well be in the foreground, but when YHWH responds to her laughter, that response is also being made to the disbelieving Abraham. In this encounter, the disbelief of the old couple in the promise of a son to Sarah is the issue which must be resolved; if they will not believe *and resume sexual relations*, YHWH's promise will not happen (cf. Gossai's vulnerability of the deity, 1995:50).

Sarah laughed in disbelief *to herself* (בְּקֶרְבָּהּ). Westermann cites B. Jacob's conclusion that 'laughter is not something internal—there is no such laughter' (1974:443), and states that the verb צחק describes an external expression (1985:281); Sarah's laughter was, therefore, not silent. But there is a logical problem with an argument in which an example of צחק with a modifier such as בְּקֶרְבָּהּ which perhaps indicates internal laughter is disallowed on the grounds that the verb must describe an external expression. It is also surely significant that for some commentators, as was noted earlier, knowledge of Sarah's laughter is an indicator of divine insight (e.g., Bowie, 1952:619; Skinner 1910:302; Morgenstern, 1965:121). Sarah's laughter (and speech) is silent or at least unheard by those outside the tent. It is only when a paraphrase of them is spoken back at her that she begins to realise that Abraham's

guest YHWH has come visiting with the intention of openly addressing the very disbelief expressed in her laughter and that of her husband.

#### E. YHWH Interprets Sarah's Response

YHWH asks Abraham why Sarah is laughing and paraphrases her words as, 'am I really to bear a child now that I am old'. YHWH's replaying of Sarah's words differs significantly from her 'original', a difference which some explain as YHWH's softening of her words, either as a 'kindly' act (Wenham, 1994:48), to prevent resentment of her by Abraham at the comment that he was too old (Hershon, 1885:100), or for reasons of social decorum (cf. e.g., Westermann's 'more reserved'; 1985:281). Alternatively, R.I. Letellier simply sees this a literary feature, enriching the narrative through a transmutation of Sarah's 'image of decay and conjugal pleasure to a more prosaic matter of childbearing in old age' (1995:99). A more (explicitly) ideologically driven version of Letellier's view is that suggested by Sailhammer. He regard the differences as the result of a re-interpretation of Sarah's words by YHWH which does not soften but rather serves to define her real concerns (cf. also Jeansonne, 1990:24):

Firstly, the Lord [sic] restated Sarah's somewhat ambiguous statement ('After I am worn out will I now have pleasure?') as simply, 'Will I really have a child?' Then he took Sarah's statement about her husband ('My husband is old') and reshaped it into a statement about herself ('I am old'). Finally, he went beyond her actual words to the intent of those words: 'Is anything impossible with the LORD?' By means of these questions to Abraham, the underlying issue in the narrative is put before the reader, that is, the physical impossibility of the fulfilment of the promise through Sarah (1992:166).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Wenham records Sarah's response as

showing the basis of her doubts. She laughed not out of cocky arrogance, but because a long life of disappointment had taught her not to clutch at straws. Hopelessness, not pride, underlay her unbelief. Her self-restraint in not openly expressing her doubts and the sadness behind them go far to explain the gentleness of the divine rebuke' (1994:48).

Sailhammer's claim that this re-interpretation encapsulates Sarah's real meaning, however, may be considered problematic given the content of her secret comments. What is undoubtedly correct, however, is that this meaning is the only one to which YHWH intends to respond; Sarah's other concerns are left unaddressed by the deity.

#### F. Is Anything Beyond YHWH?

With YHWH's rhetorical question, הַיִּפְלֵא מִיְהוָה דְבָרָךְ, in v. 14a, the highpoint of this section of the narrative is reached (*contra* Westermann, 1985:282). The niphal of פִּלֵּא 'refers to things unusual, distinguished, singular, beyond human capabilities, and hence astonishing, wonderful, miraculous' (Letellier, 1995:100). Letellier notes two primary meanings: that of 'hard, difficult' (Deut. 17:8; 30:11; 2 Sam. 13:2; Job 42:3) and that of a 'rapturous quality..., wonderfulness' (Exod. 3:20; 2 Sam. 1:26; Ps. 118:23; 139:14; Prov. 30:18; Zeph. 8:6). Letellier, however, argues that Gen. 18:14a contains nuances of both, that 'there is [in this verse] a mixture of the difficult and the miraculous, the limitations of the humanly possible and the marvellousness of God's power' (1995:101). This nuanced combination of the 'difficult' and the 'wonderful' can also be seen in the response of Jeremiah to the creative powers of YHWH: 'Ah Lord GOD! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you' (לֹא־יִפְלֵא מִמֶּנִּי; Jer. 32:17; NRSV). Also noteworthy is the question's open-ended nature. As Letellier puts it: 'The strength of this terse statement has an absoluteness which takes it beyond the immediate narrative context. It speaks of an eternal truth about the nature of YHWH and his omnipotence' (1995:100; as von Rad puts it: 'This word reposes in the story like a precious stone in a righteous setting, and its significance surpasses the cosy

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As Gossai further points out, Sarah's laughter does not indicate that she is unwilling to bear a son because any decision about willingness is totally precluded by her complete disbelief that it could happen (1995:51). If a thing is viewed as impossible, then no decision about personal involvement is required.

patriarchal milieu of the narrative; it is a heuristic witness to God's omnipotent saving will', 1961:202). But T.E. Fretheim notes that the self-imposed constraints under which YHWH generally operates within the Creation mean that this statement cannot be simply invoked in all contexts, as if YHWH will do anything, anytime, anywhere (1994:465). Nevertheless, the point of its use here is to show Abraham and Sarah (and the reader) that such self-limitation by the deity is not to be invoked lightly either: when time and place so please, it should always be remembered that 'nothing' is beyond the capabilities of YHWH.

The giving of a son to Sarah, a woman beyond the age at which childbearing can be expected, is just the sort of wondrous and difficult event of which YHWH is said to be capable. By way of emphasis, the promise of a son is repeated in v. 14b but the addition of לְמוֹעֵד, 'at the appointed time', recalls Gen. 17:21 and the original announcement to Abraham. The reactions of both Abraham and Sarah to the announcement of a son have thus been placed in direct confrontation with the deity's claim—to go on in disbelief as before, they must say yes to the question, 'is 'anything' beyond YHWH', and deny both the power and truthfulness of their God. As Turner points out, this is exactly what Abraham will implicitly do in Genesis 20 when he, because of his own fear, hands Sarah over to Abimelech (1990a:82-85), but in the present narrative Abraham and Sarah have little choice but to accept the words of YHWH, an acceptance which necessarily results in a transformation of their view of the future. The section concludes when Sarah, in panic at the open expression of her deep disbelief in the promise, denies her laughter but is rebuked, though in a rather gentle fashion, by YHWH (v. 15; Hershon suggests that it is Abraham who rebukes Sarah here [1885:101], but the patriarch's own lack of belief in the promise clearly indicates that the rebuke is aimed—by YHWH—at both Abraham and Sarah).



### III. Events On the Way to Sodom (18:16-21)

#### A. Departing From Mamre towards Sodom

The men decide to depart and walk to a point overlooking Sodom and the lush productive valley in which it lay (עַל-פְּנֵי סְדֹם; cf. e.g., Gen. 19:28; Num. 21:20; 23:28). Abraham accompanies them, presumably to see them on their way out of his zone of obligation (Matthews, 1992:11; cf. Gen. 12:20). With the re-introduction of Sodom, the reader of the canonical text is reminded of the narrative asides of Genesis 13.

Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorra (13:10)... Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD (13:13; NRSV).

As far as the interpretation of Genesis 18-19 is concerned, however, it is very important to note that this knowledge of Sodom's eventual destruction is limited by the narrative to the reader, who even so, in narrative terms, cannot be sure that the destruction comes here. YHWH has not yet decided to punish the cities of the plain, but intends to investigate their actions. Abraham has already met the King of Sodom (Gen. 14:17, 21-24) and is presumably aware of the wickedness of the 'men of Sodom,' but even so he does not know for certain what the outcome of what follows will be.

#### B. 'Shall I Hide from Abraham That Which I Do...'

Without warning YHWH begins to 'speak' what has become known as the 'divine soliloquy,' one of several found in the book of Genesis (Gen. 2:18; 3:22; 6:3, 7; 8:21-22; 11:6-7; 18:20-21; cf. Mackenzie, 1955; he omits 18:17-19 from consideration

as secondary, 159, a factor which is relatively unimportant here). The Hebrew אָמַר often renders 'thought' (Gen. 20:11; 26:9; 44:28; Exod. 2:14; Num. 24:11; Judg. 15:2; 1 Sam. 20:26; 2 Sam. 3:6; 12:2; 2 Kgs 5:11; Isa. 20:26; 39:8; Jer. 37:8; Lam. 3:18; Zeph. 3:7; Mal. 1:7; Ps. 82:6; Job 29:19; Ruth 4:4) and the contents of YHWH's words make it clear that—at least initially—Abraham is not being addressed. Rather the deity is mulling over the pros and cons of the situation and begins: 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do...'

Two contrasting interpretations of the content of the 'soliloquy' have been proposed. The more common reading sees these verses as related to the cities of the plain. But Blenkinsopp has also suggested that these verses could as easily relate to the 'destiny of Abraham's descendants,' with vv. 20-21 then signifying a decisive turn towards Sodom (1982:120; cf. also Hamilton's noting of this possibility, 1995:17). That which YHWH describes as hidden would, therefore, be the turning of the one man Abraham into a great nation. In this reading, YHWH presumably answers this question with 'yes' because in subsequent verses he does not tell Abraham the content of what is hidden, his future status. But this view is initially problematic in that it does little justice to the readerly links which exist between Gen. 13:10,13 and the mention of Sodom in v. 16 or to the shift of scene between Abraham's camp and the view overlooking the cities of the plain. But more significantly, it must be asked what is contained in vv. 18-19, understood as relating to Abraham's descendants, that the patriarch does not already know. That YHWH will make Abraham a great nation, that all nations will be blessed in him, that he is chosen by God, and that he must teach his descendants the way of YHWH, these are not exactly new to Abraham, each being explicit or at least clearly implied in the words of promise YHWH has already spoken to Abraham (e.g., Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1). It seems more likely that Blenkinsopp's view that vv. 17-19 are related to Abraham's descendants is incorrect, and that both vv. 17-19 and vv. 20-21 should be understood as relating to Sodom.

In Gunkel's diachronic study, the claim is made that YHWH knows that Sodom is to be destroyed in vv. 17-19 whereas in vv. 20-21 the deity is only going to

investigate the outcry. But the first part of YHWH's three-part soliloquy—v. 17's 'shall I hide from Abraham that which I do...' (הֲמִכְסֶה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה)—is actually ambiguous because what YHWH is 'doing' is not immediately specified. Gunkel's assumption that in v. 17 YHWH already knows the Sodom will be destroyed is actually supplied by his view of the text as being written by a specific author for a particular audience, both of whom knew of the destruction (cf. also Westermann, 1985:289). In this canonical reading at least, such a move can only be viewed as a skewing of the final form rather than as its illumination; Gunkel's tension is, in this case, really an apparition.

The second part of the three-part soliloquy involves a description of what Abraham will surely become, 'a great and powerful nation (לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְעָצוּם) and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him' (וְנִבְרָכוּ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ בּוֹ), echoing the earlier pronouncements of the promise by YHWH to Abraham (cf. Clines, 1978:32-53). The construction of וְאַבְרָהָם הָיָה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְעָצוּם signifies both an emphasis—by way of the infinitive absolute—on what Abraham will become and—by way of the וְ form—the adversative nature of this clause to v. 17 (v. 18 forms a 'circumstantial appendage [which] involves an antithesis', GK, 142d; cf. also Gen. 4:2, 4; 24:56; 26:27; 29:17; Isa. 29:13; Jer. 14:15; Ps. 50:17; Job 21:22): 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do? *Yet* Abraham will *surely* become a great and powerful nation...'

In the third part, which continues the adversative thought, the deity says that Abraham has been 'chosen' so that the patriarch will command his sons and his house after him (וַיִּצְוֶה אֶת-בְּנָיו וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו) that they should keep the way of YHWH (דְּרַךְ יְהוָה), the meaning of which is defined by what follows, they are to do righteousness (צְדָקָה) and justice (מִשְׁפָּט). They must do so because only then will YHWH be able to carry out the promise (עַל-אַבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר) described in v. 18.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>129</sup> The insertion of a 'no' between v. 18 and v. 19 by von Rad (1961:204), RSV and NRSV is presumably not intended to suggest a contrast between these two verses, as if the promise of a great future in v. 18 somehow supplies a reason as to why YHWH *should* hide what is being done (e.g.,

Many interpreters see YHWH as revealing what is to be done primarily because of v. 18's view of Abraham's future status. As Westermann, for example, puts it, 'the promise...raises Abraham to a level of importance and honour that he is deemed worthy to share in God's plan' (1985:288, 290; cf. also Hershon, 1885:103; Roshwald, 1989:146). Some, citing Amos 3:7, also see Abraham's status as being linked to the role of the prophet (e.g., R. Davidson, 1979:68; Gossai, 1995:55; Wenham, 1994:50; Westermann, 1985:290). Others see Abraham as the eventual possessor of Sodom, with YHWH seeking his permission to destroy it (so *Gen. R.* 49:2, a position disallowed by my earlier conclusion that Sodom is outside the land of the promise, see pages 151-52). In such interpretations, v. 19 simply extends the description of v. 18 without significant addition with regard to the 'no' which is the eventual answer to YHWH's self reflexive question;<sup>130</sup> it is Abraham's status in a bright future which means that what is about to happen should not be hid from him.

The principal problem with these readings is that they do not account for the fact that v. 19 introduces a very specific reason as to why Abraham's status is being considered; namely, the way in which the doing of justice and righteousness by the patriarch and his descendants is fundamental to the contingent nature of the promise itself. YHWH defines Abraham as the 'chosen one' of God ('for I have chosen him so that...', כִּי יִדְעֻתָּיו לְמַעַן).<sup>131</sup> The deity has chosen the patriarch so that Abraham will command his sons and his house after him that they should keep the way of YHWH, doing righteousness (צְדָקָה) and justice (מִשְׁפָּט). Only then will YHWH be able to carry out the promise described in v. 18. Clearly, the greatness of Abraham is not absolutely

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'since Abraham will be a great people anyway, why bother telling him what is going on') Such a reading hardly does justice to the dynamic of the soliloquy. Rather, the eventual revealing to Abraham of what is being done assumes an implicit 'no' to the question of v. 17 at some point, either between v. 18 and v. 19 or at the conclusion of v. 19; there is no difference in meaning.

<sup>130</sup> Wenham sees the soliloquy as part of a discussion between YHWH and the two angels with him (1994:50). But since Abraham is with them but does not hear and since I have argued here that YHWH is rather 'present' in all three men (see pages 168-75), it is preferable to see the words of vv. 17-19 as purely self-reflexive.

<sup>131</sup> 'Chosen' is rendered by Driver as 'noticed, regarded, cared for' in a practical sense (1909:195; cf. Exod. 33:12, 17; Deut. 34:10; 2 Sam. 7:20; Ps. 37:18; Amos 3:2; Hos. 13:5).

guaranteed; it is not so much ‘will surely become’ as ‘will surely become, if’. This verse repeats the contingent connection between the behaviour of Abraham and the fulfilment of the promise which occurred within its original utterance in Gen. 12:1-3 (see pages 144-46, and in such later passages as Gen. 22:15-18; 26:5; *contra* Alter, 1990:150; Westermann, 1985:289; and of course, Gunkel). Abraham will become and remain a great nation that will be a source of blessing for the nations *only* if he and—through his command, example, and teaching—his descendants follow the way of YHWH, doing righteousness and justice (cf. Driver’s, ‘Abraham’s...“commanding his children and household after him” is the condition of Jehovah’s fulfilling the promises given to him’, 1909:195). A strong emphasis on teaching the way of YHWH will form part of the later Sinaitic law (e.g., Exod. 12:25-27; Deut. 6:1-3, 6-7, 20-25) and the wisdom tradition (Prov.1:7, 13:1; cf. Wenham, 1994:50).

In the light of what will eventually be revealed about the justice situation in Sodom, it seems somewhat unlikely that the point of Abraham being told what is to happen is simply the imparting of a bit of knowledge because he is a prophet or is worthy of being close to YHWH. Rather v. 19 introduces into the soliloquy the idea that revealing to Abraham what is to happen is highly relevant to Abraham’s own task of commanding his descendants to do righteousness and justice. It is, therefore, the content of v. 19—the contingent nature of the promise—rather than that of v. 18—Abraham’s future status—which primarily results in YHWH’s decision not to hide from the patriarch what he is about to do.

### C. ‘Keep the Way of YHWH,...’

The requirement of YHWH that Abraham and his descendants must keep the ‘way of YHWH, doing righteousness and justice’, occurring together only here in Genesis (W. Brueggemann, 1982:169), functions as an expansion of Gen. 17:1. There Abraham is told to ‘walk before YHWH and be blameless’ (הִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי וְהָיִה תָמִים). Each of these three terms, ‘way of YHWH’, ‘righteousness’, and ‘justice’, concerns

the relationship between YHWH and Abraham—the chosen one of YHWH—and the outworking of the promise. The use of **דָּרַךְ** to indicate the path on which one walks, that is, as a metaphor of one's conduct or morality, is common within the Old Testament, and much of that usage echoes and, in canonical terms, develops from this verse. V.R. Gordon notes that although the explicit language of the two ways is lacking in the Old Testament (1988:1032), the idea of an oppositional structure between the way of the righteous and the way of wicked is clearly implied in many passages (Deut. 11:26-28; 30:15-19; Ps. 1; 119; 139:24; Prov. 4:18-19; 12:28; 14:2; 15:19). Jer. 21:8, for example, records YHWH as setting before Judah a way of life and a way of death, the former involving obedience to YHWH's command to submit to the Babylonians and the latter the disobedience of defiance. Also implied within the solitary 'way' are the many 'ways' of a person.

These terms, 'way' and 'ways', have a number of possible meanings when used of YHWH. They may refer to YHWH's saving deeds (e.g., Ps. 145:17), especially the events of the Exodus (e.g., Deut. 8:2). But often, as here, the 'way of YHWH' indicates 'something that is practised by human beings,... something that is almost synonymous with God's will as it is revealed in his commandments' (Gordon, 1988:1032). In fact for much of the Old Testament, the way of YHWH indicates the keeping of the Torah given at Sinai. The Israelites are commanded to walk in or keep the way(s) of YHWH (e.g., Deut. 5:33; 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 19:9; 26:16-19; 28:9; 30:16; 1 Kgs 11:38; Jer. 7:23). Occasionally, they respond that they have kept to the way of YHWH (e.g., Ps. 18:22; 44:18) or request that they be taught the way of YHWH by their deity (e.g., Ps. 25:4; 27:11; 86:11; 119:33; 143:8). This later identification of walking on the way of YHWH as keeping the Torah is, of course, of significance for interpretations of Genesis 18-19. In Gen. 26:5 it is said of Abraham by YHWH **וַיֹּשֶׁבֶת אַבְרָהָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיִּשְׁמַר אֶת־דִּבְרֵי יְהוָה וַיִּתְּנָה לְאֵלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתָיו וַיִּשְׁמַר אֶת־הַבְרִית וַיִּשְׁמַר אֶת־הַבְרִית וַיִּשְׁמַר אֶת־הַבְרִית**—a comment which clearly renders Abraham's faithfulness in walking in/on the way of YHWH into terms more suitable for those later readers who regarded the Torah as constituting that way, but which does not indicate that Abraham himself kept the Torah given at Sinai (Moberly, 1992a:143-5; on Patriarchal

and Mosaic religions, cf. e.g., Alt, 1966:1-66, Pagolu, 1998; Wenham, 1980:157-88; 1994:xxx-xxxv; Westermann, 1985:105-121). It is rather Abraham's commanding of his descendants to do the 'way of YHWH' which eventually becomes identified with carrying out the observance of the Torah from Sinai, and it is only Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, who will do the way of YHWH by observing the Torah of Moses; clearly Abraham is not responsible for teaching absolutely everything which will come to be called the way of YHWH.

#### D. '...Doing Righteousness and Justice'

Von Rad begins his discussion of צדקה, righteousness, with the following:

There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of צדקה. It is the standard not only for man's relationship to God but also for his relationships to his fellows, reaching right down to the most petty wranglings—indeed it is even the standard for man's relationship to the animals and to his natural environment. צדקה can be described without more ado as the highest value in life, upon which all life rests when it is properly ordered (1975:370).

Von Rad argues, following H. Cremer (1893, 1901), that צדקה does not involve the comparison of 'a man's proper conduct against an absolute ethical norm' (*contra* Rodd, 1972, 1994; and Barton, 1979; both of whom see such a norm as implied in Genesis 18). Cremer argued that Israel did not understand righteousness in terms of something external but rather saw the doing of צדקה as the fulfilling of the claims made upon those within specific relationships: 'The way in which it is used shows that צדקה is an out and out term denoting relationship, and that it does this in the sense of referring to a real relationship between two parties... and not to the relationship of an object to an idea'" (1893:273-75; cf. von Rad, 1975:371; this position is affirmed by Childs, 1985:208; and Bovati, 1994:19).

Such a definition obviously means that a multitude of nuances may be found to **צִדְקָה**, depending upon the overall construction of a particular relationship; globalised notions cannot be invoked in order to define the meaning of every occurrence of the three letters **צ**, **ד** and **ק** (cf. Scullion, 1992:724). In Gen. 18:19, the key to understanding **צִדְקָה** is its pairing with **מִשְׁפָּט**. Although sometimes used of forensic justice alongside the synonymous but more common term for legal judgement, **דִּין**, **מִשְׁפָּט** is also used more widely. As with **צִדְקָה** a number of possible meanings can be discerned in its usage; Mafico lists the following: ‘justice, judgement, rights, vindication, deliverance, custom, and norm’, as possible meanings (1992:1127).<sup>132</sup> But when used with **צִדְקָה**, as here, P. Bovati notes a dominant meaning of ‘uprightness in behaviour’, (1994:188; though he also points out that the pairing has procedural force in some texts, e.g., the Queen of Sheba to Solomon: ‘Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king *to execute* justice and righteousness’ 1 Kgs 10:9; NRSV).

For Abraham, doing **צִדְקָה** and **מִשְׁפָּט** involves fulfilling the covenant requirements YHWH has laid upon him *and* the more general requirements which the deity has laid upon humanity in general. For his descendants this will eventually include the keeping of the Torah given at Sinai. In later more troubled times for Israel, **צִדְקָה** and **מִשְׁפָּט** will be ‘used to summarise the teaching of the prophets’ (W. Brueggemann, 1982:169; cf. Isa. 5:7; Amos 5:7, 24). For Rendtorff, they are used in Isaiah 1-39 to indicate ‘the righteousness which has to be kept and done’ (1993:183). In Isa. 56:1 this is made clear: ‘Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice (**מִשְׁפָּט**), and do what is right (**צִדְקָה**), for soon my salvation (**יְשׁוּעָה**) will come, and my deliverance (**וַצִּדְקָה**) be revealed’ (NRSV). The reason that Abraham and his descendants should act this way is not because it is simply an arbitrary requirement for the promise to be

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<sup>132</sup> Booth lists eleven meanings of **מִשְׁפָּט**: ‘manner or custom, rightful due, judicial decision, case for decision, command of man, command of God, that which should be, administration of law by man, proper administration of law by man, administration of law by God, and litigation’. Unfortunately individual texts are not specified but only strands of tradition such as J. E. etc. (1942:106).



fulfilled, but because, as Ps. 33:5 puts it, '[YHWH] loves righteousness and justice' (cf. also Prov. 21:3).

#### E. An Investigation of the Outcry Against Sodom

Having considered the contingent relationship between the promise of Abraham's future status and the way of YHWH on which he and his descendants must walk in order for the promise to be fulfilled, YHWH decides that Abraham should be told what the deity is doing; he speaks aloud (וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה) in the presence of Abraham in vv. 20-21 and the reader learns of that which has been hidden. Sodom and Gomorra are the subject of YHWH's speech, specifically an outcry (תַּעֲרָא) against them (literally an 'outcry of Sodom and Gomorra') which, having come to the hearing of the deity, now requires divine investigation (cf. Gen. 4:9-11a; Exod. 2:23; 3:7-9; Judg. 3:9, 15; 1 Sam. 9:16). The roots used here for 'outcry', זעק and צעק, are virtually interchangeable (SP reads צעק in both verses), and are considered by von Rad to represent a 'technical legal term ... [which] designates the cry for help which one who suffers a great injustice screams' (1961:206; cf. Prov. 21:13). He even suggests that we know the content of the cry, סמך, 'violence', citing as support Hab. 1:2: 'O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' (סמך) and you will not save?' (NRSV).

It is notable, however, that the content of the outcry against Sodom and Gomorra is left unspecified and is not recorded as simply 'violence'. Rather it is this broad and non-specific use of the term that must be kept in mind (*contra* von Rad), a usage which W. Brueggemann helpfully characterises as a 'general abuse of justice' (1982:164). Gossai supplies three examples which are useful in defining the 'breadth' of the outcry against the cities:

First the anguished cry of those kept in bondage under an oppressive regime is heard by God (Exod. 3:7) and consequently God acts on their behalf.... We find a second contrasting example in Exod. 22:21-23. In

the midst of several social laws, the people are warned that the oppression of the weak in their midst will lead to action by Yahweh. The possibility of oppressing family members is sounded here and the actions of God on their behalf will be no less devastating than that of the punishment meted out against the Egyptians, Third in Genesis 4:10, after Abel is murdered, Cain is satisfied that the evidence is gone: no one will discover his crime. Answering God, Cain snaps at God saying that he is not responsible for his brother. What is stunning about the use of זעק and צעק in [Gen.] 4:10 is the fact that it is not uttered by a person. Rather, the cry comes through the dramatic image of the very blood of the innocent. In the matter of oppression which leads to an outcry, no part of creation will be able to hide the signs alerting Yahweh (1995:89).

Gossai also cites Isaiah 5:7 (ET 5:8): וַיִּקְוּ לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהָיָה מִשְׁפָּח לְצַדִּיקָה וְהָיָה צַעֲקָה. There, צַעֲקָה (the ‘outcry’) is what YHWH discovers in place of ‘righteousness’ (צַדִּיקָה) in a context in which ‘justice’ (מִשְׁפָּט) has been exchanged for ‘bloodshed’ (מִשְׁפָּח). The outcry against Sodom and Gomorra appears, therefore, to be the result of a great but unspecified injustice.<sup>133</sup>

YHWH (‘I’) intends to ‘go down’ (אֲרִדְהָ-נָא) to Sodom and Gomorra and ‘see’ (וַאֲרִא; cf. Gen. 6:5, 11:5-7; Exod. 3:7). Once there the deity will be able to see if the outcry which has come to him is accurate or not. Are the sins of the men of Sodom מֵאֵד מְבִרָה? Are they guilty in full (to ‘completeness’, כְּלָה; cf. also Jer. 4:27; Nah. 1:8,9)? YHWH’s words end with ‘if not, I will know’ (וְאִם-לֹא אֲדַעַה), raising the possibility that the outcry may be unjustified and indicating that as yet no guilty verdict has been handed down. ‘That which I am is doing’ in v. 17 is not then, as Gunkel believes, destroying the men of Sodom (cf. also Westermann, 1985:289-90; Driver, 1909:194; R. Davidson, 1979:68)—a view based primarily on the presumption that the actually non-specific v. 17 must contain a decision to destruction (Gunn also notes the angel’s words in 19:13 [1993:181], but neither of these should be understood as

<sup>133</sup> The language from this point onwards consistently relates to innocence (‘righteous’) and guilt (‘wicked’) of the events which lead to the outcry. It is then rather bizarre to note the attempt of Levin to ascribe the wickedness of Sodom to their sickness due to bromide poisoning (he even corresponds personally with the Dead Sea Bromide Co. Ltd, Beersheba, Israel): ‘there must have been something about the behaviour of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah which made them recognisable to others as coming from a dubious region. Perhaps they were recognisably lazy, tired, and little given to assist fellow citizens, hence their evil reputation for social concern’ (1986:282-83). Indeed!

indicating YHWH's prior decision to destroy)—but rather the carrying out of the investigation of the outcry against them. After all, if Sodom is vindicated rather than destroyed, Abraham will still be learning his 'lesson'.

In consideration of the need for Abraham to teach righteousness and justice to his descendants in order for the promise to be fulfilled, YHWH has decided to educate Abraham as to the true meaning of subsequent events in Sodom. On one level, Abraham is simply being informed that what is to happen is solely the doing of YHWH, the deity assuming that Abraham is aware both of what such an investigation might find and of YHWH's willingness to inflict punishment (Gunn, 1993:181). For the one upon whose righteousness, justice—and teaching ability(!)—the promise of blessing depends, however, the implied message is clear. Sodom and Gomorra—whatever happens to them—are to function as an example to the patriarch and his descendants of the justice of YHWH. As Keil-Delitzsch put it (with the benefit of hindsight concerning the results of the investigation),

God... disclosed to Abraham what he [sic.] was about to do to Sodom and Gomorra... because Jehovah had chosen him to be the father of the people of God, in order that by instructing his descendants in the fear of God, he might lead them in the paths of righteousness, so that they might become partakers of the promised salvation, and not be overtaken by judgement. The destruction of Sodom and the surrounding cities was to be a permanent memorial of the punitive righteousness of God, and to keep the fate of the ungodly constantly before the mind of Israel (1980:230).

#### F. Sodom as Exemplar to Israel

The ability of Sodom to serve as an example to Israel about its own behaviour implies a number of similarities between the cities of the plain and the descendants of Abraham. The possible existence of צְדִיקִים in Sodom is accepted by both Abraham and YHWH and indicates that it is possible for those outside the covenant between Abraham and YHWH to be considered 'righteous' by the investigating deity. Both

Abraham and Sodom, and indeed all of humankind, are still subject to the judgement of YHWH who, as in the time before Abraham (Genesis 3-11), remains willing to seek out injustice and punish those who are guilty. What exactly the people of Sodom must do to be considered righteous is not explained, but it may be inferred from the ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’ required of Abraham and the term ‘outcry’ that it is necessary for them to do justice and righteousness in their relationships with each other, with their neighbours, and with the Creator God in order for them to be pronounced righteous; it is against the ‘divine expectation’ of *צְדָקָה* and *מִשְׁפָּט*, that ‘man’s behaviour on earth is measured’ (Mafico, 1983:11; cf. 13). In effect then the people of Sodom have their own version of the ‘way of YHWH’, a version which does not contain the claims made upon Abraham by the covenantal relationship which he enjoys with YHWH or those which will be laid upon his descendants on Sinai, but which nevertheless insists that the cities of the plain do righteousness and justice before YHWH. Given the non-specific nature of the outcry in vv. 20-21, it seems clear that the basis on which the cities of the plain are being judged is whether or not they too are keeping the way of YHWH, and not on the basis of one particular crime.<sup>134</sup>

But if Sodom can be pronounced righteous, then Sodom’s exemplar status requires that Abraham and Israel can also be pronounced *unrighteous*; this example is a double-edged sword. And it is certainly noteworthy that, when the opportunity arises for such an example to be placed before Abraham, it is taken, being deemed necessary by the deity. Following the deity’s explanation of what these events mean, Abraham and his descendants will know that the divine response to an outcry is to investigate the actions of those involved and to punish those found guilty. Therefore they must do righteousness and justice lest *they* be the cause of such an outcry, incurring punishment and perhaps jeopardising the fulfilment of the contingent promise; they must walk the way of YHWH. In Alter’s words:

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<sup>134</sup> On the problematic relationship between wickedness and the role of the Law pre- and post- Sinai, see Anderson (1998).

Sodom, firmly lodged between the enunciation of the covenantal promise and its fulfilment, becomes the great monetary model, the myth of a terrible collective destiny antithetical to Israel's. The biblical writers will rarely lose sight of the ghastly possibility that Israel can turn itself into Sodom (1990:158).

It is Abraham as the paradigmatic teacher of the way to Israel who needs to be told what YHWH is doing here and not Abraham the prophet.

YHWH's promise to Abraham that the patriarch would be a source of blessing to all the nations of the earth, first made in Gen. 12:3 and reiterated here (v. 18), is thus placed alongside the deity's ongoing judgement of those nations, here Sodom (listed with the nations in Gen. 10:19). Abraham's success in both walking on the way of YHWH and in his teaching of it to his descendants are thus intimately bound up with divine judgement as it relates to his own people and to the nations (cf. Westermann, 1985:308-309). If he fails to walk on the way, judgement will overtake him and his own, removing any chance of the giving of the blessing which the nations would have gained through him. If he succeeds, however, blessing will come to all through him, and judgement will pass over Abraham and, presumably, those blessed in him. YHWH's decision here to educate Abraham as to what really happens at Sodom is thus of great significance for the future judgement of Israel and the world. The decision to reveal what YHWH is doing is made on the basis of a long term view of the promise of Gen. 12:1-3 in which Abraham and his descendants would become a blessing to the nations partly because they had been 'encouraged' by the example of Sodom to walk on the way of YHWH. It is not taken on the basis of a short-term view of the promise which would see Sodom itself being blessed in Abraham in the present.

Announcement complete, YHWH is ready to leave for Sodom; his initial quandary of v. 17 is resolved, and Abraham has been made aware of what is to happen. Because Abraham was being addressed only as the future teacher of Israel and not as a prophet or as an intercessor, no further exchange of words is necessary; YHWH's

intent is not to test Abraham by seeking a response to his announcement (*contra* e.g., Roshwald, 1989:160).

#### IV. Abraham's Challenge to YHWH (18:22-33)

##### A. An Uninvited Intervention

In v. 22b a well known but contested *Tiqqun Sopherim* occurs.<sup>135</sup> Here, it is claimed, the ancient version ran as follows, וַיְהוֹה עֹדְנֵנו עֹמֵד לְפָנַי אַבְרָהָם, a reading in which YHWH remains standing before Abraham in a manner which seems to suggest an invitation to Abraham to respond to what the deity has revealed. The MT, however, reads, וַאֲבָרָהֶם עֹדְנֵנו עֹמֵד לְפָנַי יְהוֹה, and it is Abraham who now stands before YHWH. Many commentators, however, tend to read as though the invitation to speak implied in the *Tiqqun* can also be found in the MT (e.g., Wenham, 1994:50-51), ignoring the difference which the (change of) word-order makes to the sense of the passage. Instead of YHWH inviting a response from Abraham by standing before him (e.g., Jacob, 1974:449; Wenham, 1994:50; cf. also Roshwald's 'testing of Abraham's moral fibre', 1989:160)—or perhaps awaiting instruction from his theological teacher, Abraham, as W. Brueggemann would have it (1982:168)—it is now Abraham who stands before YHWH. In doing so he detains one of the men (whose companions leave for Sodom) and offers a response which has not been invited by the deity and is not required by 18:17-21; after all, a reader may leap from 18:22a to 19:1 with no difficulty at all (as Gunkel, with other source critics, notes). Abraham, addressed in 18:20-21 only as the teacher of Israel, clearly has other ideas and offers the response of a prophetic intercessor to YHWH's declaration of intent. What are the implications of this reading?

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<sup>135</sup> McCarthy has disputed the validity of the *tiqqun* on the basis of 19:27 which read 'and Abraham returned to the place where he had stood before YHWH'. If the *tiqqun* did indicate the changing of an originally ancient text, then surely this verse should also be identically marked (1981:73,76; cf. also the discussion of Hamilton, 1995:23-24).

Abraham's standing before YHWH now functions to show an intervention by the patriarch (cf. Jer. 15:1), but three questions are thereby raised: first, why does Abraham consider it necessary to speak at all? Second, what is his goal in speaking? Third, what is he actually asking YHWH to do? No direct answers to these questions are given, no narratorial insight offered, and Abraham's reasoning and aims can only be discerned through a consideration of what he actually says. This being the case, a consideration of the dialogue between YHWH and Abraham must proceed, as it were, backwards. The narrative can only begin by revealing the answer to the third question (what is Abraham actually asking YHWH to do?), and from this, the answer to the question (2 above) of Abraham's aims must be inferred. Knowing what Abraham wants and why will then enable a reason to be given for his intervention and allow conclusions to be drawn both about Abraham's own understanding of the judgement of YHWH and about that eventually promulgated by the canonical text itself.

#### B. What is Abraham Actually Asking YHWH to Do?

Abraham begins what W. Brueggemann has well described as his 'bold and tentative' intervention (1982:167; cf. also Roshwald's 'what might be described today as the archetypal manifestation of *hutspah*', 1989:148) with a question to the one man/YHWH who remains standing before him: 'will you sweep away the righteous (צַדִּיקִים) with the wicked (רָשָׁעִים)?' The righteous and the wicked are, in the context of YHWH's investigation of the outcry, those innocent or guilty of the unspecified injustice that has occasioned the outcry (vv. 20-21), and therefore those who are or are not walking on the way of YHWH.<sup>136</sup> Significantly, Abraham introduces in v. 23 a

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<sup>136</sup> Speiser argues that these terms should be translated as 'innocent' and 'guilty' and not as 'righteous' and 'wicked' (1964:134). There is no doubt that these terms are supposed to relate only to those innocent or guilty of the actions which have led to the outcry, but in terms of the larger narrative setting, these groups are being characterised as those walking of the way of YHWH or on a different way: that is, as 'righteous' and 'wicked'. Speiser's sharp distinction between innocent and righteous seems to owe much to Paul's arguments in Romans regarding everyone's lack of righteousness, a view contained in some Old Testament texts (e.g., Ps. 143:2), but it is misplaced

distinction between the righteous and the wicked with regard to their joint destruction because of the wrongdoing of the wicked alone. It would be wrong, he implies, to destroy the righteous along with the wicked. But this should not be taken to indicate an argument that it would also be wrong to destroy the wicked alone; Abraham appears to have no qualms about this at all; as Westermann puts it: ‘This is not to contest God’s right to destroy’ (1985:291; cf. Gossai, 1995:58). Rather he is asking for YHWH to distinguish between the fates of these two groups, implicitly requesting that the righteous be saved and the wicked punished. No criticism of YHWH’s right to judge is voiced. Neither, as Hamilton notes, ‘does Abraham challenge God’s evaluation of Sodom’s moral turpitude. That judgement is not up for debate. Nor does he at any point turn to Sodom to urge repentance’ (1995:25). In v. 23 only the salvation of the righteous is in view. Abraham is in effect invoking—or better, bringing to the surface of the discourse—one of the principle tenets of an *individualistic* judgement; each group being solely responsible for their own fate and punished only for their own wrongdoing.<sup>137</sup>

Von Rad has argued that such an understanding of v. 23 is incorrect, a mistake made as a result of ignoring the surrounding context. He suggests that the verse functions not as an argument for saving the righteous alone, but rather as a premise for saving the whole rather than destroying it (1961:208). Von Rad thus provides a thoroughly *corporate* reading developed from what he sees as the real meaning of v. 23: ‘What determines God’s judgement on Sodom, the wickedness of the many or the innocence of the few?’<sup>138</sup>

This reading, however, requires either an assumption that a corporate judgement is what Abraham is seeking from the very beginning or a willingness to see

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here. People can be righteous in Sodom with regard to their innocence of this unspecified crime because such innocence implies they are actually walking on Sodom’s ‘way of YHWH’

<sup>137</sup> The recent tendency to regard terms such as ‘individualistic’ as negative should be resisted here since it is not yet clear what evaluation, if any, is being placed upon this model by the canonical text itself.

<sup>138</sup> Again, ‘corporate’—like ‘individualistic’ above—is intended to be viewed neutrally here.



v. 23 as initially ambiguous before being resolved by the corporate v. 24 and v. 25. Von Rad takes the former line, his own assumption that this text is wholly corporate being supplied by his historical-critical reconstruction of the growth of corporate and individualistic ideas within the traditions of Israel; Abraham, as a character in that history, is basically incapable of requesting an individualistic judgement because it is not available to him as an option (cf. also Daube, 1947:154-60; other historical critics, however, argue exactly the opposite, e.g., Ben Zvi, 1992). But recent study of the relationship between corporate and individualistic ideas in Israelite history and religion has shown that such evolutionary pictures are highly questionable. A truer picture of the situation is that a complex intermingling of corporate and individual ideas existed side by side (cf. Kaminsky, 1995:116-38). In the texts which form the canonical background to this act of judgement—the narratives of Genesis 1-11—Noah is saved alone because of his personal righteousness (6:8-9, 7:1; though his family are saved with him, 6:18, 7:1,7,13; 8:16,18) but the sins of the Sons of God brings a corporate punishment on all humanity (6:1-3). Von Rad's need to reinterpret 'individualistic' notions in corporate terms may also demonstrate that this 'intermingling' occurs within Gen. 18:23-5 itself with his historically-oriented exegesis therefore resulting in a flattening of the diversity of the canonical text. In the following exegesis, von Rad's historical-critical assumption is discarded and it will be assumed that both models of judgement are options available to Abraham. Viewing either as a decisive background for this text in its canonical form before even beginning to read the Sodom narrative appears—to this reader at least—unnecessary in a canonical reading.

Equally problematic would be to offer corporate readings of vv. 23-25 in which v. 23 is seen as initially ambiguous before being resolved by the 'corporate' v. 24. Such a reading implicitly assumes that v. 24 offers the real core of this text, that it redefines what to first sight at least appears to be an individualistic v. 23, that it is explicitly supported by v. 25ab, and thus gives Abraham's argument a consistent corporate slant. But this attempt to impose a coherence of mind upon Abraham is both fundamentally flawed and contextually dubious. With regard to the former, v. 25ab

does not in fact support a corporate reading but rather contradicts it. The individualistic premise of v 25b—the profanity of removing the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, making them the same—can only be inconsistently applied by a ‘corporate’ Abraham. It is called justice when no distinction is made when relieving the wicked, but the application of *the identical mechanism* in a situation involving the punishment of the righteous is called profanity. With regard to the latter, a cool, calm, consistency of mind is most unlikely to be found in the patriarch given the sudden announcement of the impending investigation—and possible destruction—of Sodom; Abraham’s context is not that of the systematic theologian at his or her desk! He is rather on ‘unknown territory,’ performing an intercessory task of which he has no previous experience (Gossai, 1995:62). It should be expected that he is rattled and under intense pressure here, a view borne out by his subsequent claims during his successive interventions (e.g. v. 27’s וְאֶנֶּכִי עֶפֶר וְאַפֶּרֶךְ; if my overall view of Abraham is accepted, then Turner’s view of Abraham as a calculating schemer must be discarded, 1990a:79-82, 1990b:89-90; cf. also Davies, 1995:95-113). If the essential primacy of corporate notions on historical grounds is discarded and no attempt is made to enforce a retrospective coherence on Abraham’s argument, it can be argued that in v. 23 Abraham is interested in saving only the righteous from destruction, in an individualistic judgement.

In contrast to the individualism of v. 23, Abraham’s next words takes a somewhat different tack. Instead of a general question, a specific but indefinite request is made: ‘suppose there are fifty righteous ones in the midst of the city, will you sweep away (הֲיִסְּפֶה) and not forgive (וְלֹא-תִשָּׂחַ) the place because of the fifty righteous who are in it’ (v. 24). It is not clear why Abraham begins at fifty; Jacob’s suggestion that a small town could field a hundred fighting men (cf. Amos 5:3) implies that Abraham begins by asking what happens if half the men of the town are righteous and half are wicked (1974:451; cf. Wenham 1994:52). Abraham is once again talking about the righteous and the wicked, but is now focused on the concrete setting of those within the city. However, rather than argue for the punishment of the wicked half and

the reprieve of the righteous half—that is, for an ‘individualistic’ distinction being made between the two sections of the city—he asks YHWH to forgive the wicked—and thus forego their punishment—for the sake of the righteous (cf. Wenham, 1994:52-3). These two equal groups are to be collapsed into one undifferentiated mass when reprieved; this time it is the notions which make up a *corporate* judgement which undergird Abraham’s request; Mafico is incorrect when he claims that Abraham has simply ‘repeated the question’ of v. 23 (1983:13). That such a merciful deliverance of the wicked from destruction can take place is, for Abraham, completely dependent upon the presence of the righteous. There is still no suggestion that the wicked can be reprieved on any other basis, destruction is still their lot in the absence of the righteous.

### C. Judgements—Corporate and Individualistic

Care must be taken when interpreting the significance of these corporate and individualistic strands of thought.<sup>139</sup> Two corporate judgements are possible - that the innocent become as the guilty and the punishment of the whole takes place (context A) or that the guilty become as the innocent and the whole is reprieved (context B), both occurring without any regard for the proportions of each. Though a judge rendering a corporate judgement may make individualistic distinctions as to the guilt or innocence of those under investigation, these are not carried through into the act of punishment. However, in an individualistic judgement, there is a strict attempt to ensure that any differentiation exposed in the act of judging the status of the innocent and the guilty is carried through into punishment with the end result that the righteous are vindicated (context C). It is the applying of individualistic notions to the punishment of the guilty that separates corporate and individualistic forms of judgement.

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<sup>139</sup> The nature of the corporate aspects of Israel’s religion and society has engendered considerable interest this century and has formed the subject of a still ongoing debate (cf. c.g., Wheeler-Robinson, 1980; Porter, 1965; Rogerson, 1970; Joyce, 1982; Kaminsky, 1995, 1997).

Despite the degrees of overlap, it should be recognised that when the concepts which make up individualistic and corporate judgements are extrapolated into the different ‘models’ of judgement which underlie these practices, they are in such a degree of tension as to be almost totally incompatible—it is only possible for them to agree on a particular judgement when that judgement involves either a group of innocent (context D) or a group of guilty people (context E) or an individual (context F). Both models would punish the guilty and vindicate the innocent in the same way in such circumstances. In all other cases, the verdict reached would be fundamentally and intractably different. For example, the punishing of the innocent with the wicked, while unjust in an individualistic model, is still an act of justice in a corporate model. In a very real sense then, Abraham’s opening request for the saving of the righteous and his subsequent expansion to the saving of the whole city are in stark but unconscious contradiction. Given this state of affairs, the reader awaits with some confusion as Abraham continues with his—at least to his own eyes—‘consistent’ words.

#### D. Abraham’s Intervention as ‘Incoherent’

Hamilton recognises that v. 24 is asking for something rather different to v. 23, but suggests that Abraham’s concern is two-fold; after an initial request for the righteous alone, he simply expands his concern to save the whole city (1995:24-25; van Seters also acknowledges Abraham’s interest in both options, 1975:214). But such an easy solution must be discarded after careful consideration of Abraham’s next words. In v. 25 Abraham ‘appears’ to present the premise which underlies his request to YHWH in v. 24. He states that it is wrong for YHWH to do this ‘thing’, a thing quickly explained as being ‘to kill the righteous with the wicked’. The use of לְהַמִּית (the hiphil infinitive construct of מוּת) here does not simply imply killing, but has overtones of judicial execution (Lev. 20:4; Num. 35:19, 21; Wenham, 1994:52). Abraham then emphasises why this is so unacceptable, וְהָיָה כִּצְדִיק פָּרָשׁ, ‘and the

righteous will be as the wicked' or, as Wenham puts it, because YHWH will then 'treat the righteous and the wicked the same' (1994:34). Of this important phrase, Joüon writes:

it is not exactly being said that the first thing is like the second nor that the second thing is like the first, but rather that the first thing is like the second *and* the second is like the first.... In other words, the two terms are declared identical in some regard.... [in] Gen. 18:25 *the just and the sinner will have the same fate* (1996:644—my italics).<sup>140</sup>

These words are framed by two extremely strong exclamations which emphasise the profanity of YHWH breaching the premise (חַלְלָהּ לְךָ... חַלְלָהּ לְךָ), classically rendered in Latin by Dillman's *profanum tibi sit* (1892:270; cf. also e.g., Gen. 44:7; Josh. 22:29; 1 Sam. 14:45; 24:7; 26:11). Here the problem for Abraham is that the killing of the righteous with the wicked is profane and unjust because it removes the distinction between them. He cannot therefore be simply providing a premise which will justify his corporate request in v. 24 because in that particular case their joint reprieve would once again result in the distinction between them being removed, the very opposite of what v. 25ab is aiming to achieve. Rather he is once again arguing that these two groups should be considered on the basis of their own individualistic merit, voicing explicitly in v. 25ab what was clearly implied in v. 23.

In contrast to Hamilton's two stage speech which sees a linear expansion from saving the righteous in v. 23 to saving the city in v. 24, the textual result of Abraham's combination of arguments is rather more complicated. In the words of Solomon Dubnow (1738-1813):

'First Abraham prayed that God should not slay the righteous together with the wicked whereas in the succeeding verse he besought God to deliver the wicked along with the righteous, even before his first prayer has been answered. In the next verse Abraham then reverted to his first

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<sup>140</sup> In Gen. 44:18, the still incognito Joseph's status in Egypt is summarised by his brother Judah with the words 'for you are like Pharaoh himself' (כְּמִוֶּךָ כְּפַרְעֹה; NRSV).

plea to save only the righteous (*Biur* to Genesis; cf. Leibowitz, 1973:183).

Abraham's opening words can be divided into two discrete groups on the basis of whether or not there is an insistence that YHWH should differentiate when punishing between the righteous and the wicked; Abraham's individualistic premise is thereby placed over against his corporate specific request, the contents of v. 25ab (and v. 23) over against the contents of v. 24. In the former, Abraham argues that it would be a profane thing for YHWH's justice to remove the distinction between righteous and wicked in punishment. In the latter, however, Abraham is actually requesting that YHWH not differentiate between righteous and wicked—that YHWH commit an act defined as profane by the premise of v. 25b. It is perhaps as well that, *pace* W. Brueggemann (1982:168), Abraham is not YHWH's theological instructor!<sup>141</sup>

Interpreters touching upon the tension created by Abraham's incoherence have generally disguised it in some way, usually by enforcing a highly consistent mind-set upon the patriarch and his words. One option, already seen, is that of von Rad's corporate reading; the tension is resolved by the consistent re-interpretation of individualistic notions and the assertion that Abraham's only aim is to save the whole city. The obvious alternative—an individualistic reading—has been supplied by such as E. Ben Zvi, the 'corporate' request for Sodom to be saved being seen by him as resulting from an implicit limitation in the power of the divine; YHWH not being capable of rescuing ten people from the city (1992:41).

On other occasions it is simply implied that, rather than inconsistency resulting from the invocation of two modes of judgement, there are—or appear to be—two very different things going on (as with Hamilton above). For example, Jewish interpreters, while occasionally recognising the difficulties as Dubnow does above, prefer to keep

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<sup>141</sup> It is instructive to consider Loader's arguments on this aspect of the text. He suggests that Genesis 18-19 demonstrates both the saving corporate function of the righteous—in that a few righteous will save the whole city and the wicked within it—and the concept of individual retribution—because a righteous Lot is saved (1990:33-34). But he fails to recognise that the former is in direct contradiction to the latter. If the wicked are not given their due punishment, then the concept of retribution is actually being denied by Abraham.

Abraham as coherent by seeing him as asking two consecutive questions of YHWH here, one relating to what Morgenstern calls a 'strict and absolute justice' (1965:125) with the other relating to mercy as an almost unrelated category altogether.<sup>142</sup> Hershon, for example, writes:

Peradventure there be fifty righteous in the five cities,... wilt thou then destroy them and wilt thou not spare them for the sake of the righteous which are among them? And if thou wilt not deliver the wicked for the sake of the righteous, deliver at least the righteous for his own sake (1885:104).

He thus makes the salvation of the righteous alone a secondary or fall back position. But all such interpretations implicitly reflect the problem made obvious by Kaminsky's comments that 'Abraham appears to appeal to God's sense of justice (v. 25), but... in fact is arguing for mercy' (1995:186; 1997:326). The relationship between the language of what Abraham is only appearing to do (or, in the case of the Jewish exegetes, *is* doing in invoking an individualistic justice) and what he is actually doing (in also arguing for a corporate mercy) is never explained. Why does Abraham speak so strongly of an individualistic 'strict' justice at all if what would appear to be a profane and contradictory corporate mercy is his aim? Ultimately, however, such interpretations must be rejected as too simplistic; they cannot do justice to a canonical text in which it is not the case that two separate questions are being asked consecutively but rather that a complex speech mixes these notions together.

The net effect of this complex is to render Abraham's final words in his opening speech—the rhetorical question, 'shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice' (הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט) deeply ambiguous. Obviously, YHWH is that judge (cf. vv. 20-21) and it is, so Abraham believes, unthinkable that he should act unjustly. But it is not clear what Abraham now considers justice to be. Is it an

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<sup>142</sup> In a variation of this solution, Landy sees the deity as being concerned to act according to a strict justice (cf. vv. 20-21) whereas Abraham believes in 'sparing the evil to preserve the good' (1990:109).

(individualistic) differentiation that marks the justice of YHWH for Abraham, the separation of the righteous and the wicked? Obviously, yes. But doesn't he also want YHWH's justice to result in the corporate non-punishment of the people of Sodom? Again, yes. Abraham's call for the 'Judge of all the earth to do justice' is marked by a profound and unrecognised contradiction, the result of which is to leave unanswered the question of what YHWH must do in order to be just.

#### E. Two Models of Judgement or Four?

At this point, it is also necessary to consider the gender of the 'righteous' of whom Abraham is speaking; a point which most commentators seem to ignore, simply discussing the residents of Sodom as though no gender issues are involved (e.g., Gossai's 'righteous people', 1995:59; Wenham, 1994:52,55,63; note also the use of gender-neutral terms in translations such as NRSV). But in his opening question of v. 23 and in his premise in v. 25ab, Abraham is using the term צַדִּיק and its opposite רָשָׁע, both masculine singular adjectives which should perhaps be translated as 'righteous man' and 'evil man'.<sup>143</sup> In vv. 24, 26-33, however, Abraham uses the masculine plural

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<sup>143</sup> The form צַדִּיק twice explicitly occurs as male only when it is used in an adjectival construction with אִישׁ: Noah was 'a righteous man' (אִישׁ צַדִּיק; Gen. 6:9) and the slain Ishbaal, son of Saul, is described by David as 'a righteous man' (אִתְּ-אִישׁ-צַדִּיק; 2 Sam. 4:11).

In older English translations of such as Ps 112:1b-6, the use of צַדִּיק alone with associated masculine singular verbs and suffixes usually led to talk of a righteous man:

Blessed is the man who fears YHWH who greatly delights in his commandments.  
 His descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright (masc. pl.) will be blessed.  
 Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever.  
 He arises in the darkness as a light for the upright (masc. pl.); He is gracious, merciful, and righteous.  
 It is well with a man who deals generously and lends, who conduct his affairs with justice.  
 For he will never be moved; the righteous man will be remembered forever (Ps. 112:1b-6).

But even here, however, it is not immediately apparent that a woman's use of this text is being precluded. Much Anglican liturgy of recent years is cast in male terms (e.g., the Alternative Service Book of 1980), but is still being used by women (though not happily by some).

But in more recent years translations such as the NRSV have been more gender-inclusive, thus:



form צְדִיקִים which could be used to indicate either men only or both men and women, regardless of the meaning assigned to צְדִיק. Biblical Hebrew contains no female form of צְדִיק (though a feminine form of the verb צָדַק is used with regard to Tamar in Gen. 38:26),<sup>144</sup> but in Mishnaic Hebrew, the feminine form צְדִיקָה appears and is used of Esther (*b. Meg.* 10b), Sarah (*Gen. R.* 48), and Rebekah (*Gen. R.* 63). The plural form צְדִיקוֹת appears in Canticles Rabbah with צְדִיקִים (I, 4; all cf. Jastrow, 1992:1262). It is not clear what exact significance can be attached to this omission in Biblical Hebrew—at its most extreme, it can even be asked if there are any righteous women in the whole of the Old Testament?<sup>145</sup>—but the question asked here is a simple one: are the ‘righteous’ and the ‘wicked’ of whom Abraham speaks to be understood as only those who are male or as being of both genders? If it is the former, this will have implications for the constructions of both models of judgement invoked by Abraham and further increase the complexity of the patriarch’s requests.

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Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments.  
 Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.  
 Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever.  
 They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.  
 It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice.  
 For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever (Ps. 112:1b-6).

Similarly, Kraus, in his *Theology of the Psalms*, talks of the righteousness of men and women without ever discussing the problem inherent in assuming the gender-neutrality of צְדִיק (1992:154-162). Originally, these psalms may have had a mixed group in mind or be applicable to any member of the worshipping community, but they could also have been aimed solely at male worshippers (in the Temple courts, after all, women did not have the same access as men); gender-neutral translations such as the NRSV can easily appear presumptuous in their apparent whitewashing of what may simply be the gender-specific language of a patriarchal society. At best, צְדִיק itself can only be called presently ambiguous with regard to the gender of its referent.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Judah... said, “She [Tamar] is more righteous than I (צְדִיקָה מִמֶּנִּי), since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not lie with her again’ (Gen. 38:26). Of a total of four occurrences of female forms of the verb צָדַק, only this one actually relates to a woman, with the other three relating to that ‘female whore’, Israel (Jer. 3:11; Ezek. 16:51, 52).

<sup>145</sup> A woman may not have been considered eligible to be a צְדִיקָה because she was virtually always under the control of a male figure. Even the daughters of Zelophehad who possessed their father’s inheritance were forced to remarry into their father’s family so that the inheritance would not be lost to their father’s kin if they happened to marry someone from outside (Num. 27:1-7; cf. 36:1-12).

Two interpretive options arise from the gender ambiguity of צְדִיק, one favouring a male-only interpretation and the other, a gender-neutral interpretation. In the former, Abraham considers only the ‘men of Sodom’ to be the righteous who should be saved or on whose behalf the city could be saved, with the women and children of Sodom being wholly subordinate to the men who have control over them. In favour of this position is the now-recognised patriarchal bias of much Old Testament language and society; it is noteworthy that Jacob’s suggestion that the number fifty arises because a small town could field a hundred fighting *men* implies that the צְדִיק are male alone (1974:451; cf. Jeansonne’s ‘righteous men’, 1990:40). In the latter, however, Abraham may be simply using either the masculine singular form in his abstract argument with YHWH (vv. 23 and 25) or the singular as a non-gender-specific collective term, before returning in both cases to the plural form which may indicate that both male and female can be considered righteous when considering the concrete situation of Sodom itself (vv. 24, 26-32). Although no woman is specifically called צְדִיק in the Old Testament, adding to the weight of evidence for women as potentially being righteous on their own merit are texts which indicate the need for impartiality in judging legal cases which could have concerned righteous women (e.g. Exod. 23:7-8; Deut. 16:19; 25:1), possible general references to the righteousness of ‘all the people’ (כָּל-הָעָם; e.g., 2 Kgs 10:9: ‘Jehu stood and said to *all the people*, “You are innocent [צְדִיקִים]”’) although the same phrase in Neh. 5:1 indicates only ‘men’ (‘the people and their wives’; cf. Gunn, 1993:189), and finally, perhaps, the existence of significant women like Deborah (Judg. 4:4-5:31), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14-20), and the three called צְדִיקָה by the later rabbinic traditions, Esther, Sarah, and Rebekah.

In a canonical approach, however, both readings appear quite possible, suggesting that there is probably no ‘right’ answer here; whatever Abraham intends, his view of the actual gender of the צְדִיק and the צְדִיקִים is ambiguous to his hearers, to both YHWH and the canonical reader, leaving its actual effect as far as Sodom is concerned as open to YHWH’s interpretation and response as the rest of his request in

vv. 23-25. (As will become apparent, the reading suggested here does not require that YHWH see into Abraham's mind and discern his 'true intentions'). But this openness has consequences for the models of individualistic and corporate judgement being discussed here; the possibility that women are not being counted as righteous individuals in the debate over Sodom means that four rather than two models must be considered. In an individualistic model in which women and children do not count, such a model is not 'individualistic' in the modern sense implied by gender equality, but is rather to be considered individualistic within a patriarchal setting. In the same way, a corporate model in which a woman cannot be counted as righteous may also be termed a patriarchal model of corporate judgement. YHWH is now confronted by *four* possible models—two individualistic and two corporate or two patriarchal and two gender-neutral—as Abraham awaits his response. Moreover, each of these models is in tension with and implicitly criticises the other three (for example, a 'patriarchal individualistic' judgement which involved the punishment of women and children would be judged wanting by a more egalitarian individualism). But for now, having outlined the content of what Abraham is—or rather appears to be—saying, the canonical reader can return to a consideration of the second question with which exegesis of this passage began.

#### F. What is Abraham's Goal in Speaking?

A consideration of possible aims may elucidate Abraham's words further and ultimately allow an explanation of the whole narrative. The following possibilities are considered in turn below.

- 1) Abraham is interested in saving the righteous of Sodom.
- 2) Abraham is interested in saving Sodom itself.
- 3) Abraham is interested in saving Lot.

It is important to note that each of the three options above may overlap with elements of one or more of the other three. Nevertheless, readings can generally be grouped as to their *primary* conception of Abraham's aim.

### G. Saving Only the Righteous of Sodom

For some, Abraham's aim is understood solely in terms of saving the righteous (e.g., Ben Zvi, 1992:34-45; Westermann, 1985:291; Driver, 1909:196; Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:231; Roshwald, 1989:153).<sup>146</sup> Ben Zvi, for example, justifies this position by singling out for detailed examination two premises which he believes to have been invoked by Abraham. The first is that to destroy the righteous of Sodom with the wicked is behaviour unworthy of the Judge of all the earth (1992:34). The sole problem for the patriarch then is that YHWH might destroy the righteous with the wicked thereby failing to enact an individualistic justice; as Driver puts it: 'The patriarch's keen sense of justice recoils at the thought of the innocent perishing with the guilty and this by the decree of an all-righteous judge' (1909:196). Abraham's kinsman Lot, currently a long-term resident of Sodom (cf. at least the thirteen years between Gen. 16:15 and 17:1), is not considered relevant except in his status as one of the righteous of Sodom (e.g., Ben Zvi, 1992:42). Since Abraham is not questioning the punishment of the wicked, neither is the eventual fate of Sodom itself in question.

The occurrence of corporate language in v. 24 is accounted for by Ben Zvi's second premise, 'that the possibility of destroying the city and sparing the righteous, no matter what their number, is beyond the horizon' (1992:34). Accordingly, the request for the whole in v. 24 has to be made because YHWH is implicitly viewed as being unable to save more than nine individuals from out of the city; as he puts it, 'the claim is that God is, at least functionally, not omnipotent' (1992:41); a position

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<sup>146</sup> Wenham states both that Abraham is interceding for Sodom and that he wants to save only the righteous, but is only able to do so by not supplying any resolution of the language problem (1994:52-53).

mentioned as possible by Roshwald (1989:153) and implied in the work of such as Keil-Delitzsch (1980:231), L. Schmidt (1976:154-55), and Westermann (1985:292). Alternatively, Daube has suggested a variant in which Abraham is unable to shake off some kind of communal thinking and can only ask for the righteous to be saved by asking for the whole city (1947:157). In the former, it is primarily YHWH's limitation which is in view but in the latter, primarily Abraham's (though YHWH does not then 'correct' the patriarch's 'error'). But for both, judgement must be rendered on the basis of an individual's merit or guilt; the righteous must go free and the wicked must be punished for YHWH to have done what the 'Judge of all the earth' must do.

These readings are, however, rendered problematic by the words of YHWH in 18:14a, 'is anything beyond YHWH'. Abraham has just been confronted with this rhetorical question and, at least for the present, can only believe that it means just what it says. If Abraham believes—for now anyway—that nothing is too hard for YHWH, then it seems difficult to accept the necessary limitation on the divine power seen within Ben Zvi's reading of the text. Equally, if YHWH believes the statement of 18:14a, then Daube's reading is rendered difficult, though not impossible, since it relies on YHWH accepting Abraham's consistent but faulty—at least according to Daube's own individualistic preference—reasoning as a basis for divine justice, thus failing to act in accordance with the mode of justice agreed upon with the patriarch. More problematic is the fact that Daube's proposal is driven by the historical-critical assumption that Abraham sits between an era when communal thinking is the norm and an era when it is considered deficient when compared to individualistic judgement; Abraham grasps after individualistic judgement for the righteous but is unable to ask for them alone. But if this evolutionary assumption is removed and the concept of a limited YHWH dismissed because of Gen. 18:14a, the view that the whole text is solely interested in saving the righteous alone must be rejected.

## H. Saving the Whole City of Sodom

A second option for discerning Abraham's aim is that Abraham is actually interested in saving the whole city of Sodom rather than it being a necessary event for the salvation of the righteous—the line of interpretation taken by von Rad (1961:208; cf. also Skinner, 1910:305; Schmidt, 1976:141-151; R. Davidson, 1979:70; Brueggemann, 1982:169; Mafico 1983:15). For von Rad, the text is an exploration of a particular problem: 'What will happen if the result of the judicial investigation is not quite unambiguous, in that a majority of guilty men are nevertheless confronted by a minority of innocent men' (1961:207). He argues that 'Abraham is not concerned with either the release from the city of the guiltless nor with their special preservation. [The patriarch] is concerned with something quite different and much greater, namely from beginning to end, with Sodom as a whole' (1961:208). For von Rad, therefore, the text is actually a critique of an old type of collectivism by a new one. In the past the righteous minority were punished for the sins of the majority. Now, however, they are to be the cause of the salvation of the wicked. Nevertheless, if the righteous are missing, the city is still lost. The mercy in view is conditional, being an integral element of the 'new' collectivism underlying Abraham's request. In this reading, YHWH must render a collective judgement and save Sodom, erring on the side of saving the righteous few rather than punishing the guilty many.

A sub-set of this type of approach denies that Abraham's primary concern is with saving Sodom as such, and sees him as being mainly concerned with how YHWH's judicial investigation will reflect upon both the deity and divine justice itself. Skinner, for example, describes Abraham as investigating the principle that 'there is more injustice in the death of a few innocent persons than in the sparing of a great multitude' (1910:305; cf. R. Davidson, 1979:70). Mafico quotes Skinner approvingly, and adds that 'Abraham is not pleading for Sodom nor for Lot and his household [or, it might be added, the righteous]. If this were the case he would have mentioned them by name to get an assurance of their safety' (1983:15). However, Abraham's narrative

context is one of a surprise announcement of an investigation involving potential judgement upon a great number of people, and it seems strange that Abraham is neither watching and learning as YHWH expected nor interceding to save anybody but is debating the abstract mechanics of judgement. Given his lack of interest in the people involved such an Abraham should perhaps be considerably cooler and calmer than the Abraham whose confused arguments in vv. 23-25 are more suggestive of hasty formulation; it is also significant that the reduction in numbers in vv. 27-32 does not flow out of a coherent argument in vv. 23-25, it is only YHWH's lead in v. 26 which sends Abraham off in this direction. Equally, Mafico's secondary argument does not do justice to YHWH's announcement of his judicial investigation in vv. 20-21; to have asked for a group would have been to say to the deity, 'regardless of your investigation, will you just save these people?'

A second sub-set of this type of reading may see Abraham as desiring to save the wicked. W. Brueggemann, for example, views Abraham's vocation as outlined in vv. 18-19 as involving notions of 'righteousness and justice' which do not simply signify moral obedience but also a 'passion for the ones who have violated God' (1982:169; cf. also the grace-orientated 'Lutheranism' of Keil-Delitzsch's approach, 1980:230-1 and Morgenstern's hope that the righteous will, if left alone, eventually convert the wicked, 1965:124-25). But even this last view should not go so far as to see Sodom being saved if there are no righteous people there (but cf. W. Brueggemann's attitude to Genesis 19; 1982:163-67). Ultimately, all of these proposals tend towards a reading in which Abraham's aim is to have the city as a whole saved—for whatever reason—on the basis of the righteous ones who live in it.

Yet the claim that any of this group of readings can account for the whole of this text is difficult to reconcile with Abraham's emphasis on the need to differentiate between the righteous and the wicked (18:23, 25), indeed on the profanity of failing to do so. As was noted with von Rad's reading earlier (see ages 210-12), this reading assumes that a corporate judgement is what Abraham is seeking, and requires the consistent reinterpretation of 'individualistic' notions in corporate terms. But, of

course, the required degree of consistency in Abraham's mind is illusory since the premise of v 25b—making the righteous as the wicked—is being applied inconsistently in these arguments; it is called justice when no differentiation is made in reprieve but it is called profanity when the identical mechanism is applied in a situation incurring punishment. Given these problems, the view that Abraham is solely interested in saving the city cannot stand.

### I. Saving Only Lot

Turner has noted the inconclusive nature of the debate between proponents of each of these two alternatives and proposed a different option. He suggests that Abraham has *only* Lot in mind when he bargains with YHWH over the fate of Sodom (1990a:79; cf. also e.g., Alexander, 1982:51-52; 1985:291; Lundbom, 1998:141-43; Gunn, 1993:181). Turner's primary reasoning concerns what he sees as the still-possible role of Lot as Abraham's heir. Abraham does not yet believe YHWH's promise of a son to Sarah even following YHWH's statement in 18:14a—Turner citing as evidence his willingness to give her to another man in Genesis 20—and persists in seeing Lot as one of the two half chances he has for an heir; the other being Ishmael (1990a:79-80). Abraham is obviously aware that Lot lives in Sodom and has been there for a considerable time (at least thirteen years; cf. Gen. 16:15; 17:1), a factor which should be remembered despite Genesis 18's silence as to Lot's whereabouts. For Turner then, Abraham's mode of argument is designed to save his kinsman even though, as he subsequently argues, Lot may not himself be righteous. Although the mechanism used by Abraham in Turner's reading is that of von Rad's argument to save the whole of Sodom (cf. also Coats, 1985:124), there seems no reason why the alternative—saving only the righteous—could not also be the case provided the reader posits that Abraham regards Lot as righteous (Turner does not; Alexander, however, does regard Abraham's arguments as requiring Lot's righteousness because he believes that the patriarch tries to save his nephew on that basis rather than that of kinship,



1985:291). Following the destruction of the cities and the apparent saving of Lot regardless of Abraham's dialogue with YHWH, Turner wonders whether Abraham would have bothered to argue had he known that Lot would be saved anyway.

Problems exist with seeing the salvation of Lot as the sole aim of Abraham in Gen. 18:23-25, however. Turner's arguments for Lot still being a possible heir to Abraham have already been discussed and rejected (see pages 151-53; Turner's supplementary argument, that Abraham does not accept Gen. 18:14a here because of his behaviour in Genesis 20, is unwarranted; it is not necessary to assume a constancy of character for the patriarch, and his later behaviour need not signify that he is similarly disbelieving here). Of course, it remains probable that Lot's fate would have been of considerable interest to the patriarch, who has already acted to save his kinsman in Genesis 14, but it seems rather strange that Abraham would jury-rig a mechanism of justice to save Lot rather than simply appeal to YHWH for the salvation of his nephew. This results in Turner suggesting a rather cumbersome mode of argumentation in which Lot will only be saved *if* some righteous person(s) exist(s) within Sodom, and *if* YHWH will then relent from punishing the city on their account. Even if YHWH agrees to relent on their account, Lot's salvation remains subject to their presence. Alexander's assumption of Lot's righteousness makes his own proposal that Abraham is seeking only the righteous more certain in outcome, but it would still seem considerably easier to appeal to YHWH to save Lot alone than to ask YHWH to refrain from punishing a whole city (so Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:230). Since Turner and Alexander's positions are parasitic on the two options already considered, they also have the strengths and weaknesses of those interpretations. This implies that their readings cannot stand if they are based on the need to accept either option alone, and that the view that Abraham's aim in speaking is to save Lot alone must be rejected.

## J. A Fragmented and Inconsistent Aim

Given the conclusions already reached about the contradictions contained within that for which Abraham is asking, it should come as no surprise that no one of these interpretations can stand alone as explaining the aim of Abraham's words in 18:23-25. Rather each option matches a strand of the fragmented and inconsistent aim contained in Abraham's opening comments. Those who accept that Abraham is arguing only for the righteous build on the strands which insist on strict differentiation (vv. 23, 25ab); they then have to account for his attempt to argue for the saving of the city in terms of Abraham's limited understanding (Daube, 1947:157) or the inability of YHWH to save more than nine from a city (Ben Zvi, 1992:41-45; cf. also Roshwald, 1989:153). Those who argue for the saving of the city as Abraham's prime motivation build on the strand dealing with Abraham's attempt to save the city on account of the righteous people within it; they must either ignore the individualistic justice language altogether (cf. e.g., Kaminsky, 1995:186; 1997:326), perhaps separating the two types of language into consecutive questions, showing Abraham moving from an individualistic justice to a corporate mercy (cf. e.g., Leibowitz, 1973:183) or re-interpret it as corporate language (cf. e.g., von Rad, 1961:208). And finally, although the form of Abraham's argument make it unlikely that he is solely interested in saving Lot, it seems equally unlikely that he is wholly indifferent to his nephew's situation.

It is perhaps no wonder that such a maelstrom of concerns results in a complex and contradictory discourse. Each of these three options must somehow find a legitimate space in an account of vv. 23-25. For the present it may be said that Abraham is concerned with all three options, with the differentiated individualistic justice of YHWH and the fate of the righteous, with the application of a corporate notion of mercy with the aim of saving the city as a whole, and—perhaps to a slightly lesser degree—with saving Lot (so also van Seters, 1975:214). But he (and van Seters) is totally unaware of how disparate and contradictory his statements and

requests actually are. Such a conclusion means that Abraham's requests for justice cannot be ranked by the reader, since it is not clear exactly what he wants himself. Presumably, if Abraham could be asked in turn whom he wanted to save—Lot, the righteous or the city—he would answer yes to all by reprising the relevant strand of argument. In the light of Abraham's confusion, it is actually left to YHWH alone to decide how to respond and only the dialogue which follows that response can explain which of (or how much of) Abraham's aim(s) is(are) achieved. After all, the possibility remains that YHWH may simply call Abraham's attention to the confused nature of his request and either ask for clarification or offer resolution in some other direction.

#### K. Could Lot Be One of the Righteous of Sodom?

A point which merits further consideration here is the implication of the reading proposed here for our understanding of the role of Lot (and his daughters) in Abraham's argument(s). I have argued that Abraham is unclear as to his aim because he does not explicitly say what he wants, his words being contradictory. But I have also suggested that part of that aim must involve saving his kinsman Lot (and presumably any further kin in Sodom), and it must be assumed that Abraham thinks that his request will either do this or at least allow it as a strong possibility. But do his contradictions result in Lot's necessary destruction? It would seem unlikely, but then it is of the nature of contradictory discourse to have unintended consequences. Since Lot is male, the difference between gender-neutral and patriarchal models can be placed on one side—in both he would be in exactly the same position<sup>147</sup>—while an

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<sup>147</sup> His daughters, however, would not. In a patriarchal model of judgement, they would be wholly reliant upon the righteousness of either Lot (if the model is individualistic and if he, a נָדִיב, is able to count as righteous) or the righteous men of Sodom (in a corporate model or, again if he is able to count as righteous, Lot). The point to note here is that if Abraham does manage to save Lot—surely his primary aim as far as saving his kin are concerned—by *any* of his arguments, then they too will be saved.

But in a patriarchal individualistic judgement, any female kin will also be lost. Perhaps, given Abraham's attitude to Sarah in Gen. 12:10-20, this is of no great concern to the patriarch; they

answer is sought to the following question: What does the application of either an individualistic or a corporate justice do for Lot?

In order to deal with this question, the status of Lot within Sodom must be considered. Mafico, for example, has argued that as a גֵר Lot does not count as one of the people of Sodom and that his personal righteousness is therefore irrelevant when YHWH searches for the righteous of Sodom (1983:16). Lot then would indeed be as J. Skinner sees him, in a 'solitary and defenceless position' (1910:307). If this is the case then, the corporate saving of the city would result in Lot's salvation, but Abraham's contradictory insistence on saving the righteous alone would leave Lot with no explicit means of survival; any subsequent salvation of Lot (not to mention any other גֵרִים) would have to take place *despite* Abraham's words in Gen. 18:23-25.

F.A. Spina has suggested the word 'immigrant' as the best English option when translating גֵר (1983:325), but this has been disputed by C. van Houton who in turn argues for the term 'alien'. She notes that while immigrant 'captures the connotations of social and political upheaval which are part of the origins of the גֵר, and clearly distinguishes him from the pastoralist who moves from place to place as part of his occupation...', an immigrant is someone who comes from elsewhere and is now settled, whereas an alien may be settled or may still be on the move' (1991:19). Both Abraham and Lot had left their homeland as commanded and gone to Canaan, to the land that YHWH had promised (Gen. 12:1-3). During an ensuing famine, they had travelled down to Egypt to be 'aliens' there (12:10). Although both are, in some sense, aliens in Canaan, the fact that this is the land which was promised provides a nuance of permanence not found in their (temporary) visit to Egypt to survive the famine; Abraham is in effect a settled immigrant in Canaan. This distinction is important in considering Lot's status in Sodom. He has chosen to leave Canaan, to go to dwell in Sodom (and has now been there for more than thirteen years; cf. 16:15;

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are, after all, unable to inherit the promise of YHWH (cf. the experience of the daughters of Zelophehad, Num. 27:1-7; cf. 36:1-12). On the other hand, this may simply be an unintended consequence of Abraham's incoherence.

17:1). He is, therefore, also an immigrant, but is settled in a different land to Abraham and one outside the promise of YHWH. Spina's definition of the 'immigrant' is therefore a useful starting point:

*ger* in the Hebrew Bible refers to people who are no longer directly related to their original social setting and who have therefore entered into dependent relationships with various groups or officials in a new social setting. The *ger* was of another tribe, city, district or country who was without customary social protection or privilege and of necessity had to place himself under the jurisdiction of someone else (1983:323-24).

Is Lot then, as Mafico suggests, outside the reckoning of anyone dealing with the people of a city like Sodom?

A canonical view of the גֵּר is dependent to some degree upon the legal corpus of the Israelites relating to their treatment. Although one must be careful not to attribute a quasi-Israelite religion to the men of Sodom, the use of the term in Gen. 19:9 inevitably invokes some sense of resemblance to the place of the גֵּר in Israel. W.W. Fields defines the place of the גֵּר in Israel—whether male or female (cf. his 1997:31-2)—under the following four points:

- 1) A גֵּר has some of the rights of an Israelite (Exod. 12:49). (a) If he is circumcised he may eat the passover the same as a citizen (Exod. 12:48), and must observe the Israelite regulations concerning it (Exod. 12:19; Num. 9:14); (b) he has the right to flee to one of the cities of refuge (Num. 35:15; Josh. 20:9); (c) he has the right to a fair trial (Deut. 1:16); (d) he has the right to be paid at the end of each day like any workman (Deut. 24:14-15); and (e) he has the right to be instructed in the Torah in the sabbatical year during Succoth (Deut. 31:12).
- 2) A גֵּר has some of the responsibilities of an Israelite. These responsibilities include (a) circumcision (Exod. 12:48); (b) observance of Shabbat (Exod. 20:10; 23:12; Deut. 5:14); (c) observance of the prohibition against eating blood (Lev. 17:10-16); (d) observance of Yom Kippur (Lev. 16:29); (e) observance of regulations concerning a burnt offering (Lev. 17:8-9; 22:18-19; Num. 15:14, 26-29); (f) reverence for the God of Israel (Lev. 24:26, 22); (g) recognition of the right of redemption of a slave (Lev. 25:47-48); (h) eschewal of sacrifice to Molech on pain of death (Lev. 20:2; cf. Ezek. 14:7); (i) avoidance of intentional sin

(Num. 15:30); (j) observance of laws concerning sexual conduct (Lev. 18:26); (k) rejoicing at the offering of the firstfruits (Deut. 26:11); (l) suffering of the same penalties as an Israelite for blasphemy, murder or killing an animal (Lev. 24:15-22); (m) observance of the regulations concerning the ashes of the heifer (Num. 19:10); and (n) observance of terms of the covenant (Deut. 29:10).

- 3) A גֵּר has certain special rights and is free of some prohibitions. (a) He may glean leftovers in the fields which the owners were not allowed to take (Lev. 19:10; 23:22); (b) he may eat an animal found dead (which is forbidden to an Israelite, Deut. 14:21; cf. Lev. 11:39); (c) he shares in the tithes of the produce of every third year along with the Levites, the fatherless and the widows (Deut. 14:29); and (d) he is to be supported by Israelites just like the poor (Lev. 25:35).
- 4) A גֵּר has a right to legal protection. Because Israel was a sojourner in Egypt, Israelites should be sympathetic to the sojourners in their midst (Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:19; 23:8). This principle is repeatedly stated as the rationale behinds the legal status of the גֵּר (1997:33-34).

Sodom has no such rationale and is probably not to be imagined as being quite so sympathetic to a גֵּר as Israel (the need for the Israelites to be encouraged to be caring, however, no doubt indicates that the opposite was often the norm even for ‘the chosen people’). It is clear from Fields’s work, however, that a גֵּר was not reckoned a non-person as Mafico suggests, even in texts in which their difference is emphasised (e.g., Deut. 14:21). Whether a temporary ‘alien’ or a settled ‘immigrant,’ the גֵּר was not without rights. Two elements of the narrative which support this view are Lot’s seat within the city gate, indicating a degree of stature within the city (cf. perhaps also the betrothal of his daughters to ‘locals’) and the fact that when the men of Sodom come to mistreat the two ‘alien visitors’ and the ‘alien immigrant’ Lot in Gen. 19:4-11, the sense of divine and human outrage generated within the text is intelligible only if it is assumed that the ‘rights’ of real people have been violated.

Lot then does count as a person in Sodom as far as YHWH and Abraham are concerned. He is an immigrant who is assumed to have rights (of some kind) and his righteousness is an issue here (*contra* Mafico). When Abraham argues to save the

righteous for their own sake, a righteous Lot will be one of those saved (and his daughters with him). When he argues that Sodom should survive because of the righteous, Lot may count as a righteous person whose presence will save the whole city. Abraham has not contradicted himself on this point at least.

#### L. Why Does Abraham Speak At All?

Having defined—to a limited degree—what Abraham was asking for and the aim(s) he wished to achieve, it is now appropriate to return to the first question with which this section began: Why does Abraham feel the need to speak at all? The elusive nature of the answers given here to the first two questions—that Abraham, in a confused speech, asks for contradictory forms of justice with relatively unclear goals—means that a definitive answer is not available. Abraham's words are not a clear, calculated request calmly made; he is not a systematician offering a fully worked out argument. On hearing of the potential destruction of Sodom, the patriarch reacts to an event which he considers likely with almost every argument he could muster; at stake is the fate of his kinsman Lot, the righteous of Sodom, the wicked of Sodom, the city of Sodom, and perhaps the future of 'justice' itself.

Abraham demonstrates in his intervention his clear conviction that 'sweeping away', that is destroying (מִשְׁחָרֵף), the city is obviously a live option for YHWH (cf. e.g., Num. 16:26). This understanding results from a knowledge of the people of Sodom (though perhaps not as detailed as Morgenstern suggests: 'Abraham knew full well the wickedness of the people of Sodom and Gomorra', 1965:125), a knowledge of the justice of YHWH which the deity has assumed to be in Abraham's possession in vv. 17-21, and a knowledge that YHWH's justice extends to the nations (cf. e.g., Gen. 6-10). It is also clear that, for Abraham, there is no question but that the guilty must be punished if they stand alone; there is no suggestion here that they can expect mercy without the presence of the innocent in their midst.

Less clearly, it may be concluded that Abraham's impression of the justice of his God is not only that it must be transparently just, but also that he believes that his words are necessary for that justice to take place; he is in some way protesting 'against the thought of an indiscriminate judgement' (Skinner, 1910:305). But since what he is asking for and what he wants are both unclear, it is impossible to be exact about what such a judgement is. On the one hand, it could be said that Abraham believes that YHWH might destroy the righteous with the wicked, 'flouting his usual principles' (recorded by Ps. 146:8-9 as 'the Lord loves the righteous...but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin', Wenham, 1994:52). But because of the nature of Abraham's speech, it also remains an irrefutable possibility that Abraham is already expecting YHWH to offer an individualistic judgement and is intervening only to ask for a corporate judgement (so Landy, 1990:109). It is further possible, though unlikely, that Abraham has the gender issue in mind here, wanting to reform YHWH's 'patriarchal' or 'egalitarian' form of judgement into its opposite. In the exegesis offered here, however, that ambiguity will only be considered as a powerful side-effect rather than as a direct 'intended' assault. Ultimately, however, the exact cause of Abraham's intervention is beyond reach, and I can only conclude that Abraham's confusion also extends to this point. The patriarch speaks up but does not have a cogent reason for doing so; more likely the shock of YHWH's pronouncement brings on a flurry of thoughts and prompts an intervention which might be described not only as 'bold and tentative' but also as 'incoherent' in aim and content.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> This is the principal problem with Rodd's use of this text to define a 'norm' against which Abraham is measuring the behaviour of the deity (1972:138; 1994:211-12). Rodd's careful logical treatment of the alternatives misses completely the sheer illogicality of Abraham's request, flattening the text completely. Even the 'inescapable' conclusion that Abraham deliberately sets up an external standard is rendered questionable by the possibility that Abraham is seeking more than an individual 'justice'.

Even if it is allowed that a 'norm' is being used by Abraham in *some* strands of his speech, this need not indicate that justice is being raised over YHWH by Abraham or by the text; Abraham's lack of anything resembling systematic thinking precludes the view that he sees YHWH as necessarily having to submit to a higher law (though it may be 'seen' here) and, as will soon become clear, YHWH's refusal to clarify Abraham's words leaves the process of education open-ended and results, for the present, in the text's opacity. An examination of the place of this text in such rarefied philosophical, theological, and ethical debate must await an examination of the whole of the biblical witnesses, a task obviously far beyond this thesis.



In conclusion, Abraham asks for YHWH to act justly but unknowingly sets up two self-contradictory premises which must be followed, one involving a individualistic justice which differentiates between righteous and wicked, the other involving a non-differentiated corporate justice. (He also unintentionally introduces an ambiguity into the discussion with regard to the gender of the righteous.) His aim(s) is(are) therefore a complex bundle which includes his wish to save the city, to see a differentiated justice to save the righteous, and to save his kinsman Lot. With the possible exception of the saving of Lot, the assigning of rank to them is beyond the interpreter. Abraham's intervention arises from undefinable motives. It may be said that Abraham's view of his God is that he should be just, but what that ultimately entails is lost in the twists and turns of his argument. He does not, however, suggest at any point that the wicked be reprieved for their own sake. In the ensuing dialogue, the interplay between Abraham's beliefs and aims and the response of YHWH may shed some light on the implications of Abraham's opening challenge in vv. 23-25.

#### M. The Response of YHWH

Within the exegetical history of Gen. 18:23-32, YHWH's response to Abraham's opening words has virtually *always* been understood as an affirmation of the patriarch's argument. This has been the case regardless of whether an exegete sees the aim of the argument as an individualistic (cf. Westermann's 'God assents to Abraham's request,' 1985:292) or a corporate justice (cf. von Rad's 'as Yahweh's grace is willing', 1961:208). But if that pattern is followed here, YHWH will only be affirming the patriarch in his contradiction. Is this what happens when YHWH responds in my reading? Or will the deity simply call Abraham on the confused nature of his request, and offer resolution in some other direction? Will the contradiction be resolved in some unforeseen way? Will we finally get to learn what the judge of all the earth must do exactly?

YHWH responds to Abraham's complex speech by taking up Abraham's request that the city be saved if it contains fifty righteous people and acceding to its contents, making the indefinite request of v. 24 definite (Schweizer, 1983; cf. also Gossai's 'Yahweh...makes the move from probability to concreteness', 1995:60). YHWH has not investigated Sodom and does not yet know how many righteous he will find there, but if the fifty are found, the city will be saved. However, YHWH does not respond—positively or negatively—to Abraham's individualistic differentiation between the righteous and the wicked in punishment or to his question as to whether the judge of the Earth will do justice. Neither does the deity refer to Lot. Nor is any response to the gender issue offered—YHWH always using the ambiguous term אִשָּׁה—though the deity's actions in Genesis 19 may yet provide clarification on this point. In effect YHWH only offers a clear response to the strand of Abraham's words in which no distinction is made between the righteous and the wicked in judgement, only taking up the corporate notion of judgement. But why?

Two possible reasons occur to this reader. The first is that perhaps I should apologise to Brueggemann for my earlier dismissal of his characterisation of Abraham as YHWH's teacher (see page 216). Perhaps YHWH simply does not understand the contradictions any better than Abraham does; the bad teacher Abraham has an even worse pupil. Perhaps YHWH's lack of response indicates folly and not wisdom. But given this narrative's placement within the context of the divine education of Abraham, the one who will command the chosen people to follow the way of YHWH and be its first great teacher, it seems more likely that YHWH's silence is supposed to form a part of that process. YHWH affirms one strand of Abraham's argument, but does not point out the contradictions in his requests or reject—either explicitly or implicitly—any the alternatives presented. Most significantly of all, YHWH never defines what the judge of all the earth must do in order to be just. Although Abraham, having received an affirmative reply to the corporate strand of his argument, continues in a manner which involves pursuing that strand to the exclusion of all others, this does not necessarily mean that he is entitled to assume that he now knows what the Judge of all

the earth must do. The process of education begun in Gen. 18:17-21 will not be so easily completed. It is only within the later history of Israel (and beyond) that the numerous tensions in Abraham's words will be brought to the surface again, and the process of education as to the nature of YHWH's justice continued.

In responding to the deity's acceptance of the corporate strand of his opening speech, Abraham begins v. 27 with a declaration of his own unworthiness to speak to YHWH: 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust (עָפָר) and (אֵפֶר) ashes' (cf. for this alliterative pairing, Job 30:19; 42:6; Sir. 10:9; 17:32; 40:3). He then repeats his request but proceeds to ask what will occur if the fifty righteous (plural) are less five (v. 28ab); that is if less than half the city are righteous. YHWH again agrees that he will spare the city on their account (v. 28c). Abraham repeats the process a further four times, lowering the required number by five to forty, and then by ten each time until the figure of ten righteous is reached. Each of these exchanges moves from the indefinite question 'if... will you destroy?' to the definite response, 'I will not', based, of course, on the presence of that number of the righteous. But there is also a consistent use of terms by Abraham indicating his fearful attitude to what he is doing: 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak' (v. 30); 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord' (v. 31, mirroring v 27a). Finally, Abraham in fear and trembling asks for the last time: 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there'. With YHWH's agreement that ten will suffice to save the city, Abraham ceases his requests and returns to his own place (at Mamre, cf. 18:1). YHWH also departs.

This process of reducing the number of righteous required for saving the city gives some further insight into Abraham. Westermann argues that because Abraham already knows the outcome of the investigation, the traditional view of these verses as exhibiting 'bargaining, beating down, haggling with God' on behalf of Sodom is incorrect (1985:291). Westermann, however, views Abraham as having the knowledge of a post-exilic reader who already knows of the destruction, in effect denying the character his own narrative existence (cf. also Lundblom, 1998:141-43); this is

unacceptable in a canonical reading (if it is acceptable in any other!). Having originally expressed his desires incoherently in vv. 23-25 and subsequently seen the corporate strand of his words taken up by YHWH, Abraham now pushes that strand to its limit. If a certain number will save the city, what is that number? If—with Jacob—it is half the (men of the) city, will less than half suffice? Is this about numbers at all? Abraham here pursues what has now become his primary interest in saving the city (following YHWH's response), but betrays a secondary interest in the limits of the justice of YHWH in that salvation. Having been pointed in this particular direction by YHWH's response to his initial statement, Abraham doggedly—and consistently—pursues this strand of argument to a conclusion (of sorts).

#### N. The Ten Righteous

Much comment has been occasioned by Abraham's ceasing at the figure of ten righteous people and his implied refusal to proceed down to a solitary righteous individual. Although for some, YHWH is the one who is responsible for this 'failing', his demeanour causing Abraham to stop (e.g., Wenham, 1994:53), nothing that the deity says or does actually gives any indication that this is so; it is only Abraham's repeated statements of unworthiness and entreaties for YHWH not to be angry which may give this impression and these are more naturally interpreted as indications of Abraham's fraught state of mind. But does Abraham 'fail' to go further or has he got what he wanted?

Sometimes the problems attached to the figure ten are simply glossed over (and Abraham is usually let off the hook of being a 'failure'). Wenham notes that the process is stopped at ten but then simply says that there was not even one righteous in Sodom, effectively leaving a 'hole in the text' as to what would have happened to less than ten found in this situation (1994:53; cf. also Mafico, 1983:15-16; R. Davidson,

1979:70; Ben Zvi, 1992:35-36, footnote 2; Coats, 1985:120).<sup>149</sup> Another way of avoiding the issue is for the interpreter to be mysterious, even opaque, as with Skinner's comment that the reduction continues 'till the limit of human charity is reached' (1910:306; mistakenly attributed to Keil-Delitzsch by Mafico, 1983:15); this implies that the city should not be saved on behalf of nine righteous people but gives no comprehensible rationale for this decision (cf. also Clements, 1985:22). Similarly, von Rad's view that the decision to stop at ten safeguards the uniqueness of the future messianic one leaves this narrative in a judicial limbo (1961:209).

Others attribute the ceasing to Abraham's having 'achieved' his aim to save only Lot. J. Lundblom, for example, argues that the number of the members of Lot's family explains why Abraham ceases at the number ten rather than go down to five or below (1998:141-43; a view echoed by some Jewish exegetes; cf. e.g., Ginzberg, 1947:252, *Gen. R.* 49:13). His case is rendered problematic, however, because he assumes that Abraham already knows of the destruction of Sodom (cf. Westermann's flaw!) and so does not go below ten because he knows that to do so would leave Lot's escape unexplained.

Abraham's self-description in 'fear' terms has led to the ceasing at ten being ascribed to Abraham's inadequacies. Gossai suggests that Abraham's ceasing at ten both demonstrates his 'lack of imagination' as to the potentialities of YHWH's justice and betrays his fear and mistrust of the deity (1995:64-65; cf. also one of Roshwald possibilities, 1989:155). Taken in the light of Gossai's view of Abraham as seeking a consistent goal in 22b-32, this is problematic because it assumes that YHWH is prepared to act unjustly on the basis of his dialogue partner's inadequacies (1947:157), a position which would take YHWH's silence about the contradictions in Abraham's words to unreasonable extremes; it is one thing for YHWH to accede to one view of justice rather than another, but quite another thing for YHWH to fail to carry out a

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<sup>149</sup> A variant suggested by Landy involves recognising this 'hole' as creative: following Abraham's 'Socratic' questioning of the deity, his failure to pursue his line of reasoning to its conclusion (so very unlike Socrates!) results in a 'final joke: our expectations are simply abandoned, momentarily baffled' (1990:110).

particular form of justice correctly simply because Abraham is either too frightened or too stupid to ask for less than ten to save the city.

Alternatively, an implicit narrative assumption, ‘uncovered’ by some of those who have taken the view that Abraham is only interested in saving the righteous (Ben Zvi, 1992:41-45; Roshwald, 1989:153), has been invoked to explain the significance of the number ten; it is argued that due to the deity’s non-omnipotence, YHWH cannot save more than that number from out of the city. This limitation is also implicit in the positions of those who argue from the importance of the number ten in the Ancient Near East; Schmidt, for example, suggests that fifty equals an extended family with ten equalling the smallest group (1976:151-56). On this view, less than ten righteous people do not constitute a group at all. Because they are individuals who can therefore be removed from the city, Abraham does not need to ask for the city in order for them to be saved (so Westermann, 1985:292; Loader, 1990:30-31). But Westermann’s comment that ‘if there are 50 just in the city, then God *has to spare it* so as not to destroy them with the wicked’ makes explicit the non-omnipotence of YHWH underlying these attempts to account for the number ten (1985:291—my italics; also noted by Ben Zvi, 1992:40-41, footnote 2). Obviously, having already rejected the view that YHWH cannot remove more than nine from the city as incompatible with Abraham’s—at least temporary—acceptance of Gen. 18:14a, this option is less than convincing to a canonical reader.

In the light of such difficulty in explaining a ceasing at ten, the views of those who argue that the number ten has little or no significance prove more convincing to this canonical reader. Sailhammer suggests that since the next reduction from ten by ten is zero, the patriarch’s conclusion may be considered appropriate and indicates that any righteous element in the city will suffice, Abraham and YHWH having established the general principle that any righteous element may be considered sufficient reason by YHWH not to destroy the city (1992:170). As Brueggemann puts it: ‘The numbers are incidental. The principle is established... By the new mathematics of 18:22-33...one is enough to save’ (1982:172-73; also listed as a possibility by Roshwald,

1989:155). Gossai, having blamed the ceasing on Abraham's weakness, nevertheless also concludes:

One might very well ask, how would Yahweh respond had Abraham asked: 'and if one righteous person is found? What then Lord, will you destroy Sodom?' for the sake of one. Indeed we are surprised that Abraham does not pursue this any further, given the fact that he was aware that Lot was in Sodom. Though one may only speculate here, the reader has ample basis to believe that God would have saved the city (1995:64).

Ultimately, the biggest argument in favour of the 'meaninglessness' of the number ten is the sheer difficulty of otherwise explaining its significance as a point of ceasing.

At the conclusion of the dialogue between YHWH and Abraham, they have agreed that the issue that will be foregrounded here is the salvation of the city of Sodom on the basis of the existence of the righteous within it, almost certainly even down to a single figure. It is still not apparent, however, if women (or children) will be taken as counting as righteous or not. If YHWH finds a righteous figure (required gender presently unclear), the city will be spared, with God's non-punishment of the wicked in this act of (corporate) justice being for the sake of others—the righteous—and not for the sake of the wicked. YHWH does not answer Abraham's other statements at all, but chooses in his education of the patriarch to grant one request that denies aspects of another and not to call Abraham's attention to the contradiction. In this setting, corporate notions are chosen by YHWH over individualistic ones—non-differentiation over differentiation. The subsequent Sodom narrative will not therefore decide what YHWH must always do to be just, it will not define the criteria demanded by Gen. 18:25, but it will form the first educative example of YHWH the judge in action. Of course, two possible outcomes would cohere with the judgements of the individualistic model; if all are innocent or if all are wicked, then the outcome is identical in both models of judgement. But if the wicked gain salvation for the sake of the righteous few, then the exemplar of divine judgement set by YHWH before the face of Israel will be an act already described by Abraham as 'profane'.

## Chapter 6

### **A Canonical Exegesis of the Sodom Narrative, Part 2: Genesis 19**

#### I. The Arrival of Two Visitors in Sodom (19:1-3)

##### A. Arrival at Sodom

Genesis 19 opens with the arrival of the two ‘outcry investigators’ at the gate of Sodom in the evening (one of the three visitors of Gen. 18:2 remaining to dialogue with Abraham in 18:23-32, but not *as* or *as sole representative of* YHWH as Wenham argues, 1994:54). They are now openly designated as angelic figures by the narrator, a designation which will be used to contrast their real identities with the identities ‘seen’ by the inhabitants of Sodom. It is not necessary to emend the text here to ‘men’ in agreement with vv. 12, 16 as BHS suggests because it is the dual aspect of the men/angels which is of interest here; the ‘angels’ are referred to as ‘men’ by the men of Sodom (19:5) and by Lot (19:8), with neither recognising the presence of YHWH through his angelic representatives.

The ‘men’ arrive in the evening and encounter Lot ‘sitting in the gate of Sodom’ (יָשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר-סְדֹמָה). According to Matthews, ‘the fact that Lot has won a place in the gate suggests he has won a measure of acceptance from the citizens of Sodom since this is a place reserved for business and legal transactions’ (1992:4; cf. e.g., Gen. 23:10, 18; Deut. 21:19-21; Ruth 4:1-12; 2 Sam. 18:24; 2 Kgs 7:1; Job 5:4, 29:7; Ps. 127:5; Prov. 31:23; Isa. 29:21; Amos 5:10, 12, 15). The prospective marriages of his two daughters to men who are either men of the city or אֲנָשֵׁי סְדֹמָה so closely assimilated as to be indistinguishable from the men of Sodom (19:14) also implies that although he remains a אֲנָשִׁי, Lot is also being assimilated into the city’s life.<sup>150</sup> Wenham, however,

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<sup>150</sup> Some rabbinic sources go so far as to argue that Lot has been appointed as a judge (cf. Hershon, 1885:206) or even as chief justice (e.g., *Gen. R.* 50:3) in Sodom.



suggests that there is a strange contrast between the implication that Lot is a ‘respected member of the community,’ and his apparent isolation in the gate itself; does ‘Lot’s sitting by himself indicate his estrangement from the men of Sodom’ (1994:54)? Or is it perhaps an early indication of the dissolution of the men of Sodom themselves, with them actually present with Lot but wholly disinterested in ‘appearing’ to greet the visitors themselves?

## B. An Invitation...and Acceptance

Lot sees (וַיִּרְאֵה־לוֹט) and arises to meet the two (וַיֵּקָם לְקָרְאָתָם) before bowing his face to the ground before them (וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַפָּיִם אֲרָצָה). He then addresses them as ‘my lords,’ אֲדֹנָי, and consistently uses plural forms (וְלִינֶוּ עַבְדְּכֶם) In contrast to Abraham, Lot does not recognise his visitors as representatives of YHWH. He requests that they turn aside and come to the house ‘of your (pl.) servant (עַבְדְּכֶם),’ stay (for the night), and wash their feet (19:2; cf. Gen. 18:4-5). Lot’s use of servant here resonates ironically with that of Abraham because of his lack of recognition of the men as representing YHWH; Abraham puts himself forward as the servant of YHWH, but Lot claims no such thing.

In the light of the protocol of hospitality (see page 181), it is clear that Lot’s invitation is actually out of place; as Matthews puts it, ‘he is a resident alien...and therefore cannot represent the city in this matter’ (1992:4). It is not explained why Lot chooses to act in this way, but the impression given is that either no Sodomite was present in the gate (so Wenham above, with Lot’s position there indicating his estrangement from the community) or that none wished to offer hospitality to the two visitors (Lot’s position then being a sign of his acceptance by the community; Driver’s view that Lot wished to claim the privilege for himself fails to recognise how inappropriate such a motive would be, 1909:198). Given that the men of Sodom are well aware of the visitors later and the general unlikelihood of Lot being alone in the

busiest part of the city, it is most likely the latter which is in view here; the obligation to offer hospitality to travellers is not being fulfilled in Sodom, and this despite the lush land in which the city is set (cf. Gen. 13:10).<sup>151</sup> Lot's invitation is therefore similar to that of the old man from Ephraim who, though dwelling in Gibeah away from his own place, invites the visiting Levite to stay with him; both are invitations to those spurned by the responsible local populace (Judg. 19:16-21). His desire to offer hospitality may then be strengthened by an awareness that there is no hospitality to be had in the city (Matthews, 1992:4); indeed, there may only be danger to visitors in the streets and Lot is here demonstrating his desire to keep the men safe (cf. Skinner, 1910:307). If Fields's description of the 'night as danger' motif is accepted, the 'dark' terminology in this passage also contributes to a general atmosphere of menace (1992:17-32; 1997:103-15). But by acting contrary to his fellow community members, Lot is already giving his watching neighbours a reason to turn on him.

The angels properly refuse Lot's invitation as the conventions of hospitality dictate (Matthews, 1992:4). They may fear for Lot's safety if they accept (so Wenham, 1994: 54-5), but it is also possible that they simply wish to stay in the *ḥayyot* to investigate the outcry (so Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:232; Hershon's suggestion that they wished the townsfolk to see their judges and repent [1885:107] is highly unlikely because no opportunity for repentance is explicitly offered by the men, Lot's sons-in-law excepted). The *ḥayyot* was not simply any street but the main 'square' of the town (cf. e.g., Judg. 19:15, 17, 20; 2 Sam. 21:12; Isa. 15:3; 59:14; Jer. 5:1; 9:21; Amos 5:16; Ezra 10:9; Neh. 8:1). Lot took no offence at their refusal, however, and 'pressed

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<sup>151</sup> Bechtel's analysis of hospitality in Sodom is skewed by her unfortunate categorisation of outsiders as wholly 'dangerous' (1998:112-15; here, characterising the two visitors as potential spies from foreign kings) and her subsequent failure to recognise that the aim of the code of hospitality is the transformation of the stranger from potential threat to ally *by the offer of hospitality*. The men of Sodom, as a corporate group in Bechtel's sense, have it within their own power to negate the threat posed by the visitors. But the invitation which negates the danger can only properly be offered by the male head of household or a male citizen of a town or village. It is not the case, as Bechtel argues, that Lot as both insider and outsider is more open to those outside (1998:115). Rather Lot's invitation to the men is an improper one, being, at best, an attempt to deal with the failure of the men of Sodom to carry out their obligations and, at worst, a prevention of their offering hospitality which may put them in some danger.

them strongly' (וַיִּפְצְרֵם בָּם מְאֹד) to accept his invitation (Gen. 33:11; Judg. 19:7; 2 Kgs 2:17; 5:16; cf. 1 Kgs. 13:14-19). But this comes perilously close to a coercive imprisonment, with Gossai noting the negative effect of the occurrence of פָּצַר in Gen. 19:9 and Judg. 19:22 (1995:77). This impression is mitigated somewhat, however, by Lot's prior provision of a time-scale for their stay with him in v. 2 (Matthews, 1992:4), and the men acquiesce and turn aside to his house, their business in the square evidently proving not too pressing an engagement.

### C. A Meal for Lot's Guests

Having brought the guests within the (relative) safety of his doorway, Lot prepares food for them, מִשְׁתֶּה, 'a feast' perhaps approaching that prepared for the weaning of Isaac (Gen. 21:8), for a wedding (Gen. 29:22; Judg. 14:10), or for royal entertaining (Gen. 40:20; 1 Kgs 3:15; Wenham, 1994:54).

He—or, as with Abraham (18:6-8), more likely his female family (*contra* Gossai who seems to think Lot should be faulted for not involving his family in preparing the meal, 1995:80-81), subsequently discovered to be a wife and two daughters—hurriedly bakes unleavened bread, 'מִצֹּחַ' (cf. Exod. 12:39; Judg. 6:19-21; 1 Sam. 28:24), and then his guests eat (v. 3). Lot's actions here demonstrate his righteous fulfilment of part of the protocol of hospitality (cf. Keil-Delitzsch's 'Lot was entertaining his guests with the greatest hospitality,' 1980:232). However, his presence among those who fail to care for the travellers as they should means that his own offer of hospitality inevitable reflects their hostility. He is stepping into the gap and that is good, but the fact that he has chosen to live among the men of Sodom is emphasised by both his and his guests having to step outside the norms of the protocol of hospitality. That he does not thereby *necessarily* sin is the clear implication of the assumption—shared by both YHWH and Abraham—that righteous people may exist amongst the wicked (cf. Gen. 18:23-32); Lot cannot be made necessarily wicked by

his dwelling in Sodom. It is rather his decision to adopt the values of his inhospitable neighbours which will eventually call Lot's behaviour into question.

#### D. Contrasting Lot with Abraham

R.C. Culley lists the following similarities and contrasts which exist between Genesis 18:1-8 and 19:1-3, with italics indicating verbatim agreement (1976:54-55; adapted slightly to fit my reading of 18:3—see underlined>):

##### *Genesis 18:1-8*

Abraham was *sitting* at door of tent  
He looked up, saw three men standing  
He *saw*, ran *to meet*....  
*bowed to the ground*  
Offered hospitality (*He said: My Lord...*  
*Wash your feet...*): rest and food  
They accepted  
Abraham prepared food  
*They ate*

##### *Genesis 19:1-3*

Two men come to Sodom  
Lot was *sitting* at gate of Sodom  
Lot *saw*, rose *to meet*,  
*bowed... to the ground*  
Offered hospitality (*He said: My lords...*  
*Wash your feet...*): to spend the night  
They refused but Lot urged  
They accepted  
Lot prepared food  
*They ate*

Fields regards it as obvious that the two narratives as a whole are 'complementary' with 'Abraham's hospitality... the prototype for Lot's' (1997:39). Alongside these parallels, the differences between the two narratives have also been emphasised; Fields, for example, comments upon what he sees as a 'night as danger' motif, with a contrast being drawn between Abraham's day-time visitation and Lot's night-time visitation

(1997:103-14).<sup>152</sup> When Gossai writes that although ‘Lot cannot be faulted for this temporal setting, we have an immediate though subtle indication that this act of hospitality will be different from that of Abraham’ (1995:76), he illustrates the most significant use of these similarities and contrasts, their employment in various attempts *to compare and contrast the characterisation of Lot with Abraham*, usually in order to suggest that Lot is either righteous (e.g., Skinner, 1910:307; Morgenstern, 1965:126; Schmidt, 1976:141; Vawter, 1977:235-36; Alexander, 1985:289-91; Clements, 1985:20; Ben Zvi, 1992:42; Matthews, 1992:6; Wenham, 1994:55-56; Rashkow, 1998:106-107) or unrighteous (e.g., Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:233; Coats, 1983:141,143; Jeansonne, 1988:123-29; Turner, 1990b:94-95; Gossai, 1995:76-81).

#### E. Lot the Righteous

It is perhaps the interpretation of T.D. Alexander which most emphasises Lot as a righteous man, taking his lead from 2 Pet. 2:7-8 (cf. also Driver, 1909:196):

For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgement; and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly; and if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorra to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly; *and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)*, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement—especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority (2:4-10; NRSV—my italics).

Alexander argues that the parallel structural details between 18:1-8 and 19:1-3 indicate that Lot is ‘being carefully compared with Abraham’. He continues: ‘by caring for the

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<sup>152</sup> This is also echoed by the title of Letellier’s book on Genesis 18-19, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom* (1995).

needs of others he resembles Abraham, and since Abraham is commended for his generosity Lot is also therefore to be viewed in a favourable light. Lot's hospitality is a mark of his righteousness' (1985:290). Alexander defends Lot against a charge of drunkenness in 19:30-38 through a comparison with Noah (Gen. 6:9). He concludes by looking at Lot's offer of his virgin daughters to the men of Sodom, and attempts to avoid a characterisation of it as an act of wickedness. He writes:

Concerning the events in Sodom we should not judge too harshly a man placed in an extremely dangerous and apparently impossible situation. Faced with the demands of the crowd Lot had few options. How easy it would have been for him to let the mob have its way. Yet rather than yield to their wishes he is prepared to protect his guests at the cost of dishonouring his own daughters. Lot's predicament calls for a sympathetic understanding rather than a harsh condemnation (1985:291).

Others have argued that cultural factors are involved and have implicitly accepted those values as reasonable in order to portray Lot as righteous. B. Vawter, for example, writes that '[t]he spectacle of a father offering his virgin daughters to the will and pleasure of a mob that was seeking to despoil his household would not have seemed as shocking to the ancient sense of proprieties as it may seem to us' (1977:235-36; but cf. Wenham's opposite conclusion, 1994:55). Indeed, some go further in seeing this episode as being pro-Lot, Skinner even stating that the event 'is recorded to [Lot's] credit' (1910:307). Wenham writes that Lot is 'shown to be a man of no mean courage. True to the cardinal principle of oriental hospitality that protecting your guest is a sacred duty, he bravely goes out to face the mob alone', before making his 'unfortunate offer' (1994:55-56; but cf. his subsequent quotation [57] of Procksch's description of an indecisive and anxious Lot, 1924:129). Jacobs suggests that Lot knew that the men of Sodom would not accept his offer (1974:455). Matthews, however, argues that when Lot tries to protect his guests through the offer of his two virgin daughters, it is not unfortunate, but is rather a sign of hospitable

'extravagance' in which 'an asset...in terms of the bride price they could command and of the children they could produce' is being sacrificed (1992:6).<sup>153</sup>

#### F. Lot the Wicked

S.P. Jeansonne takes the alternative position, that Lot is unrighteous, and argues that if one examines the Abraham narratives as a whole 'the reader sees Lot fall from his noble beginnings as one accompanying Abraham to a corrupt existence in Sodom where his characterisation as one of the righteous is in serious doubt' (1988:124),<sup>154</sup> this process beginning when Lot and Abraham separate (Gen. 13:8-12). Jeansonne denies that the similarities between the texts prove Lot's righteousness, and summarises the contrasts drawn between Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18:1-8 and 19:1-3:

When Abraham caught a glimpse of the messengers, he 'ran to meet them' (Gen. 18:2), Lot simply 'rose to meet them' (Gen. 19:1) displaying no effort to go in haste. Abraham knows that any service he might wish to render to the messengers must first find their acceptance. He asks 'if I have found favour in your eyes do not pass by your servant' (18:3). Lot asks that the men come to his house without any humbling statement or qualifier (19:2). Abraham's direct address to the men offers rest and food (18:4-5), whereas the speech of Lot offers them rest alone (19:2), although the narrative later reveals in indirect discourse that a meal was prepared (19:3). The meals themselves are to be contrasted as well. Both have the meal prepared in haste, but the meal which is provided at Abraham's house is much more elaborately fashioned than the one at Lot's residence. Abraham tells Sarah to take 'fine meal' and to knead it

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<sup>153</sup> Recent scholarship has trawled the commentaries extensively for pro-Lot arguments, attempting to justify his behaviour here. Turner notes the excuses made for Lot by von Rad (1961:218; 'a compromise') and Coats (1985:121; 'less than heroic'). Gunn offers, but then rejects, the possibility that Lot's offer 'is an attempt to shock the assailants into a realisation of the enormity of their demand ("do not do evil") so that they desist altogether' (1993:182).

Rashkow provides her own list of apologists (1998:100-101), including Vawter, Skinner (both mentioned above), Sarna (1989:135), Speiser (1964:123), and Leibowitz (1973:176); all of whom see the sacred duty of hospitality as sufficient reason to sacrifice the daughters. The latter is offered by Rashkow as an example of a female apologist for Lot.

<sup>154</sup> Landy is presumably thinking of this type of reader when he writes concerning 'Humour as a Tool for Biblical Exegesis' (1990): 'We are far more likely to laugh at someone we ... despise (e.g., Lot) than at a character to whom we are committed' (104).

whereas Lot bakes unleavened bread (19:3) recalling the bread made in the dire circumstances in Egypt and surprisingly asks neither his wife nor his daughters to prepare anything. The account at Abraham's residence also tells the reader the care with which the tender calf was prepared and how curds and milk were brought along with it (18:7-8). In contrast the description of the meal Lot has prepared is glanced over in haste (1988:126).<sup>155</sup>

But for Jeansonne, the contrast between the righteous Abraham and the wicked Lot is strongest when the latter offers his daughters up to the men of Sodom in a shameful act of wickedness.<sup>156</sup>

#### G. Lot as Outsider to the Promise, Abraham as the Recipient of the Promise

Each of these two interpretations is alike in seeing Lot as wholly one or the other; he is either a righteous man (Alexander) or an unrighteous—that is wicked—man (Jeansonne). But there are difficulties with each position which lead to a less black and white conclusion. The principle flaw with viewing Lot as a wholly righteous man is that it does not deal with the increasingly negative characterisation of Lot in the preceding narratives (pointed out by Jeansonne) and in his subsequent actions concerning his daughters (19:30-38). In each of these texts Lot is portrayed as selfish and as increasingly absent from the promise made by YHWH to Abraham—he takes the good land around Sodom outside the land of the promise, Canaan. To suddenly

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<sup>155</sup> Gossai's attempt to further show that the bread Lot is offering is of comparatively poor quality and that therefore the feast was also poor is not particularly convincing (1995:78-80).

<sup>156</sup> Coats also understands the portrayal of Lot here in negative terms. But, in contrast to Jeansonne, his description of Lot has less to do with the contrast between righteous and wicked and more to do with the contrast between hero and buffoon (1983:144). Lot is 'unheroic', a 'foppish fool', 'a jester', 'someone to be ignored' (1985:122-23). Nevertheless this view does reflect the righteous/wicked divide in that while it is general passivity of Lot—he is a 'helpless object' (1983:144)—which leads to his characterisation as the fool, when he actually does take action in offering his daughters, it is an act of wickedness (though Coats himself merely describes it as unheroic and unsuccessful, 1985:122). Similarly, Coats implicitly equates the 'hero Abraham' with the 'righteous Abraham' (1983:144-45)



see him now as a paragon of virtue is suspicious to say the least. On the progression of Lot from dutiful heir to distant foreigner, Jeansonne's interpretation is to be preferred.

Nevertheless, her reading does require careful nuancing. Turner has noted that most of her contrasts between Lot and Abraham are 'nothing more than the kind of slight differences one would expect in a sophisticated narrative that wanted to portray similarity without recourse to verbatim repetition'. Others are accounted for by Turner as being due to temporal factors or misinterpretation: for example, while the late arrival of the angels does leave little time for preparation of food, the 'feast' that Lot prepares is not necessarily a poor offering (1990b:91; cf. Esth. 5:6; Dan. 1:5; Jer. 16:8; Job 1:5; Gen. 21:8); as Driver puts it, '[Lot] was not, it seems, less liberal in his hospitality than his uncle' (1909:198). Jeansonne's desire to demonstrate the differences between Abraham and Lot makes a little too much of the evidence; Lot is not as black as Jeansonne paints him.

That there are similarities and contrasts between Abraham and Lot is not in question. But at least as far as the initial comparisons of hospitality are concerned, Lot is as righteous as Abraham, and to that extent Alexander's comments can be echoed (so Turner, 1990b:93; after, all, as Morgenstern states, 'Lot had learnt the lesson of hospitality from Abraham' (1965:126). But the act of sacrificing his daughters is more than a 'mistake' (Driver, 1909:199); to this reader it can only be regarded as an act of wickedness (with e.g., Turner, 1990b:94-95; Jeansonne, 1988:126, Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:233) which should not be excused (*contra* e.g., Matthews, 1992:6; Vawter, 1977:235-36; Skinner, 1910:307). Matthew's attempt to see this as an extravagant gesture of hospitality is problematic because of his characterisation of a virtually identical action by the *guest* in Judg. 19:25 as 'callous' (1992:10).<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Lasine, however, states that:

there is a world of difference between Lot's offer and the analogous offer of the resident alien host in Gibeah. It is one thing to offer one's daughters to a mob in order to fulfil one's duties as a host, and another to offer one's virgin daughter and the concubine of one's guest! The words and actions of the old host are almost identical to those of Lot at this point, but their effect is to invert Lot's overblown hospitality into inhospitality (1984:39).

Westermann's description of Lot's action as 'a desperate offer that knows no way out' (1985:302) is also problematic because Lot does have other options available; he could sacrifice himself (so Turner, 1990b:94; Gunn, 1993:182) or reprove the men for their behaviour (so Hamilton, 1995:35). But, of course, Lot does neither, preferring rather to sacrifice his daughters to the mob (cf. Tapp, 1989).

Lot's characterisation then reflects a wavering between both righteous and unrighteous aspects. But when Leibowitz characterises Lot as 'an example of the average man, a study in mediocrity faithfully following in the steps of his master Abraham' (1973:175), she has failed to realise that such 'wavering' between righteous and unrighteous behaviour is also a good description of the ethical behaviour of Abraham. Though many have followed Driver in seeing Abraham as 'attractively depicted,...[as] dignified, courteous, high minded, generous, a man whom... God deems worthy of His confidence, visiting him as one friend visits another, bestowing on him promises, and disclosing to him his purposes' (1909:191; e.g., Coats, 1983:144-45; Roshwald, 1989:146), it is more accurate to note that the patriarch is also portrayed unattractively in previous narratives. While some have seen Lot as learning hospitality from a virtuous Abraham (e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 1:200; *PRE*, 25), it is also very tempting to see Abraham's sacrifice of his wife in Gen. 12:10-20, with Turner, as offering a parallel to Lot's sacrifice of his daughters in Genesis 19 and to conclude that Lot may have learned a lot more from Abraham than how to treat visitors properly (1990b:95; cf. also Gunn, 1993:191)!

But Turner's own portrait of Abraham as consistently negative must also be rejected (along with that of Davies, 1995) because it does not do justice to the positive aspects of Abraham's characterisation; indeed, any contrast drawn between Lot and a consistent construction of Abraham as either a righteous or an unrighteous man is inevitably skewed. Lot's ethical behaviour in and of itself does not distinguish him

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I fail to see, however, why one act is 'callous' and the other not. Even though there is a significant difference between these accounts, it is still the case that Lot acts without consideration of alternatives, his first choice of action being to sacrifice his daughters.

from Abraham as Jeansonne believes. In fact the behaviour of the patriarchs as a whole has long been recognised as ethically problematic. In Childs's words:

How can one ever use the response of the Patriarchs as an ethical norm when their conduct is filled with flagrant immorality? Abraham lied and traded his wife for personal gain. Sarah was ruthless with Hagar her rival. Jacob was a cheat and Moses a murderer (1985:212; cf. also Hamilton, 1990:45-47).

This has led both Childs (1985:218-21) and Hamilton (1990:47) to claim that the patriarchal narratives are actually concerned to show YHWH's faithfulness and not Abraham's (or Isaac's or Jacob's) fidelity to the deity.

If Abraham is understood as a character wavering between righteous and unrighteous behaviour, then clearly the contrast between the patriarch and Lot cannot be a contrast on the basis of ethical behaviour at all. What truly contrasts Lot with Abraham is that the latter is still in the land of Canaan—and is therefore within the promise—whereas the former had decided to depart and go to Sodom. This is strongly emphasised when Abraham recognises YHWH (18:1-3), but Lot initially remains ignorant (19:2), an indication of the distance which Lot has travelled away from his role as Abraham's heir; he is 'wavering' on the edge as far as his ability to recognise YHWH is concerned (*contra* Skinner, who denies 'that Lot's spiritual vision was less clear than Abraham's, 1910:306; Coats also points out the inevitable element of comparison between Abraham's call on the name of YHWH in 13:4 and Lot's choice of the wicked men of Sodom in 13:10, 12b-13; 1985:117). In what follows, it will be clearly demonstrated just how far Lot has departed from the promise.

## Surrounding the House (19:4-11)

### A. The ‘Men of the Sodom’

As Lot’s household prepares to sleep (יִשְׁכְּבוּ; cf. Josh. 2:8; Judg. 19:22), the house is surrounded by the men of the city. E.A. Speiser, attempting to render the menace implicit in the niphal of שָׁכַב with מִטְרָם, suggests that the men of city ‘closed in on the house’ (1964:139; Hamilton offers the men of the city ‘circled the house,’ 1995:33). The designation of those outside is fulsome and highly significant. Those outside are אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר אֲנָשֵׁי סֹדֹם מִנְעֵר וְעַד־זָקֵן כָּל־הָעָם מִקְּצֵה, ‘the men of the city, men of Sodom, from the youngest to the oldest, all the people to the very last’ (for מִקְּצֵה as ‘one and all’; cf. Gen. 47:21, Exod. 26:28; Deut. 13:8; Isa. 56:11; Jer. 51:31; Ezek. 25:9). Although often regarded as a gloss, אֲנָשֵׁי סֹדֹם links this description with that of the men of Sodom as ‘wicked’, as ‘great sinners’ against YHWH in Gen. 13:10, 13; because of this link Rashi suggested that אֲנָשֵׁי סֹדֹם should actually be understood as ‘evil men’ (1900:77). According to Matthews, when the crowd later prove their iniquity, these ‘carefully drawn legal phrases... leave no room for question that every man in the city of Sodom (young and old, ‘to the last man’) is outside Lot’s house, there can be no question that there are no righteous men, much less ten, within that city’ (1992:5; cf. also Skinner 1910:307; Westermann, 1985:301). Driver also notes that the encompassing description indicates the brazen nature of the men of Sodom who act wickedly in the open (cf. his citation of Isa. 3:9 where of those accused, none hid their sin, 1909:198).

With the designation of those around the house as ‘the men of Sodom’ and as ‘the people’, the question of the gender of the righteous and the wicked again surfaces. Clearly, for the commentators mentioned above, the ‘men’ of Sodom are just that, men; no women are in sight here. Though the occurrence of כָּל־הָעָם may be held to suggest otherwise, it does seem likely that those outside the house are only the men of Sodom (following ‘the people and their wives’, וְנִשְׁיָהֶם, in Neh. 5:1; cf. Gunn,

1993:189) and that it is their behaviour which will occupy the narrative now. But if the ‘men of Sodom’ all prove wicked, will YHWH’s investigation seek out the women who are absent and insist on an egalitarian judgement or will it be satisfied with a strictly patriarchal justice?

Even if those outside—whether male alone in v. 4 or female in some later part of the investigation—eventually prove wicked, however, the question arises as to whether or not there is either a righteous man in the city in Lot or a righteous figure in Lot or any of the female members of his family? If so, the city—this reader, at least, is convinced—would be saved because of that one righteous man or figure. Although it is tempting to read the term ‘men of Sodom’ in v. 4 as an indication that Lot is outside of Sodom for the purposes of the arguments in Abraham’s dialogue with YHWH, I have already argued that—in contrast to Speiser’s partially true but very misleading definition of the  $\text{אֲנָשֵׁי סְדוֹם}$ , as one lacking ‘the privileges and protections enjoyed by the citizens,’ (1964:139)—it is possible for a  $\text{אֲנָשֵׁי}$  to be outside the designation for a people but still to have some rights and responsibilities within that people; for example, as being ‘in Israel’ but not being ‘an Israelite’ (see pages 229-33). Somewhat artificially, no other  $\text{אֲנָשֵׁי}$  seem to be envisaged by the narrative as being in Sodom at this time (unless perhaps they are  $\text{אֲנָשֵׁי}$  who are already so totally identified with the crowd that they can be termed ‘men of Sodom’). Here, those living in Sodom (= Sodom and Gomorra = the cities of the plain) are effectively reduced to two entities: those outside the house (either the men of the city or, perhaps, all the people of the city) and those inside (either Lot or, perhaps, Lot and his female family). And it is the question of the righteousness or wickedness of these groups which is now in view.

Those outside know that the angels are in the house of Lot, but of course do not know their true nature as representatives of YHWH. Neither does Lot and in what follows both Lot and the men of Sodom will refer to the angels as ‘men’. On surrounding the house, the men of Sodom call to Lot (who is in the house) to ‘bring them (the men/angels) out to us that we may know ( $\text{נִרְעָה}$ ) them’.

## B. 'That We May Know Them'

The meaning of this initial response of the men of Sodom to the presence of the two men in Lot's house is variously interpreted. For many, the word *יָדָעוּ* has an obvious (homo)sexual connotation and the men of Sodom's desire for the two men is simply due to their sexual depravity.<sup>158</sup> According to Skinner, the men of Sodom wish to carry out the act which 'derived its name from the incident', that is, to sodomise the two angels (which he presumably understands to involve penetrative anal intercourse), an act which he describes as an 'unnatural vice' (1910:307; cf. also Wright, 1989; Wenham, 1991; White, 1995). But because of an increasing acceptance of—at least—male homosexuality at the end of the twentieth century, an interest in the exact nature of the implied sexual act has arisen, exegetes no longer being content to assume the 'obvious' depravity of homosexuals, not least because Lot's offer of females clearly implies that the men of Sodom were not simply 'homosexuals' (cf. Gossai, 1995:83).

Some, for example, have attempted to draw a distinction between homosexuality and homosexual rape, arguing that rape itself—regardless of who is being assaulted—is the crime involved (e.g., Gossai, 1995:83; Carden, 1999).

Hamilton notes in response four problems

with the view that the prohibition here is only on homosexual rape. First, nowhere in the OT does the verb *יָדָע* have the nuance of abuse or violate. Second, the OT uses unmistakable language to relate rape incidents. Thus the Shechemites 'seized' and 'lay with' and 'humbled' Dinah (Gen. 34:2). Amnon 'forced' and 'lay with' his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:14). Similarly, the biblical laws about rape also use these terms 'seize', 'lie with' (Deut. 22:25-27). Third, this interpretation forces one meaning on 'know' in v. 5 (i.e. 'abuse') but a different meaning in 'know' three verses later (i.e. 'have intercourse with') for it is unlikely that Lot is saying: 'I have two daughters who have never been abused'. Fourth, such an interpretation forces these incredible words in Lot's mouth: 'Do not rape my visitors. Here are my daughters, both virgins—rape them!'

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<sup>158</sup> Although R. Davidson assumes that the angels appeared to be young and physically attractive (1979:72), this is not essential; after all, the men of Sodom may even be 'depraved' enough to desire sexually the old and the ugly!

Clearly, then the incident frowns on homosexual relations for whatever reason (1995:35).

Hamilton's logic requires that the men of Sodom do not wish to rape the visitors but only to have sex with them: that is, if ידע in v. 8 indicates that Lot's daughters have not known a man, that they have not yet had consenting sexual intercourse, then it also must have no connotations of force in v. 5. This lack of force is seen as a feature of all sexual uses of ידע, and the lack of any other terms indicating force clinches Hamilton's view that the men of Sodom wish for voluntary homosexual sex with the men, but are offered voluntary heterosexual sex with the daughters.

Dissatisfaction with Hamilton's account is initially raised, however, because if those outside are only interested in consenting sex, it becomes difficult to understand the response which follows Lot's offer of his daughters. If they are going to do a greater evil to Lot than they were planning to do to his guests (עַתָּה נִרְעֵ לְךָ מִהֵם), the element of comparison surely implies that the visitors were themselves to suffer something worse than merely consensual sex, a point which Hamilton misses. On detailed investigation of Hamilton's arguments, this dissatisfaction will lead to rejection.

Hamilton's claim that ידע never has a connotation of force in the Old Testament is incorrect. In Judg. 19:25 ידע is placed alongside the verb עָלַל (נִידָעוּ) (אֹחֲתָהּ נִידָעוּ לְדָוִד בְּרָהּ כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה). Although עָלַל may mean simply 'busy, divert oneself with' here, Hamilton's own recognition that the offer being made in Judg. 19:24 is an invitation to 'sexually mistreat' (נִידָעוּ), that is to rape, those who are sent out (1995:35), indicates that it must have the stronger meaning of 'deal wantonly with,' of abuse. The Levite's concubine is sent out to the men and 'they knew her and they abused her'. It is inconceivable that ידע here does not denote rape, and two of Hamilton's four points fall; after all, if ידע itself can mean 'to rape,' it is obviously no longer necessary to have specific rape terminology!

Furthermore, in linguistic terms, there is no difficulty in seeing ידע as having one (sexual) meaning when the men of Sodom want 'to abuse' the visitors and another

(sexual) meaning when, three verses later and in a different context, Lot rather technically describes the virginal state of his daughters: they 'have not had sexual intercourse with a man'. Hebrew, like all languages, tends to use the same word for a number of functions, and its exact semantic content is only apparent when it is used in context; if the word 'bank' occurred twice but three sentences apart, a competent reader of English would have no difficulty in accepting that one occurrence denoted a (money) bank and the other a (river) bank.

If rape is a semantic possibility then, it may be asked if Hamilton is correct in believing that the words which are therefore put in Lot's mouth are 'incredible'. In fact Hamilton's paraphrase seems eminently suited to describing what Lot proceeds to offer those outside. There is no suggestion that his daughters are any more willing to have voluntary sexual intercourse with the men than the angels are, and that raises the question of what one actually terms intercourse performed by a crowd surrounding a house on two unwilling guests or two unwilling virginal daughters.

Hamilton's argument that the sexual acts in this scene are consensual is clearly misguided; the offence of the men of Sodom does include an element of violent sexual abuse. But this is not necessarily to say that the homosexual aspect of the activities of the men of Sodom does not form part of their offence. In my opinion, this text cannot be used to answer the questions of whether a male homosexual act is itself 'wicked', cannot be used to state definitively that the offence outside the house does involve homosexuality as well as rape. There seems little doubt that homosexuality was to play no part in Israel's eventual 'way of YHWH' (cf. Lev. 18:22; 20:13). But part of the point of this very narrative is that the Sinaitic Torah which condemns male homosexuality in Israel is not wholly applicable to the men of Sodom; they can be considered righteous without the Torah by avoiding 'violence' through (the doing of) 'righteousness' and 'justice'. The view that they are being punished essentially for the crime of not being Israel is refuted by YHWH and Abraham's joint belief that there may be righteous people in Sodom and, as Wenham notes, it seems likely that the nations around Israel allowed sexual relations between men, but prohibited



homosexual gang rape (1994:55). It may be that prohibitions against homosexuality *per se* were actually a purely Israelite concern.

### C. Rape as Punishment or Perversity

That the proposed rape is solely the result of the perversity of the men of Sodom has also been challenged. Matthews explains what he sees as their otherwise ‘inexplicable’ action (despite its usual explanation as ‘perversity’) as possibly a response of punishment to the visitors’s improper acceptance of Lot’s hospitality. In such a reading, the men of Sodom’s instruction to Lot to turn his guests over (19:5) is effectively giving him a chance to redeem himself in their eyes (1992:5). For Matthews, the men of Sodom are innocent of sexual perversion, but guilty of being inhospitable alone, first to the two visitors in not offering them shelter (19:1-3) and then to the resident alien Lot (19:9a); it is this inhospitability which leads to their eventual destruction. Their behaviour is otherwise consistently cast as reasonable, Matthews invoking an ancient Near Eastern parallel (The Middle Assyrian Law Code #20) to justify what may be seen by a modern reader as the rather extreme punishment of sexual violation for an acceptance of an illegitimate offer of hospitality.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Matthews does not appear to be content with his own justification of the intended sexual acts as legitimate, however, and he introduces the work of R. Wright on this issue. She proposes that when Lot responds to the call of the Sodomites, he has misunderstood their intentions. The Sodomites wish to examine the men, to test them, so that ‘we may get acquainted with them, that we may see for ourselves that they pose no threat to our city, that we may take their measure’ (1989:177; a position also found in the ‘apologetic’ work of Bailey, 1955:1-28). On this view, it is Lot alone who introduces a sexual aspect to the situation when, perhaps because he is a foreigner, he misreads their use of *נִדְעָה*.

The problem with Wright’s proposal is not that it is demonstrably wrong; Hamilton’s description of this type of reading as ‘wild and fanciful’ is far too strong (1995:34) because Wright supplies a perfectly valid reading of *נִדְעָה*. Wenham’s argument that *נִדְעָה* cannot have a non-sexual meaning because the Sodomites already know who the men are, having been present when they had arrived, is hardly conclusive since Gen. 19:1-3 contain no explicit statements of identity by the visitors (1994:55). Equally, Gossai’s comment that the gathering of the men of Sodom around the house hardly constitutes a welcoming party (1995:82) is not problematic for Wright’s reading since the crowd is seen as being incensed by Lot’s ‘illegitimate’ performance of a protocol of hospitality. Neither does Wenham’s statement that Lot’s response, with its implication of a sexual ‘knowing,’ settle the issue in ‘inescapable’ fashion (1994:55). Wright having argued that Lot has misunderstood. The difficulty is that there is actually no textual way to decide between these two readings.

The choice then is of either seeing the attempted rape as a reasonable punishment of the guests or accepting that the action is in itself reprehensible, either as an unjust sexual punishment or as simply as perverse sexual act. But a justification of the punishment as reasonable can only come from the assumption that Sodom correctly enacts the code of hospitality; if Lot has done wrong by an accepted code, then punishment can, perhaps, be justified. Given that no Sodomites apparently wished to offer hospitality to the two visitors at the gate as the code demands, however, it must be concluded that they either do not keep the protocol at all (and are simply sexually perverse) or are hypocritically using it to attack Lot for not sticking to norms which they themselves have not kept (resulting in an unjust sexual punishment). If it is the latter, the punishment can only be seen as self-serving, as an abuse of power, as sexual violation, as rape; the very conclusion which Matthews wishes to avoid (1992:6). Given the prevalence of the protocol of hospitality in the world of the patriarchs, it seems unlikely that a perverse lust for forced sex with travellers can alone account for this particular narrative; it seems more likely that the men of Sodom are issuing a hypocritical 'invitation' to Lot to correct his 'incorrect' hospitality by giving up his visitors and attempting to administer an unwarranted sexual punishment on specious 'legal' grounds. The world-view of the men of Sodom is completely inverted with the result that the charges against the city must include violence, sexual abuse, and hypocrisy, a conclusion supported by the original outcry against unspecified but significant acts of violence in Sodom (cf. 18:20-21).

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But this is not to say that they must be left standing side by side because both are acceptable. One way of differentiating between the two is simply on grounds of the extent to which the exegete is being made to work in order to read the texts in each way. It becomes obvious that Wright's proposal is more cumbersome because it introduces an extra element into the exegesis, that Lot has misunderstood the Sodomites when he responds. It is simpler to argue that he has understood them all too well, but that his response draws their ire for reasons other than misunderstanding **וַיִּשְׁמַע**. By employing Occam's razor, the latter is shown to be preferable.

#### D. Lot Goes Outside

Lot responds to the hypocritical call of the men of Sodom to redeem himself in their eyes by going out to them, putting himself beyond the—normally safe—door of his own house. He closes the door behind him, keeping intact the separation between his guests on the inside and the mob on the outside (cf. Fields, 1997:97-99). Jeansonne's claim that he is embarrassed by what he is about to do in offering his daughters is unlikely (1988:127) since, if the men of Sodom accept his proposal, he will have to carry out the offer he is about to make in view of his guests anyway. Lot address the men of Sodom politely (הַיְהוּדָה) as 'my brothers' (אָחֵי), and exhorts them not to do this evil (אֵל-נָא...תִּרְעוּ). He then offers them his two daughters to do with as they please, as seems 'good in their eyes' (בְּעֵינֵיכֶם; cf. Judg. 19:24). The two women he describes to the mob as 'virgins' (לֹא-יָדְעוּ אִישׁ). But he adds a condition to his offer, pleading that his visitors should be left alone, that they should not be sexually abused because they are his guests (כִּי-עַל-כֵּן בָּאוּ בְּצֵל קַרְתִּי). Seen by many as an act of hospitality—albeit by some with unease (cf. Wenham's 'unfortunate offer', 1994:55; R. Davidson, 1979:72)—Lot's attempt to safeguard his visitors, while fulfilling the code of hospitality, is rather an improper act of wickedness (see pages 249-53). Ironically, Lot asks those outside not to do an evil thing, but in turn offers to do an evil thing himself. As Raskow further points out, the evil nature of Lot's offer is compounded by the fact that 'since the daughters are betrothed (19:14), and since the rape of a betrothed woman is a crime punishable by death (Deut. 22:23-27), Lot's actions could have implicated him as an accomplice' (1998:99)! At no time, however, does Lot recognise the irony or the links that exist between his own behaviour and that of those outside (Gossai, 1995:94). But Lot's demonstration of his own 'wickedness' serves to turn the spotlight back onto the crowd for, as Westermann notes, 'repentance by the men of Sodom even at this moment would have meant salvation' (1985:301).

The crowd responds to Lot's offer with fury, however. To his designation of them as brothers and his attempt to offer hospitality to outsiders in their place, in effect

a claiming of rights within the city, they respond with ridicule, reminding him mockingly of his status as a גַּר who is overstepping the mark in disputing their actions, in presuming to judge them. As Matthew's puts it: '[Lot] has usurped privileges which no sojourner could ever claim, has styled himself a citizen without official sanction, and has stood in judgement of the actions of men over whom he has no jurisdiction' (1992:6). Indeed, by doing so he demonstrates that he is not wholly with them; if he was, then he could not oppose them by disputing their right to deal sexually with his guests (Gossai, 1995:87)

That all the men of Sodom are hypocritically laying claim to the rights of citizenship when not one of them has carried out the citizen's obligation to hospitality demonstrates their desire to appear righteous but without the effort of actually being so. Nevertheless whatever rights Lot once had in the city are now irrelevant as the men reject Lot's implied claims and attempt to punish him. Lot's attempt to involve himself as a dweller within Sodom has fallen flat and he is rejected. In what follows this contemptuous dismissal of Lot signifies the beginning of a separation between Lot (and his household) and his neighbours which will in part allow his rescue.

The men surge forward to do more evil to Lot than they had planned to do to the visitors (עָתָה נָרַע לְךָ מֵהֶם), making him their 'rape object' (Gunn, 1993:182). As the 'men put forth their hands', however, it is not the hands of those who wish to harm which reach out but those of the visitors; Lot is pulled into the relative safety of the house, the door closing behind him. Rather than Lot saving his guests from the crowd, they ironically save him, initially by closing the door and then by striking the crowd blind (בְּסַנְנִירִים; only here and in 2 Kgs 6:18), an act which reveals something of their identity. Hamilton notes that this does not indicate that those outside could not see (for surely, even a blind crowd could find a door before which they were stood), but that their sight became faulty—'it does not correspond to reality' (1995:37; Skinner's designation of the blindness as 'demonic,' however, is unnecessary, 1910:307). The scene concludes with the comic sight of the crowd wearying itself trying to find Lot's door, a persistence which demonstrates the intensity of their wickedness.

Despite their blinding by the representatives of YHWH—perhaps as a preliminary or warning act of divine judgement (cf. Wenham, 1994:56)—they show no signs of change, of repentance from their wicked way.

But the investigation appears over; in v. 12 the visitors will announce the verdict of destruction. Those outside have provided sufficient evidence for YHWH to accept the general accuracy of the more wide-ranging outcry, and provided justification for a guilty verdict and punishment. They also have demonstrated the lack of a single righteous ‘man’ among them. Lot inside has demonstrated his willingness to act wickedly as and when necessary, revealing that he is already part of the wicked city. And because Lot’s female kin play no role in this decision and because no further search for females is envisaged, it seems that YHWH has adopted the patriarchal corporate model of judgement in full; women will not count as righteous in their own right here, and their destruction is due to the wickedness of ‘their’ men. Gunn’s questions—‘So where are the women? Where are the young, not the young men but the children—the daughters and sons? Where are the babies? Where are all these in this facile talk of the innocent/righteous and wicked’ (1993:189)?—are not answered here, because they are totally irrelevant to the model of justice in operation. But rather than being ‘facile’, as Gunn claims, the talk of righteous and wicked here is actually totally consistent *if* one begins with the premises of a patriarchal corporate model of justice.<sup>160</sup> Sodom is justly doomed for the iniquity of its men, and its women folk and

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<sup>160</sup> In response to a similar question to Gunn’s—‘What had the infants done to deserve to be swallowed up in the same destruction as their parents?’—Calvin offers markedly different responses to the question, while still finally insisting on a just deity. First, he places the fate of the infants in the hands of a deity free to choose how to deal with the human race. Then he counsels a willingness to see the humanly incomprehensible as explicable in the deity’s secret judgement, before finally categorising all of the seed of Sodom as ‘accursed and execrable’, and so even the babies are beyond being justly spared (1965:513).

Calvin’s commitment to a clear debate between Abraham and the deity resulting in an individualistic judgement leaves him no choice but to eventually condemn the babies as ‘sinners’ precisely in order to safeguard the justice of YHWH (and to this type of move Gunn responds with vehement condemnation). Here, however, I have argued that innocent babies die for the sake of their wicked fathers, but YHWH still remains ‘just’; it is only later within the outworking of the biblical story that conclusions about the nature(s) of ‘justice’ may be drawn. Indeed in the light of the continuing theodicy debate, there might be no final, conclusive stance in the biblical witnesses at all (though an acceptance of that must await further exegesis). My decision to see Abraham as incoherent has very far reaching consequences indeed!

children are doomed because of the wickedness of the men on whom they are wholly dependent.

But the contradictions within Abraham's dialogue with YHWH (18:23-32) with regard to the distinction between corporate and individualistic models are now shown to be irrelevant to the immediate situation in Sodom; because the city does not even contain one righteous man both individualistic and corporate models of justice cohere in the just punishment of a totally wicked—at least in patriarchal terms—city. But when J. Crenshaw notes that the lack of a single righteous man means that Abraham's words lose something of their force (1983:7), he is only partially correct. The fate of Sodom itself is left untouched by the debate, but Israel itself will be very much moulded by what has passed between Abraham and YHWH as they stood overlooking Sodom. Indeed, the implications of the debate will continue to resound throughout the Old Testament account of Israel and far beyond (as Gunn's feminist concerns clearly show).

### III. Excursus: Is there a Sin of Sodom?

#### A. A Single Sin?

Much has been made of the concept of the 'sin of Sodom' as though it was a single identifiable sin which led to the destruction of the city, the events of Genesis 19 being seen as portraying what may be termed the 'only sin in town'. Typically, the more general, non-specific indicators of Sodom's guilt (Gen. 13:10, 13 and 18:20-21) are interpreted as referring to this 'crime' alone. Hamilton, for example: 'Here for the first time the nature of Sodom's sin is revealed. An earlier statement (13:13) was content to evaluate the men of Sodom as "evil" and "sinners." The story that is about to unfold will substantiate that statement with specific details' (1995:33). Similarly, Westermann states that 'Gen. 18:20-21...deals with the crime of Sodom and Gomorra in general terms; if there is to be an inquiry about the "outcry", then the crime must be

portrayed concretely; that is what 19:4-11 does' (1985:301). Though arguing for a different crime, Matthews also implies that the only crime that the men of Sodom are guilty of is that they are inhospitable (1992:3-6). Indeed much of the recent argument about homosexuality and Genesis 19 assumes that it is that particular sexual practice which is or is not the 'sin of Sodom'.

But the narrative so understood has a very restricted view of the evil of Sodom, with Gen. 19:4-11 being considered wholly equal to other less specific statements of the wickedness of the city. This assumption is unnecessarily reductionistic. In fact it would be better to say that there is no sin of Sodom at all if by that term a specific course of sinful action is meant, but there is a sin of Sodom if that term is held to mean a particular wicked way of life. Further evidence for such a reading is supplied by the placing of these events within the context of YHWH's intentions for Abraham and his descendants to walk on the 'way of YHWH', doing 'righteousness and justice' (Gen. 18:18-19). Sodom is an exemplar within this process of education in which wickedness itself is not reducible to a single act of sin, but rather indicates a failure to walk on the way. In such a context, the point of judging Sodom is not to demonstrate abhorrence for a particular sin, but to show the consequences of going off the path in any way. Equally, the text does not claim that the actions of Gen. 19:4-11 are the concretisation of the actual cause of the initial outcry which brings YHWH to investigate; YHWH only states that if the men of Sodom are not guilty of the outcry, 'I will know' (18:21). That the actions of 19:4-11 in some way confirm the guilt of the men of Sodom—their own straying from the way of YHWH—is true, but they do not constitute the totality of their sinful actions. The fact is that the action(s) which caused the outcry of Gen. 18:20-21 is(are) never revealed; the terminology used allows only the general designation of the cause as 'violence' and makes it much more likely that the range of sinful actions involved is wider than those which can be gleaned from Gen. 19:4-11. A better attitude towards the narrative then is that of the guitarist Jerry Garcia in the first verse of his song, *Gomorrah* (1997):

Just a song of Gomorrah,  
wondering what they did there,  
must have been a bad thing,  
to get shot down for.

The actions of the men of Sodom are—to the canonical reader—a blank space which nevertheless includes the sins of Gen. 19:4-11, however defined, and which clearly merits judgement. The required response therefore is to look on, ‘wondering what they did there’.

### B. Exploiting a ‘Wicked Space’

The existence of this wicked space in the narrative has been exploited many times in the history of reflection on this text, an exploitation which is, in effect, fully legitimate. A brief exploration of some examples involving the explicit mention of Sodom will demonstrate the effect of the text’s reticence about defining the cause of the outcry (I am assuming those sins already present in Gen. 19:4-11). Of course, the presence of ‘the wicked’ at Sodom also opens up many other implicit links between later sins of any group designated ‘the wicked’ and the sins of ‘the wicked’ of Sodom (cf. e.g., Ezekiel 18).

The details of the ‘sin’ which made up the lives of the men of Sodom were much developed in later usage. In the book of Jeremiah, the claim that adulterous prophets of Jerusalem have become ‘like Sodom’ to YHWH (23:14), leads to the attribution of adultery to the men of Sodom. Examples of other forms of sexual immorality are also listed as sins of Sodom: Lust (Philo, *Abr.*, 134-45), fornication (*Jub.* 16:5-6; 20:5; *T. Benj.* 9:1), sexual impurity (*Jub.* 16:5-6; 20:5), the making of married women impure (*T. Levi.* 14:6), sex with prostitutes and adultrous wives (*T. Levi.* 14:6), marriage with heathen women (*T. Levi.* 14:6), unnatural sexual practices



(*T. Naph.* 3:4) including sexual contact—lewdness—between males (Augustine, *City of God*, 16:30), unnatural lust (Jude 7), and licentiousness (2 Pet. 2:7).

But alongside the traditions of sexual sin, the hostility of the men of Sodom to visitors also suggested additional sins.<sup>161</sup> YHWH, in Ezek. 16:49-50, compares the sins of Jerusalem with Sodom:

This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me (NRSV).

Other aspects of characterisation related to the treatment of guests ‘identified’ in the behaviour of the men of Sodom include arrogance (*Sir.* 16:8; 3 *Macc.* 2:5; *Jos. Ant.* 1:194-95), hatred of foreigners (*Jos. Ant.* 1:194-95), gluttony (Philo, *Abr.* 134-35), greed (*t. Sot.* 3; *b. Sanh.* 109a; *m. Ab.* 5:10), and either failure (*Mt.* 10:14-15) or refusal (*Wisd.* 19:14; Ramban, cf. Leibowitz, 1973:178-79) to be hospitable.

Injustice, perhaps hinted at both in the unspecified outcry and in the hypocrisy of Gen. 19:4-11, has also been seen as a major ‘sin’ of the men of Sodom. For example, the grammatical form of the suffix attached to the word for outcry (הַפְּצֵעֵקְתָּהּ) in Gen. 18:21 led to some speculation among the Rabbis as to the identity of the victim whose cry was heard by YHWH. Although grammatically the antecedent to the feminine suffix is that of the city itself (‘outcry of it’ [her] = ‘outcry of the city’), dissatisfaction with that reading led to the following story:

They issued a proclamation in Sodom, saying: Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor and the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burnt by fire! Pelotit the daughter of Lot was wedded to one of the magnates of

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<sup>161</sup> Kugel notes that in Gen. 13:13 Sodom is called both wicked (רָעִים) and sinful (חַטָּאִים) and wonders if the rather redundant use of two terms perhaps indicates already the twin strands of sexual and social iniquity. He quotes the following targumic passages in support:

Now the men of Sodom were wicked with their wealth, and they were sinful with their bodies before the Lord, exceedingly (*Targ. Onq.*, Gen. 13:13).

And the people of Sodom were wicked toward one another and sinful with sexual sins and bloodshed and idolatry before the Lord, exceedingly (*Targ. Neof.*, Gen. 13:13).

But even if this was the case, this does not preclude the later ascription of a much wider range of sinful acts to the violent empty space within the Sodom narrative.

Sodom. She saw certain very poor man in the street of the city and her soul was grieved on the account. What did she do? Everyday when she went out to draw water she put in her pitcher all kinds of provisions from her house and she sustained that poor man. The men of Sodom said: how does this poor man live?<sup>162</sup> When they ascertained the facts they brought her forth to be burnt by fire. She said: Sovereign of all worlds! Maintain my right and my cause at the hands of the men of Sodom! And her cry ascended before the throne of glory. In that hour the holy one blessed be He said: 'I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to her cry which has come unto me'—and if the men of Sodom have done according to the cry of that young woman, I will turn her foundation upwards and the surface downwards (*PRE*, 25; cf. Leibowitz, 1973:173).

Leibowitz notes that far from being embarrassed by their failings, this enshrining of their values in their laws—'They issued a proclamation in Sodom'—indicates the brazenness of the men of Sodom (1973:174). Another midrashic story which illustrates this theme of injustice through everyday legal practice is that of the visit of Eliezer, the bondsman of Abraham, to Sodom at the bidding of Sarah, to enquire after the welfare of Lot.

[Eliezer] happened to enter the city at the moment when the people were robbing a stranger of his garments. Eliezer espoused the cause of the poor wretch and the Sodomites turned against him; one threw a stone at his forehead and caused considerable loss of blood. Instantly, the assailant seeing the blood gush forth, demanded payment for having performed the operation of cupping. Eliezer refused to pay for the infliction of the wound upon him and he was haled before the judge Shakkara. The decision went against him for the law of the land gave the assailant the right to demand payment. Eliezer quickly picked up a stone and threw it at the judge's forehead. When he saw that blood was flowing profusely, he said to the judge, 'pay my debt to the man and give me the balance' (Ginzberg, 1947:247-48).

An additional element of later developments of the sins reckoned to the men of Sodom was the their expansion to cover the other cities of the plain (however named):

As Sodom had a judge worthy of itself (Sherek), so also had other cities—Sharkar in Gomorra, Zabnak in Admah, and Manon in Zeboim. Eliezer, the bondsmen of Abraham, made slight changes in the names of these judges in accordance with the nature of what they did: the first he called Shakkara, Liar; the second Shakura, Arch-deceiver; the third

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<sup>162</sup> *B. Sanh.* 109a,b records that the men of Sodom had strictly forbidden charity.

Kazban, Falsifier; and the fourth Mazle-Din, Perverter of Justice (Ginzberg, 1947:246-47).

By this manner of device, the cities of the plain are shown to share in the corruption of Sodom and to merit the punishment meted out (for other developments of the tradition, see for example, Loader, 1990:75-138; and Newman, 1998 [on early Jewish and Christian works]; Frantzen, 1997 [on medieval Anglo-Saxon prose works]; McDonald, 1963 [on the Samaritan tradition]; Rue, 1996 [on staging Genesis 19 as a modern play]).

The violent empty space left by the reticence of the text is available to be amply filled with all manner of sin and wickedness as and when the need arises. In one sense then, despite the phenomenon of sins generally being collected around the twin poles of sexual sin and social iniquity, the 'sin of Sodom' can include anything considered wicked by later interpreters. Field's argument that the 'sin of Sodom' functions archetypally so that those who sin differently may still be considered sinners in Sodom's mould is only half right (1997:171-72), because the sins of those later communities may also be seen typologically as once having taken place in Sodom. A good example of this dynamic can be found in von Rad's historical-critical arguments about the sources underlying the Sodom narrative. He argues that the rape scene in Gen. 19:4-11 is perhaps based upon the story of the rape of the concubine in Judges 19, it being placed in its present context because it was 'connected only secondarily with Sodom *as the seat of all sin*' (1961:213—my italics). In the light of how the judgement of Sodom is to function within Israel as an example to Abraham and his descendants, it is significant that Abraham never knows the specifics of what caused the outcry (or even the events of Gen. 19:4-11). He only sees the consequences of the guilt of the men of Sodom. For Abraham and Israel, there is no 'sin of Sodom' as such, save that of failing to walk on their own way of YHWH and perhaps causing an outcry to the deity. Anything which the later hearers or readers of this tradition see as leading to a diversion off the path is as the sin of Sodom. It can thus be attributed by

them to the void in Genesis 18-19 and viewed as part of the original sins which occasioned the judgement and destruction of that 'wicked' city. This, of course, assumes that such inheritors of the tradition can tell the way of YHWH (and its ethics) from the available alternatives. But can they?

In effect, the way of Sodom is an anti-type of the right way, the way of YHWH, and Sodom itself is an anti-type of Israel, and by extension the people of God. Its importance can be gauged by the fact that, as Westermann notes, '[t]here is no event in the whole of Genesis that is mentioned so frequently in the Old Testament as the destruction of Sodom (1985:298; whether as Sodom and Gomorra, Admah or Zeboiim; Deut. 29:23; Isa. 1:9-10; 13:19; Jer. 49:18; 50:40; Ezek. 16:46-50, 53-55; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9; Lam. 4:6; Ps. 11:6). In the context of the proclamation of the later prophets and their insistence that righteousness and justice are at the heart of Israel's relationship with YHWH (cf. W. Brueggemann, 1992:169), it is clear that failure on Israel's part results in its becoming 'as Sodom' and so becoming worthy of sharing its fate in destruction. As YHWH's example of his justice to Abraham, Sodom overshadows the life of Israel and as the Torah takes its place in the life of Israel, its ideological power is implicitly enforced by the looming events of Genesis 18 and 19. Abraham's dialogue with YHWH and its confused content thus take on a new life in subsequent narratives. Though there is no righteous man in Sodom, the question as to the role of the righteous man in Israel will reappear (e.g. Jer. 5:1) as will questions regarding an individual's guilt for crimes committed by others (e.g. Ezekiel 18). Equally, the triumph of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous will surface (e.g., Psalm 73) and hark back to Abraham and Sodom. Alter's designation of Sodom as 'nexus' has deep implications for the Old Testament and its depiction of Israel and its God (1980).

#### IV. Instructions for Lot and His Family (19:12-14)

##### A. 'Bring Them Out of the Place'

With the door closed and those outside unable to find even the doorway, the visitors now turn to Lot with a perhaps surprising question: 'Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law (singular, but generic), sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place' (v. 12). The reason for this is that they are about to destroy (מִשְׁחָתִים—hiphil participle of שָׁחַת 'ruin') the city because 'their outcry'—detailed for the first time, if only as 'their'—against it has become great before YHWH and he has sent them to destroy (לְשַׁחֲתָהּ—piel infinitive construct of שָׁחַת 'ruin') the city. שָׁחַת here harks back to the repeated occurrences of this verb in the hiphil during Abraham's dialogue with YHWH (cf. Abraham's תִּשְׁחִית in 18:28 and YHWH's threefold use of אֲשַׁחֲיֵת in vv. 28, 31, 32). The timing of the destruction at sunrise (cf. the temporal indicators עַל־הָאֲרֶץ [in v. 23] and וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר [in vv. 27-8]) is the cause of all of the subsequent night-time haste.

The men/angels, having revealed something of their power by striking the men outside blind, now explain their purpose in visiting the city of Sodom. As yet they do not speak with the voice of YHWH as in Gen. 18:10-14, but will remain unidentified as representing the deity until Lot recognises them as such in 19:18 (*contra* Skinner's view that their language here proves that YHWH is not present, 1910:308; cf. also Wenham, 1994:57, Turner, 1990b:93).<sup>163</sup> Neither is it clear that Wenham's view that Lot now recognises them as angelic figures is correct (1994:56; though the SP reads 'angels' here—appropriately according to Speiser, 1964:140—the MT does not). Even if Lot has understood what has happened outside the house, there seems no reason why the blinding could not have been a miracle performed by human representatives of YHWH (cf. Elisha in the only other use of בְּסַנְיָוִיִּם in 2 Kgs 6:18).

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<sup>163</sup> Hershon records a tradition that the angels were subsequently punished for their presumption, being demoted for one hundred and thirty-eight years for having claimed that it was they who were destroying Sodom rather than YHWH (1885:108)

At most, Lot now seems to have some awareness that his guests are beyond the ordinary, but their true identity is still beyond him; he will only recognise them fully in v. 18.

Though the decision to destroy the city was not taken before YHWH's investigation, the acts of the men of Sodom outside Lot's house and Lot's own response have both demonstrated—somehow—that the outcry was accurate, and that punishment is therefore required. Gossai's conclusion that 'it is the face to face encounter between Yahweh and the evil Sodom which finally brought about the decision to destroy' seems justified (1995:95). Since no man of Sodom is righteous (including Lot), YHWH is justified in the light of his debate with Abraham in destroying the city. The words of the men that 'the LORD has sent us to destroy [Sodom],' are intended only to reflect the situation after the outcry has been confirmed, and do not imply a prior decision on the part of YHWH. By the terms of Abraham's and YHWH's joint agreement that a corporate judgement will be applied to Sodom, Lot has lost all chance of salvation from the destruction of Sodom. Its very destruction indicates his failure to be righteous; his choice to live there has—or should have—cost him his life; his hospitality is not enough to save him (*contra* Matthews, 1992:6). Yet echoing the earlier rejection of the men of Sodom (19:9), the men tell him to leave the city quickly, but give no reason why he is being offered the chance of salvation (as Brueggemann notes, this will only become clear in Gen. 19:29, 1982:165); their simple message is that Lot and his family must leave (before sunrise) in order to live for if they stay, they will surely die.

#### B. Saving Lot's Sons-in-Law

Lot now must attempt to persuade those who are of his family that they must leave the city. His wife and daughters are presumably with him in the house and hear the words of the visitors, but Lot must also try to talk those betrothed to (לְקַחֵי, lit. 'takers of'...) his daughters, his future sons-in-law, into taking flight. The term לְקַחֵי

could indicate either a present situation with a future consummation (making the daughters betrothed rather than married) or a past state involving consummation (as Gen. 27:46; cf. *Gen. R.* 's '[Lot] had four daughter, two betrothed and two married, 50:9; also Rashi, 1900:79; Hershon, 1885:109; R. Davidson, 1979:75; Wenham, 1994:57); if so, Lot's description of the two daughters inside the house as virgins suggests that they were not the wives of these men, and Lot must therefore have other daughters, a view given some support perhaps by the occurrence of הַנְּמֻצָּה in v. 15 ('your daughters *who are here*'). But surely Lot would have told these daughters the news of the impending destruction of Sodom as well as his sons-in-law. Since he does not, it seems more likely that he has only two daughters 'betrothed' to his 'sons-in-law', and they apparently require no persuasion to leave Sodom at all.

Lot leaves the safety of the house alone to find his prospective sons-in-law. It is not yet morning and the men around the house receive no mention, presumably having left alone the house they were unable to enter. Gossai notes that Lot is only said to go out to them, there being no mention of a visit to their house (1995:96). But his subsequent claim that Lot showed his indifference to the warning of forthcoming destruction by staying with them all night (1995:98) is problematic because although Lot is inside his own house at dawn, we are not told at what time he returned; given the response of those he sought, it seems more likely that he came back immediately. When Lot found his future sons-in-law, he related the warning message of the angels about the city's forthcoming destruction, telling them to get up and get out. But their response was only to mock, and the last chance of salvation for any of Sodom's inhabitants is turned down. It is unclear exactly who these men are (men of Sodom or assimilated נְרִי), but there seems little doubt that the narrative implies both that they had been part of the mob around Lot's house (Gossai. 1995:96-97) and that their response of a disbelieving laughter to Lot's message of ruin seals their fate. If they had but listened, they would have been saved (so Wenham, 1994:57). But again it is not just the judgement of YHWH which is being rejected by (those who here represent) Sodom, but also the person of Lot himself.

At this point, it should be noted that even if these men do show some sign of taking the warning seriously, do perform this one act which would perhaps indicate something approaching repentance and thereby indicate a certain degree of personal righteousness, it is already too late for them to count as righteous men on whose account the city could be saved. This is because they can only demonstrate such ‘righteousness’ by leaving, and therefore would no longer count as being among those living in the city for the purposes of Abraham’s argument. That argument—or at least the corporate aspect of it taken up by YHWH—is no longer in force because following YHWH’s judgement, the righteous are no longer to be found in the city by definition; anyone who stays has forfeited any claim to righteousness by doing so in disobedience to YHWH’s command that they should leave. If Lot leaves, this will demonstrate his decision against the way of Sodom; he will be saved because YHWH has given him the opportunity, yes, but his salvation will also be reliant upon his own act of righteousness in departing.

## V. Lot’s Departure From Sodom (19:15-22)

### A. A Tendency to Linger

The arrival of ‘dawn’ (הַשָּׁחַר) sees Lot back inside his house, wholly rejected by all the members of Sodom who had previously given him some measure of acceptance (e.g., his daughters’s prospective husbands, his neighbours, and his ‘business’ contacts). Only those within the house are now in view, and all must leave the city immediately: ‘The angels urged Lot, saying, “Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed (הִתְצַפֵּקָה) in the punishment of the city”’ (v. 15), consumed, swept away, destroyed, in the manner feared earlier by Abraham (cf. Gen. 18:23, 24). The instruction to leave the city is only implied here and not repeated (cf. vv. 12 and 14).



But a feature of Lot's character causes complications; as Letellier puts it, Lot demonstrates a 'tendency to linger in the familiar environment.... a constitutional inability to flee' (1995:166). Despite the blinding of the men of Sodom, Lot seems unable to take the warning of his visitors seriously himself—perhaps as a result of the scorn of his daughters's once future husbands—and he dithers, refusing to take leave of his home, the city in which he once chose to dwell, and the attractive lands of the valley (cf. Driver, 1909:200). Westermann's depiction of this tendency to remain as being because city dwellers feel more secure in the city (1985:303) would, if accepted, lend further strength to a view of Lot as having become assimilated to the life-style of the men of Sodom. In the rabbinic tradition, Rashi sees Lot as unable to leave his own property (1900:79), but *Genesis Rabbah* goes much further in attributing Lot's reluctance to his distress over the loss of Sodom's 'gold and silver and precious stones' (50:11). Lot may even have been so disposed towards staying that he is fast asleep as dawn came: 'get up' may mean 'wake up' (so Wenham, 1994:57).

Lot dithers to the extent that the angels have to take him by the hand and lead him and his family out of the city and towards the mountains (lit. 'mountain'; cf. Gen. 14:10). His own lack of righteousness is again demonstrated and he is now to be saved by YHWH alone; this act being recorded as 'the LORD having compassion (חַמְלָה) on him', a mercy for which at present there is still no reason given and which stands in stark contrast to YHWH's abandonment of Lot's sons-in-law to their fate when they took no notice of the warning of destruction. Why save one and not the others?

One of the angels, an individual 'he' (*contra* NRSV), again tells Lot that he must flee, and then warns Lot that he must look only forwards on leaving the city, that he must leave the plain itself, and that he must go to the hills. If he does this, he will live. If he does not do these things, he will share in the destruction of the city (19:17); 'Sodom is a world to be repudiated' (Letellier, 1995:164).

## B. An Escape to Zoar

Lot, however, cannot do these things; he still cannot reach the hills. The weak side of his character is emphasised further, under the cover of an admission of physical weakness (which will eventually prove unfounded; cf. his making it to the hills in vv. 30-38). But while admitting his inability to reach the hills ‘for fear evil will overtake me and I die’ (19:19; cf. ‘the evil’ in Amos 3:6), it becomes clear that he has finally recognised those with whom he has been dealing and addresses YHWH directly. Lot acknowledges that he is being favoured by YHWH who is saving him, but again no hint of a reason for such favour is forthcoming; Lot’s belated claim to be a ‘servant of YHWH’ (עַבְדְּיָהוָה) is ironically contrasted with Abraham’s early claim to be such (18:3) and, given Lot’s actions in choosing to live with the men of Sodom, his offer of his daughters to the crowd, and his failure to leave Sodom of his own volition, it can bring no great delight to the judging deity that such acts are being associated with service to YHWH. Lot, though, has finally recognised the God whose promise of land, descendants and relationship to Abraham he has so disastrously abandoned, and asks that YHWH allow him to go to a nearby city: ‘Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!’ An aetiology explains the city’s subsequent name of Zoar, small (cf. Westermann, 1985:304); according to Gen. 14:8, its former name was ‘Bela’ (בְּלַעַל).

YHWH’s response is to accept Lot’s request and grant the favour asked. The city of Zoar will not be destroyed and Lot may find safety there (19:21). But Lot must hurry, judgement for Sodom and the other cities of the plain is at hand and is being withheld only until Lot is safe. It is clear from the combination of designations used here that the judgement of Sodom stands for the judgement of the whole of the valley (in contrast to Gunkel’s atomising approach, the terms are to be taken as a creative use of narrative). The outcry and the events which have validated it to YHWH’s satisfaction bring destruction on the ‘whole area’. Lot hurries on and arrives in Zoar as the sun rises in the sky (v. 23).

The ironic contrast between the prospective fates of Zoar and Sodom has been noted by Gunn; while Lot's intervention for Zoar is successful (at least for now), Abraham's intervention for Sodom fails. Zoar contains no righteous man, certainly not Lot, and is, it appears at first glance, saved only because of Lot's request that it should be so. Why then did Abraham not just ask for Sodom to be saved? Is he being implicitly criticised here for his failure to do as Lot did? Two features of the story suggest that this is not the case. Firstly, Lot's request must be understood in the light of his own salvation, a salvation not yet explained. The reader does not know why Lot should be saved by YHWH, but that is what is happening. When Lot asks for and receives Zoar, the mystery deepens. Who is Lot that his request should abrogate judgement for Zoar? Hardly the to-be-congratulated scheming 'card player' depicted by Gunn (1993:184-85). This mystery will lie unresolved until v 29. Secondly, for Abraham to be deemed a failure as an intercessor here, it must first be assumed that he wanted the cities of the plain to be saved at any cost, and that their destruction indicates that he did not succeed in that task. But however difficult the discerning of Abraham's aim has proved to be, it is clear that Abraham *never* denies that the wicked should be punished; if Sodom contains no righteous people, its fate is sealed. Abraham does not fail to achieve that aim because he never intends to achieve it. Lot, however, has saved a city which appears to fully deserve its punishment; ironically, injustice there is to go on simply because of Lot's exaggerated weakness and his overwhelming desire to preserve his own life (and, perhaps, 'life-style'; so Gunn, 1993:184).

## VI. The Destruction of Sodom (19:23-29)

### A. 'Sulphurous fire'

A description of the destruction follows the report of Lot's safe arrival in Zoar. At this point the temporal consistency of the narrative sequence is lost, Lot's story

being put to one side for a moment as the destruction is described. A more consistent temporality could be achieved if the text was re-arranged as follows:

- 1) 19:23 19:26 19:30ab: Lot in Zoar, Lot's wife, Lot leaves Zoar
- 2) 19:24-5: Destruction
- 3) 19:27-9: Abraham's view of the destruction, reason for Lot's salvation
- 4) 19:30c-38: Lot and daughters

However, the effect of the temporal shifts in the canonical text is to emphasise the multi-scene account of the destruction, with the safety of Lot, the once dominant narrative plot, demoted by its broken interspersion with flicking reports on Abraham, YHWH's reason for saving Lot and the destruction of the cities. Anomalies do occur—the narratives concerning both Lot's wife and of Zoar can be read as they stand as out of sequence, thereby raising questions about their respective fates; here, the effect will be emphasised with the temporal distortions noted but not smoothed out.

Both Loader (1990:116-17, 138) and Fields (1997:158-71) have argued that in considering the biblical afterlife of the Sodom narrative, there are two main strands of development: alongside the 'sin of Sodom' already mentioned (see pages 264-70) is the paradigmatic application of the stereotypical language and imagery of its punishment to God's potentially sudden and spectacular destruction of cities or places which then become 'as Sodom'. Sulphur (גַּפְרִית) and fire (שֵׁן) rain down from the skies onto Sodom and Gomorra and all the plain, destroying the cities, inhabitants, and vegetation (v. 25; for the pairing of שֵׁן גַּפְרִית see Ps. 11:6; Ezek. 38:22; שֵׁן, 'fire', alone occurring in Ezek. 28:27; 39:6; and Lam. 1:13; with גַּפְרִית, 'sulphur', occurring alone in Deut. 29:22; Isa 30:33; 34:9; Job 18:15). Hamilton suggests that rather than the traditional 'fire and brimstone' these two actually form a 'hendiadys—hence *sulphurous fire* (NAB) or "burning sulphur" (NIV)' (1995:47; also Speiser,

1964:141).<sup>164</sup> The verb ‘to overthrow’ (וַיִּהַרְפֹּץ) is used here to describe the results of the destruction, often appearing in later texts in connection with the fate of Sodom (cf. Deut. 29:23; Isa. 1:7; 13:19; Jer. 49:16; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Lam. 4:6), sometimes clearly as ‘figurative’ (Isa. 30:33; W. Brueggemann, 1982:165). Clearly then attempts to explain what happens to Sodom as the result of natural phenomena related to the Dead Sea area such as, for example, Driver’s ‘eruption of petroleum, occasioned by an earthquake’ (1909:202) are misguided (so Westermann, 1985:306).

The peculiar construction here, וַיִּהַרְפֹּץ הַמַּטֵּיר... מֵאֵת יְהוָה, is held by Dillmann to indicate the presence of YHWH both in the men/angels as the agents who send the sulphur and fire and in the heavens as their source (1892:273-74).<sup>165</sup> Too much should not be made of any perceived distinction, however; for Hamilton, ‘the clear impression created by the addition of this phrase, *if in any way it contributes meaningfully to the narrative*, is that Yahweh hurled blocks of burning sulphur on the cities’ (1995:47—my italics). In this light, Westermann suggested reading—‘Yahweh then rained on Sodom and Gomorrah—brimstone and fire from Yahweh in the heavens’ (1985:296)—seems appropriate. Since the angels have also now left the scene, leaving Lot attempting to get to Zoar, there is little difficulty now seeing YHWH in the heavens, returned from the visit to Abraham and the investigation into the conduct of Sodom (thus resolving the problem seen in Dillman’s view of the angels by Skinner, that YHWH was both above and below, 1910:309). But in all the destruction which takes place, the narrative has been careful to stress, not one single ‘righteous man’ died. According to the model of judgement operative here, the corporate patriarchal one, YHWH is just.

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<sup>164</sup> W.E. Watson defined hendiadys as

the expression of a single but complex concept by using two separate words, usually nouns.... The two words may be collocated, be joined with a copula or be in apposition. Hendiadys is used very often in Hebrew... and the reader should be always on the lookout for its occurrence in the text. The important aspect of hendiadys is that its components are no longer considered separately but as a unit in combination. (1978:324-25).

<sup>165</sup> Calvin records his disagreement with those in his own day who saw this construction as portraying the trinity at work (1965:512).

## B. Lot's Wife Looks Back

The description of the destruction is followed by the now proverbial story of Lot's wife. As Lot arrived at Zoar, his wife behind him looked back, and was instantly turned into a pillar of salt. Although not explicitly addressed to her, the warning to Lot not to look back apparently includes his family as well. Coats assumes that she has actually heard the instructions, (1983:145), but Gunn prefers to see her as 'the woman subsumed in her husband who is expected to obey' (1993:187). Her loss at this late stage functions both to emphasise that Lot and his family were being rescued 'from the very brink of the abyss' (Westermann, 1985:307) and creates the space for the subsequent account of the sexual relationship between Lot and his daughters after the destruction of the valley (19:30-38; cf. Coats, 1985:124).

No explicit reason is given as to why she looked back, but the implication is that she, rather like Lot with his dawdling, was not able to let go of her attachment to the city of Sodom, and so could not leave her home, the city, and the bounteous valley behind her. For Driver, she is 'the type of those who, in whatever age, "look back" with regretful longings upon possessions and enjoyments which are inconsistent with the salvation offered to them' (1909:202). Gunn, however, notes the different responses of male and female readers of this text to Lot's wife, recording the poetry of K. Batey and A. Akhmatova which sees her positively. Indeed, for Gunn, Lot's wife as 'salt' is the fundamental point (or, perhaps, failing) of the narrative, indicating the presence of unmentioned women and children in Sodom (1993:188-89). Set over against this positivity, is the desire of (usually male) exegetes through the ages to explain her death as resulting from her own great wickedness; a note to *Genesis Rabbah*, for example, records that when the angels visited Lot, 'she went about to all her neighbours and asked them, "Give me salt, as we have guests," her intention being that the townspeople should become aware of their presence' (51:5).

Yet in this exegesis, the presence of women in Sodom and their inability to count as righteous is fully recognised (see pages 218-21, 262-64). In the light of

YHWH's subsequent destruction of Sodom's women and children through the consistent application of a patriarchal corporate judgement, many more 'innocent' women than Lot's wife may have died; her 'crime' is differentiated from theirs only because she actually does something—a small thing really—in looking back which *may* mean that she is personally culpable. There is no need to ascribe great crimes to her at all because Gunn is fundamentally correct; she is simply to be seen as one involved in a catastrophe most likely not of her own making (she could be wicked, I suppose), who subsequently loses her life because of her unexplained disobedience to YHWH's instruction to her husband. Gunn might argue that this is unjust, but that simply raises what is for me the fundamental point of the narrative: what does it mean to be just? By the lights of the model of judgement operating here, the destruction by YHWH of the 'innocent' women (including perhaps Lot's wife), children, and babies of Sodom on the grounds that all of their men folk are wicked *is wholly an act of divine justice*.

### C. Abraham Learns of Sodom's Fate

The text now returns to the person with whom it began, Abraham. And to his discussion with YHWH. Lot's catastrophies—his loss of wife, possessions, and station—are all implicitly contrasted with Abraham who is physically unaffected by the events on the plain. Abraham is changed, however, through his learning of one potential future for his descendants as he sees the consequences of Sodom's guilt and judgement. It may be that the temporal indicators here are intended to indicate the passage of a night during the destruction, but it seems more likely that Abraham rose early to return to the place overlooking Sodom where he had argued with YHWH (cf. 18:16, 22). There he expected to see whether or not YHWH's investigation had resulted in the sweeping away of the city or the discovery of a righteous person within the city on whose behalf it could be spared. Abraham, even with some knowledge of the wickedness of the men of Sodom, would probably have been more likely to expect

the cities to be spared; his dialogue with YHWH demanding a good probability that the righteous existed for its intelligibility.

But on arriving at the viewpoint, he discovered a smoke-covered and ruined land. At that moment, he knew—or at least thought he knew—that Sodom was wholly evil. The wicked had received the punishment that Abraham and YHWH had agreed was their due, and the righteous one needed to save the city did not exist. But of course, Abraham's lack of clarity as to the gender of the righteous one means that while he is no doubt sure that he understands what has happened, he might not actually do so. If he believes that YHWH found no righteous women in Sodom, he would be wrong, because the deity never looked for them. Nevertheless, Abraham will assume that YHWH had carried out his judgement with justice (even if he does not know the exact details). And Abraham must also think here that Lot is dead; after all, if he was righteous, he would have saved the city and if not, then he should also have incurred punishment. Abraham himself is not told that Lot is saved, but the ensuing narrative comment (v. 29) and the narrative of 19:30-38 may be held to indicate that Abraham and Israel (through the writers of its texts) came eventually to know that Lot had been saved and why.

But the canonical reader will know now the mystery of Lot's salvation from Sodom. The text notes that 'when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled'. In the history of exegesis, two main interpretive options have been offered for this verse: 'And YHWH remembered Abraham' (וַיִּזְכֹּר יְהוָה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם) may mean that YHWH remembered the patriarch himself, saving Lot for his sake alone (so e.g., Coats, 1983:145) or it may mean that YHWH remembered the words exchanged with Abraham overlooking Sodom and saved Lot because of the argument (e.g., Wenham, 1994:59-60).<sup>166</sup> If the words are

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<sup>166</sup> Two other variations have been suggested here: first, Hershon suggests that Lot is saved because of the good that he has done for Abraham in the past (1885:110); namely, not revealing Sarah's identity in Egypt. But the text expressly states that YHWH remembers Abraham, and not Lot. Given the alternatives, it seems unnecessary to stretch that far back into the patriarch's narrative past, and so this option is rejected here. Alternatively, Sarna suggest that while Lot is righteous ('he was



taken on their own, there is no way to decide between these options, but by this point in any exegesis, reaching a decision is fairly straightforward. For the second option to be chosen, Lot's escape must be attributable to Abraham's intervention—he must be either a righteous man (or even Wenham's individual who is 'relatively righteous,' 1994:42) or perhaps a  $\text{רַי}$  who YHWH must remove so as to punish only the men of Sodom (so Mafico, 1983:16). I have argued that these reading cannot stand (see pages 229-33 and 249-53) and that Lot's salvation is not the result of the dialogue between YHWH and Abraham—that argument should actually have resulted in either Lot's salvation *with* the city or his destruction *with* the city. Neither of these has happened; the city is destroyed, yet Lot is still saved. Partially, of course, a case may be made for his flawed hospitality or his rejection of the men of Sodom having some influence on his escape. If he had not offered hospitality, however incorrectly, he would have been swept away. If he had not been rejected by the men of Sodom, he would still be with them in their punishment. But also his actual willingness to leave the city, though reluctant, plays its part. If he had stayed, he would have been destroyed with the city (cf. 19:12). But these are all situational factors which only help Lot to escape—none of them in itself would have saved Lot, it being only the forceful encouragement of the visitors to flee that ultimately save Lot in contrast to his sons-in-law who—though in a very similar position to Lot, having been told to flee—are destroyed. In such a context, the words, 'YHWH remembered Abraham,' can only refer to the salvation of Lot for the sake of his kinsman. The argument of Gen. 18:23-32 is thus irrelevant—here it is Abraham's kinship with Lot that is in the forefront.

Turner has argued that if Abraham had but known that Lot would be saved in this way, he would not have spoken to YHWH at all, having already got what he really wanted (1990b:101). But Abraham's motives are much more complex than Turner allows. Lot is not Abraham's heir and has essentially made himself irrelevant to the

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certainly superior to his neighbours') his salvation resulted not from his own merit but from that of Abraham (1966:150; similarly, Calvin, 1965:516-17). Since I have argued that Lot is far from righteous as far as the violence of Sodom is concerned, Sarna's option can also be rejected here.

promise made to Abraham by YHWH. But, nevertheless, as Abraham went to save his kinsman in Gen. 14, so YHWH saves Lot again because of his kinship with Abraham. The only question that remains is whether or not Lot will return to Abraham and the promise after such calamity.

## VII. The Origins of Moab and Ammon (19:30-38)

### A. The Last People on Earth

The final section of the Sodom narrative is concerned with the actions of Lot which follow the destruction of the cities of the plain. On one level, the length of this section of the narrative is out of all proportion to its importance to the reading offered here, but on another level, the final episode of Lot's journey away from the promised land is of considerable significance to Abraham and the subsequent story of Israel.

In v. 30 the reader discovers that Lot, perhaps in response to the loss of his wife, has left Zoar. Did he do so before or after the destruction of the valley? Is Zoar still in existence? Wenham, for example, sees Zoar as having been saved, Lot having left after the destruction (1994:58-61; cf. also Rashi, 1900:82). He argues that the daughters subsequent need for intercourse with their father reflects a situation in which they see no eligible men who may become their husbands (cf. also Keil-Delitzsch's 'Not that they imagined the whole human race to have perished ... but they were afraid that no man would link himself with them, the only survivors of a country smitten by the curse of God,' 1980:237).

But the fact that Abraham sees only destruction from his vantage point overlooking the region (19:27-28), and no oasis of salvation at Zoar leads me to prefer the alternative reading in which Zoar has been destroyed. The actions of the two daughters can then be easily explained as resulting from their fear that they are the last humans left alive after the destruction of Zoar and the valley, in Gunkel's words, as the survivors of a 'universal catastrophe' (1997:217; cf. also Hershon's 'as in the time of

the deluge', 1885:111; also cf. Rashkow, 1998:103; Skinner, 1910:313). Lot's leaving of Zoar with his daughters then is out of its exact temporal sequence and reflects the pre-destruction scene after the loss of his wife. Afraid to stay in Zoar, the place where he was to be safe but where his wife has now died, Lot finally makes for the hills. No longer trusting in the words of the one who would save him (v. 21) and with his feeble protestations of weakness forgotten, Lot makes it to safety in the hills before destruction comes, and takes refuge in a cave.<sup>167</sup> Zoar, however, is destroyed; the one whose intercession once promised to save it now having abandoned it to divine justice. Lot has now lost almost everything, and his distancing from Abraham and the promise is nearly complete. As Wenham puts it:

Lot, the rich rancher who had so many flocks and herds that he had to separate from Abraham (13:8-11), chose to live in the fertile Dead Sea valley, which has been destroyed and with it all his other relations [sic] and property. He and all that he has can be accommodated in a cave. His ruin can hardly be more complete (1994:60).

#### B. The Incestuous Conception of Moab and Ben-Ammon

But clearly it can. Believing that humanity has been destroyed, and therefore acting in order both to survive personally and to perpetuate their race, the eldest of the two daughters suggests that they must get their father drunk so that they might become pregnant by him.<sup>168</sup> Although perhaps in some senses a worthy aim, their decision reflects a certain lack of trust in the message of the angels who were clear that it was only Sodom (and the valley) which was to be destroyed. This lack of trust in the one who was represented by the angels serves to indicate the daughters's distance from

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<sup>167</sup> Rashkow's comment about the sexual connotations of the cave in both psychoanalytic and linguistic terms is probably unnecessary (1998:102). After all, as Freud himself is once reported to have said, when asked by a student about the significance of the big cigars he smoked, 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar'!

<sup>168</sup> In rabbinic tradition, however, the initiative shown by the daughters is lessened somewhat by their argument that Lot desired his own daughters: 'R. Levi said, Whoever is inflamed by sexual desire will, in the end, be made to eat his own flesh' (*Gen. R.* 51:9; citing Prov. 18:1).

YHWH, matching that of their father (as young virgins, it is not even clear that they would have ever been anywhere but Sodom. Lot has been living there for at least thirteen years, and probably many more). Their remedy may also indicate a certain affinity to the men of Sodom, even to their unself-conscious naming of their infants with words which openly declare their incestuous parentage (so Keil-Delitzsch, 1980:237-38; cf. Isa. 3:9). In effect the daughters's actions reflect a mind-set which is altogether different to those who will be Abraham's true descendants, walking on the way of YHWH doing righteousness and justice; in itself initiative is not necessarily a laudable quality.

Their scheme works perfectly. Although Lot may not know what is happening, that does not alter his culpability at all. The distancing of Lot's family from YHWH, begun in Genesis 13, is now complete. Lot's sons/grandsons and their descendants are not to be גֵּרִים in a foreign land as he was in Sodom, nor will they return to Abraham as part of the nation which his descendants will become in line with the promise of YHWH; Lot's descendants will not live under his name, but rather under the names of his sons. The first born daughter 'bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day' (19:37-38; NRSV). They will be two foreign peoples who will live alongside the chosen people, the descendants of Abraham through Isaac.

Gunkel's noting of the neutral tone of this passage, leading to his attribution of it to a Moabite source, hits an important canonical note. The delicate balance which results between the dual elements of foreignness (incestuously conceived) and familial connection (through Lot, however, distantly removed now) will now be enshrined in the history of Israel as the end result of Lot's move away from Canaan through Sodom to, finally, Moab and Ammon. On occasions, foreignness will predominate, with rivalry and war between Israel and Moab and Ammon (e.g., Deut. 23:3; Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:26; Ezek. 25:3, 6; Zeph. 2:8-10). But on others the nations comprised of the

descendants of Lot will once again be close to Israel and its God. In Deut. 2:9,19, Israel is told the following:

Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle, for I will not give you any of its land as a possession, since I have given Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot' (2:9)... 'When you approach the frontier of the Ammonites, do not harass them or engage them in battle, for I will not give the land of the Ammonites to you as a possession, because I have given it to the descendants of Lot' (2:19; both NRSV).

As nations, both Moab and Ammon will partake of the promise that all of the nations will be blessed in Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). But alongside this universal level of blessing stands a further irony which will once again tie the descendants of Lot back into the life of Israel. For Ruth, daughter of Naomi, is a Moabitess, a descendent of an incestuous union between Lot and one of his daughters in a cave overlooking the destroyed valley. And she is linked, through her own son Obed and his son Jesse, to the one who would one day reign as king over Israel, David (Ruth 4:21-22). And ultimately, through the Davidic line to the messianic figure of whom Isaiah writes:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for *the throne of David and his kingdom*. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore (9:6-7; NRSV).

A shoot shall come out from the *stump of Jesse*, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins (11:1-5, NRSV—my italics).

## VIII. The Way Forward: Old Testament Texts in the Light of the Suggested Canonical Exegesis of Genesis 18-19

### A. Where to from here?

Towards the end of his *Theology of the Old Testament*, W. Brueggemann concludes that 'Israel characteristically presents itself, in "theodic" texts, as the great advocate and champion of justice, on which YHWH has reneged' (1997:739), no doubt following on from his earlier characterisation of Abraham as YHWH's teacher (1982:168). But in the light of the conclusions reached in the preceding exegesis, it seems that Brueggemann is only half right. Yes, Israel does confront its deity about justice in the world, but what Brueggemann has missed are the elements of education and the polyvalence of justice as they are involved in YHWH's relationship with Abraham and Israel; it is certainly not the case that justice is simple and YHWH simply reneges on carrying it out. Rather justice is complex and YHWH is totally consistent—at least in Genesis 18-19—in carrying out whichever model of justice happens to be in view. Israel's task is to wrestle with what justice can mean in such a situation.

Our consistent failure to recognise the diverse expressions of justice in the biblical texts usually leads to our reading whichever model suits us best into the text. As Kaminsky notes, much of modern scholarship on this topic is 'tainted' with the Enlightenment's assumption that individualism is best (1995:16-29, 179-89; 1997), leading either to the open rejection of corporate notions or their re-interpretation in terms of individualism. By recognising both corporate and individual notions as available here and refraining from prior judgement, however, this tainted choice has hopefully been avoided, and the way opened for an exploration of the models of judgement used in the wider biblical material and a critical investigation of their inter-relationships: Do they simply sit side-by-side? Are they mutually critical? Or is there an answer beyond the mere fact of difference?

There is no doubt that knowledge and practice of justice is of fundamental importance to Israel: after all, is that not what YHWH's decision to inform Abraham about the outcry is all about? In subsequent texts, it becomes clear that while YHWH will continue to act as judge in some situations over Israel (e.g., Exodus 32-34; Numbers 14) and the nations (e.g., Amos 1:3-2:3), the deity has in part delegated the application of divine justice to the judges of Israel. As Moses reminds Israel:

I charged your judges [at Horeb]: "Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, *for the judgement is God's*" (Deut. 1:16-17—my italics).<sup>169</sup>

When Israel becomes a monarchy, it is the king who now has this responsibility,<sup>170</sup> and the results of success or failure in carrying it out are summarised here in the words of YHWH to Jeremiah:

Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, and say: Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their

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<sup>169</sup> Samuel sums up his career as judge as follows:

"I have led you from my youth until this day. Here I am; testify against me before the LORD and before his anointed [Saul]. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you" (I Sam. 12:1-3; NRSV).

The people of Israel agree with Samuel's summary and reply: "You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from the hand of anyone" (I Sam. 12:4; NRSV).

<sup>170</sup> 2 Sam. 8:15 records that 'David reigned over all Israel; and... administered justice (טִשְׁרֵט) and equity (צִדְקָה) to all his people'. On meeting King Solomon, Sheba says: "Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king to execute justice (טִשְׁרֵט) and righteousness (צִדְקָה)" (1 Kgs 10:9; NRSV).

people. But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation (Jer. 22:1-5; NRSV).

Israel must walk on the way of YHWH in order to be blessed itself and in order that the blessing which is to come upon the nations through Abraham may happen (cf. e.g., Muilenberg, 1961; Whitelam, 1979). If its appointed judge or judges cannot keep Israel on the way, then either YHWH or the prophets will call them back to doing righteousness and justice (e.g., Nathan to David, 2 Sam. 12:1-12; Elijah to Ahab, 1 Kgs 21:17-19; etc.).

Justice is essential for two reasons apart from the concrete consequences for Israel and the nations: first, it is the very nature of YHWH: 'For the LORD your [Israel's] God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing' (10:16-18; cf. also e.g., Ps. 89:14: 'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your [YHWH's] throne'). This assertion is continually made until the point, when uttered by Elihu to Job, it even brings divine condemnation on its speaker:

Therefore, hear me, you who have sense, far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to their deeds he will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them. Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice (34:10-12; NRSV; cf. 42:7).

Second is the relationship between justice and creation: 'At the set time that I appoint I will judge with equity. When the earth totters, with all its inhabitants, it is I [the divine judge] who keep its pillars steady' (Ps. 75:2-3; NRSV). This move to chaos through the practising of injustice is also reflected in the wisdom view of the role of the king: 'By justice a king gives stability to the land' (Prov. 29:4a).<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Cf. also 'It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness' (Prov. 16:12; NRSV).



Yet the actual application of this justice can no longer be set against a defining moment in Gen. 18:25 and the Sodom narrative. There YHWH carries out—consistently—a very specific kind of justice, but does not decry the other possible options or insist that the model of justice applied there is universal. It is left to Abraham and Israel to work out what has happened. In taking this thesis forward, an investigation of the subsequent history of Israel and the way in which YHWH judges must be carried out. Cases of judging by the deity in each of the four models—patriarchal corporate, patriarchal individual, egalitarian corporate, egalitarian individual—must be investigated and any elements of support or criticism offered by YHWH for examples of human justice must be noted. Important here are each of the four following passages; the first two reflect corporate ideas and the second two individualistic (all NRSV):

You shall not bow down to [idols] or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exod. 20:5-6).

Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth—so that I may pardon Jerusalem (Jer. 5:1).

The word of the LORD came to me [Ezekiel]: Mortal, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its staff of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it human beings and animals, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job, these three, were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness, says the Lord GOD (Ezek. 14:12-14).

The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge”? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.... [I]t is only the person who sins that shall die (Ezek. 18:1-4).

How, for example, do the ideology of the covenant and the ideology of the remnant support or subvert each of the multiple strands within the Old Testament's complex of judicial models?

Equally, the contextuality of lament texts such as Psalm 13 must be re-assessed. Brueggemann may see 'How long, YHWH' as a pushing of the deity to act, but I suggest that one answer by the deity to such a question could well be to say, 'well, that is the result of what Abraham (or whoever) wanted, to spare the wicked—who go on being wicked—with the righteous. Don't complain to me when I give you the kind of justice you asked for!' When Israel cries out for justice, what exactly does it want? Obviously, the detailed study of the use of different models of justice within the Old Testament is a considerable task far beyond the scope of this thesis, but here I want to briefly pursue two questions as pointers to some of the answers which may arise: What is to be made of Job's complaint that YHWH kills the righteous with the wicked in the light of my reading of Genesis 18-19? And does the Old Testament rest with simply incompatible, though implicitly mutually critical, notions of YHWH's justice?

## B. Job and the Interplay Between Models of Justice

On pages 213-14 a number of different 'just' judgements were noted:

- (Context A) the innocent become as the guilty and all are punished
- (Context B) the guilty become as the innocent and all are reprieved
- (Context C) the righteous are vindicated, the wicked are punished
- (Context D) a group of innocent people is vindicated
- (Context E) a group of guilty people is punished
- (Context F) an innocent/guilty individual is vindicated/punished

These different contexts can be sub-divided into two distinct groups: A-C and D-F. What makes them distinct is the fact that contexts D-F are treated identically by both corporate and individualistic models of judgement. If everyone in a set group is either

guilty or innocent or if an individual has been found guilty or innocent of a particular crime, then both modes of judgement cohere in their punishment of the guilty and vindication of the innocent. It is only when a group becomes mixed—or when numerous events within the life-span of one individual are being considered—that these models of judgement become separated and contradictory. In such an instance, the individual model relies on strict differentiation for it to be properly carried out correctly—it can therefore be unjust—but in contrast, the corporate model is always ‘just’, the proportion of just to unjust in any given group being completely irrelevant to its actual judgements. With this in mind, let us briefly consider Job.<sup>172</sup>

Job’s problem is that he believes that he is being punished when he is righteous, a fact testified to even by the deity (1:8; readers are, of course, aware that the situation does not involve divine judgement—Satan has rather been given permission to ‘test’ Job—but it is highly significantly that Job is thinking in terms of a judgement). His friends claim that this cannot be so and that he must have sinned (though Eliphaz almost immediately implies another possibility when he notes that the sons of the fool are ‘far from safety’, 5:4; perhaps Job’s father sinned). Job, in response to the friends, challenges YHWH to let him present his case, and asserts that YHWH ‘destroys both the righteous and the wicked’ (9:22). When YHWH finally appears out of the whirlwind (38-41), Job admits that he spoke of that which he did not understand (42:1-6), yet Job’s previous words are then characterised by YHWH as correct (42:7). Three points—at least—must be accounted for: Job is righteous throughout; Job has spoken rightly of YHWH in that the deity ‘destroys both the righteous and the wicked’ (9:22; cf. 42:7); nevertheless, Job admits that he has spoken of what he does not fully understand and repents (42:1-6).

One option worth exploring further is the effect of the interplay between different models of judgement within Job, particularly perhaps because he is a patriarch

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<sup>172</sup> Obviously, given the historical effect and complexity of this text, not to mention the vast amount of secondary literature (for which see Clines, 1989), what follows is thus a very tentative foray which I nevertheless am unable to resist engaging in here.

like Abraham. I have already pointed out that YHWH can punish the righteous and it be called 'just' in a scenario involving a corporate judgement: Why then does Job defend himself and charge YHWH when his own punishment *does not necessarily mean that he himself is guilty?* The answer suggested here is that Job is operating with a particular view of judgement; namely, one in which YHWH cannot punish the righteous because that would be unjust. If this is correct, then it is possible to attribute one of two world-views to Job: The first is that Job is simply thinking of a individualistic justice in which his own punishment despite his innocence can only indicate that YHWH is unjust. But remembering the overlap between individualistic and corporate models in contexts D-F above with regard to injustice, a second possibility arises; Job is thinking of himself in terms of a corporate judgement, but sees himself as the totality of the entity being judged, as 'one'. Further research may make one of these options more likely than the other (perhaps 9:22 itself counts against the latter), but, regardless, it should be noted that if Job is correct in his diagnosis of his situation as being one involving the corporate judgement of an individual, then both judgements would agree, and, in Job's eyes, YHWH would be rendered unjust by his suffering.

But the discussion of overlapping models of justice in this thesis also raises the possibility that YHWH is dealing with Job just as he has dealt with Abraham. When YHWH appears out of the whirlwind, Job admits that he has spoken of things he does not fully comprehend as Abraham and Israel do not fully comprehend what has happened in Genesis 18-19; justice is not so straight-forward as Job and Abraham think. As far as it goes, Job has spoken truthfully of a YHWH who is capable of killing the righteous with the wicked in corporate judgements. Job's 'error' is either to have assumed (incorrectly) that such killing must be understood within an individualistic model of judgement or to have assumed that he is being judged corporately as a single person, that he stands alone in his context. It is not, however, necessary to go on to show that Job is being judged because of someone else's sin (the reader knows he is actually being tested); the point here is simply that such a 'just'

judgement is possible and that for Job to charge YHWH with unjust behaviour without taking consideration of this alternative is to have spoken of things of which he is not fully aware. But once again, YHWH does not point out the actual error of Job's ways, although unlike Abraham the latter at least knows that he has a problem, a very useful step beyond Abraham's position. But like Israel—and the rest of us—he will still have to work out for himself what exactly it means for the 'judge of all the earth' to do justice!

### C. Towards a Resolution?

In the light of the importance of divine justice for Old Testament theology, the possibility that the biblical texts simply present four (or more) incompatible models of justice is perhaps troubling. What is being demonstrated by such a presentation? One possibility is simply that judgement is always contextual, that there is no one right model for all times and all places. A future study of the use of these models and their relationship with each other would be of great help in defining the contours of this aspect of divine justice. But a second possibility arises from two related aspects of justice in the Old Testament: messianism and resurrection.

Messianism (in the sense of a utopian present or future) is a much discussed topic in Old Testament study, and here I simply want to suggest that texts like the following clearly imply that simply having four models of justice co-existing side-by-side is not the end of the matter:

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins (Isa. 11:3-5).

When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and marauders have vanished from the land, then a throne shall be established

in steadfast love in the tent of David, and on it shall sit in faithfulness a ruler who seeks justice (דָּרַשׁ מִשְׁפָּט) and is swift to do what is right (מְהֵרָה יַצְדִּיק; Isa. 16:1-5).

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching (Isa. 42:1-4).

But if divine justice is to be defined as anything other than the collection of models used by YHWH, then the question arises as to what will be done about the judgements already practised by YHWH which are now to be defined as unjust. If, for example, an egalitarian individualism is the messianic mode of judgement as we, in our individual-oriented way, usually seem to assume, then what about the destruction of the women and babies of Sodom? Are they simply to be written off as the price paid for Israel learning—eventually—what justice really is? A pointer—and that is all it really is—to this not being the case is found in the reference to resurrection in the book of Daniel:

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.* Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Dan. 12:1-3; NRSV—my italics).

It is surely significant that users of these texts as scripture have tended to add texts to them: for Christians, the New Testament, for Jews, the rabbinic texts. In both sets of texts, however, resurrection plays an important role and, in a Christian biblical theology of justice at least, this notion must inevitably be incorporated into the four-model scenario developed in this thesis. In his small book on Jewish theological

responses to the holocaust, D. Cohn-Sherbok has noted that, for various reasons bound up with the philosophy of modernity,

Jewish holocaust theologians have refrained from appealing to the traditional belief in other-worldly reward and punishment in formulating their responses to the horrors of the death camps. Yet without this belief, it is simply impossible to make sense of the world as the creation of an all-good and all-powerful God. Without eventual vindication of the righteous in paradise, there is no way to sustain the belief in a providential God who watches over his chosen people.... If death means extinction, there is no way to make sense of the claim that He loves and cherishes all those who died in the concentration camps, for suffering and death would ultimately triumph over each of those who perished. But if there is eternal life in the world to come, then there is hope that the righteous will share in a divine life. Moreover, the divine attribute of justice demands that the righteous of Israel who met their deaths as innocent victims of the Nazis will reap an everlasting reward (1989:128-29).

Although Cohn-Sherbok's argument rests firmly upon an egalitarian individualistic model of judgement—which future study of the scriptures in the light of this thesis might not confirm as being *the* messianic model of justice—it nevertheless points out some of the problems involved in the theodicy question and the role of corporate and individualistic models of justice. YHWH can only fence with Israel for so long about the question of 'justice' because one day, the messianic ideal assures us, it will have to be enacted for real; for YHWH to remain just at that point all of those who have suffered in educative examples of judgements now designated as 'unjust'—perhaps including such as that of Sodom—must be recompensed by the deity in order for YHWH, the Judge of all the Earth, to finally do justice.

## Conclusion

### **A Critical Appraisal of the Canonical Approach**

#### **I. Insights gained into the Canonical Approach Through Praxis**

##### **A. Setting the Scene**

My principal aim has been to critique the praxis of the canonical approach of Brevard S. Childs. But in the execution of that project, its conception has changed considerably over the time period involved. Initially, my intention was to offer a biblical theology of the 'God as Judge' in both Old and New Testaments as it would appear in Childs's approach. I was to take established interpretations of the Sodom narrative of Genesis 18-19 and the passion narrative in John's Gospel (18:28-19:30), and my 'original' contribution was to be a critical consideration of the relationship between the two Testaments as delineated by a study of that particular aspect of the deity (a project that has had to be deferred). As I researched the Sodom narrative more thoroughly, however, I discovered that there was no established interpretation which did justice to the peculiarities of the canonical approach; each could be faulted for failing to take account of one or more of Childs's demands. This led to a shift of concentration away from a 'biblical theology' towards the more textual aspects of the canonical approach as they appeared within a reading of the Sodom narrative itself. In what follows, I hope to draw some critical conclusions about this approach to reading the biblical text of the canonical approach based upon my experience of reading Genesis 18-19 as recorded in chapters 5 and 6.



## B. Historical Information and the Presupposed Knowledge of the Canonical Reader

Perhaps the most fundamental problem which has arisen during my exegetical work on the Sodom narrative relates to the difficulty of deciding when to incorporate historical background knowledge and when to discard it. Does the narrative of Abraham's dialogue with YHWH in Gen. 18:23-33, for example, require either an exclusively corporate (von Rad) or individualistic (Ben Zvi) model of judgement as an essential background or may the availability of both be assumed (my own position)? Of a different but related order is the question of whether or not the first section of YHWH's soliloquy requires as background the knowledge that the deity has decided to destroy Sodom (as Westermann states). Each of these questions requires a decision about how history and historical knowledge will be used to illuminate the text. But what guidance does the canonical approach provide the exegete in making these decisions?

In Childs's own statements concerning the role of historical criticism, it is clear that historical background knowledge is expected to contribute a great deal to how his approach views the biblical text. This is perhaps not surprising given his start in biblical studies in the forties and fifties; Childs is very aware of his own historical critical training and the vast amounts of knowledge generated by its methodologies. I have already discussed the difficulties of Childs's wish to use diachronic studies to illuminate the final form preliminary to my exegesis of the Sodom narrative and rejected such an insistence on knowledge of the diachronic growth of the text as necessary for a canonical approach (see pages 88-92). Nevertheless, my experience of reading the Sodom narrative makes it clear that there is no easy line of demarcation between the illumination provided by the diachronic and that provided by such simple background knowledge as prevailing juridical models. If one accepts Provan's description of Childs's use of the diachronic as involving the skewing the canonical form (rather than as a 'canonical approach' in a Carr mode), then it must also be

acknowledged that the addition of any other kind of historical information inevitably results in a similar skewing.

The essential problem arises from Childs's view of the canonical process itself. Childs's has argued that the final form of the text was formed by self-effacing tradents who so worked on the texts as to loosen them from their historical moorings (since Childs regards certain texts as only achieving a canonical setting with the finalising decision, this process was completed only by 'canonisation proper'). This process also involved the necessary loss, even deliberate suppression, of presupposed reader knowledge as texts were combined and their semantic content altered; in effect, the readers in view changed as the texts themselves were changed. What has become obvious in this thesis, therefore, is that a problem is created by Childs's view of the canonical process with regard to the standpoint of the 'correct' *audience* of the canonical text and therefore with the addition of any pieces of historical background knowledge presupposed *by the final form of the text*. Who exactly are the users of the final form supposed to be? Are they the original Israelites or readers who require the knowledge of such readers? Are they the first-century canonisers or again readers who require the knowledge of such readers? Or are they modern Christian or Jewish readers? Just what sort of background knowledge does the canonical text require of its reader in order for them to read it *as it stands*? Or, to put it another way, when is a text skewed and when is it illuminated!

When Westermann posits that YHWH in Gen. 18:17-19 has already decided to destroy the city solely on the grounds that post-exilic readers would have read the text that way, is that a mandatory assumption for later readers, especially one like myself who is more concerned with the Sodom narrative *as narrative*? In Childs's own reflection on the addition of historical knowledge to the Elijah narrative (1980), he asks what exegetes should do with our vastly improved historical critical knowledge about Canaanite sacrificial practice when interpreting the narrative of Elijah's battle with the priests of Baal on Carmel. (1 Kings 18 has no details about the Baal altar but describes in great detail the altar constructed by Elijah with its twelve stones and so

on.) Childs concludes that this historical material may only be added when it does not obscure the story being told.

But the addition of that type of information is much more subtle than Childs allows. Westermann's view of the text as post-exilic (which in the terms of Childs's canonical approach may perhaps also be transposed to *the text as passing through a post-exilic phase*) does not involve the addition of the large chunk of information about Canaanite sacrificial practice which Childs rejects for the Elijah narrative, but rather entails a subtle twist in the presuppositions of the reader and therefore in the shape of the narrative as it appears in chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis (though of course Westermann could also claim that it is I who have twisted *his* story). Similarly, a resolution of my posited incoherence of Abraham's speech is available to any exegete who is able to insist *on other historical grounds* that this text needs to be read against either exclusively individualistic or corporate thought.

Childs's view of the canonical process does not, it seems to me, provide a set of guidelines by which these decisions can be made (cf. also Sibley Towner's comments on Daniel 1, 1988:293-95). When Childs argues that 1 Corinthians should be read without reference to the actual identities of Paul's opponents as recreated by modern socio-historical investigation *because the canonical text does not record that information*, and shifts the semantic centre of the letter from (the historical critic's presumed) 1 Cor. 14 to 1 Cor. 15 (1984a:274-76), he merely completes the circle here. On what basis does Childs decide that such information is unnecessary for 1 Corinthians but is necessary in the case of the Canaanite material in the Elijah narratives? When should historical information be either incorporated as illumination and when should it be rejected as 'swamping' the text? Equally, if the semantic meaning of most, if not all, of these texts has been altered by their placement within the final text as Childs has claimed, the exegete must also reckon with the effects of canonical harmonisation (whether deliberate or accidental) upon these texts and ask, should the original meaning of the text even be allowed to survive? Even if Westermann, or von Rad, or Ben Zvi were to be correct about the original meaning of

the Sodom narrative, would they necessarily be correct in imposing that meaning upon the words as they now appear in the final form? Or should their particular interpretations be consigned to the scrap heap of ex-meanings discarded by the canonical process? (I can't help thinking that Childs's own argument that Sanders's recreation of the canonical process ignores the wishes of the tradents is encountered afresh when his insistence on our taking account of a text's original meaning effectively countermands its new canonical meaning.) The point of such criticism is not, however, to suggest that exegetes must somehow attempt to read these texts without eyes alert to historical information; they, of course, have very little choice in the matter. Rather, it is the lack of a rigorous procedure within the canonical approach constraining their decisions which is significant here.

It seems likely that there are no rules which can definitively be used to decide which information is in or out; Moberly's assertion that there is no *one* way to apply historical criticism to a canonical approach is undoubtedly correct (1983:23). Two extremes are definitely to be avoided: that of asserting that no historical critical information that is not in the text may be added and that of de-canonising the text and reading it against a detailed historical critical construct. In practice of course neither is really possible—information is always added, but never enough to read the text as it really was read and understood. In between these two points lies a spectrum of readings in which historical critical information is incorporated and semantic shifts in texts because of the effects of canonisation are recognised, both to a greater or lesser degree. The line between illuminating or distorting the final form is not ultimately a question of rule following and a hard text but rather one of the effect of that exegesis upon those who encounter it. If it is convincing and satisfying—and this does not have to mean inoffensive or culturally conforming—it is likely to be accepted as a correct application of historical criticism to the canonical text. If it is judged distracting and irrelevant by the community of the texts, it will be rejected. Only its acceptance over time will clarify such questions.

### C. A 'Thick Text' or a Number of 'Thin Texts'

Deciding to what depth the text should be investigated, what kind of extra-textual material invoked, and whether a particular piece of historical information should be incorporated or discarded is all part of the task of the canonical exegete, but these choices are highly unlikely to be made identically across cultural and temporal boundaries. Because these decisions do not necessarily lead to a mutually reinforcing plurality but rather have in this case led to a number of contradictory readings (contrast my reading with those of Ben Zvi and von Rad), the canonical approach is left not with a 'thick text' in which partial illumination of a singularity takes place, but rather with a series of 'thin texts' which then function as Scripture within contextually differentiated Christian or Jewish communities, albeit with the—at least potentially—humbling proviso that they are not the 'whole story'. To be sure, Childs does acknowledge that community readings change over time (i.e. as their temporal context changes), but he does not appear to consider what may occur to two communities sat side-by-side temporally but a vast distance apart culturally and socially. This view of the canonical text as a thin text which may be radically altered by illumination, whatever its source, rather than as the single coherent thick text which Childs presumes to exist, has the effect of highlighting the context of the exegete and his or her sources of inspiration in the production of canonical meaning. It may also result in a number of different 'Gods' rather than aspects of one 'God'.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> A possible example of this may be drawn from the recent work of Staley. In his early work, Staley had presented an Iserian reader response to the Gospel of John, constructing its ideal reader and outlining that reader's interpretation of the text (1988). But he was bothered by the apparently passionless nature of John's passion narrative, with its remarkably serene crucifixion scene. No doubt this point was highly influential in the use of the Gospel by early Docetic Christians. John's Jesus appearing almost divine in his self-control. (Of course, John's Gospel does not *require* a Docetic interpretation.) But at some point Staley became aware that one feature of first century crucifixions was the sight of dogs around the crosses, lapping up the blood of the victims. With the addition of this gruesome historical information to the exegetical pot, Staley's view of the passion narrative as serene and 'docetic' was changed. But in Fishian terms, the additional information changed the shape of the text itself and, perhaps, the very image of the divine it contains.

In the reconstruction of Childs's approach in Chapter 2, I noted that historical criticism was expected to keep control over the effects of social location on the exegete (see page 131). By involving Old and New Testament specialists in his project, anachronism was to be removed from the readings which arise from the canonical approach. But now, the likelihood that historical knowledge will form such a strict control on exegetes and their canonical text(s) seems considerably less certain. With no clear guidelines as to when to include historical knowledge and when to regard it as properly discarded, a grey area is left in which exegetes make their own decisions about the relevance of historical data.

My own preference has been to consider the canonical approach as a largely modern project with a passing nod to the periods of the canonical process and of the first century CE. It is partially this which allows me to regard both corporate and individualistic models as available to Abraham, regardless of their availability to the ancient Israelites. (Careful readers will have noticed, however, that I also invoked Kaminsky's historical arguments at that point. But did I need to?) I also used models derived from canonically later texts to inform earlier readings (e.g., Matthews's 'protocol of hospitality', gleaned from Judges 4). Was that legitimate? And I assumed that canonical readers should be aware of both Hebrew as a language and of many aspects of Yahwism, balancing, for example, their awareness of the covenant connotations of 'righteousness' over against the fleeting occurrence of the word in YHWH's soliloquy (18:19). In such an early text, many words appear for the first time in the Bible and are canonically programmatic, yet they can only be understood in the light of later knowledge of Hebrew.

Alongside these choices must also be placed the role of other sources in illuminating my Sodom narrative. First and foremost is my use of Gunkel's diachronic study as an exegetical partner. On a number of occasions, I simply dismissed Gunkel's conclusions (e.g., on Gen. 18:17-19). Other times, the tensions identified by Gunkel were obvious and required no illumination from the diachronic to see (e.g., the problem of the one and the three). But on a few occasions, his work proved very

influential in my choices. A good example is my decision to back a rather minority position in asserting that Abraham recognised YHWH from the very start (MT, Sailhammer, Keil-Delitzsch). Gunkel's assertion that YHWH is not recognised at all in Gen. 18:1-15, but is obviously known in the following text led me to adopt the view that Abraham does not recognise YHWH during the narrative precisely *because* he has already recognised the deity at its very beginning. Provan's claim that diachronic studies may prove useful seems to be borne out here, but with the caveat that this may well prove to be the exception and not the rule.

But easily the most significant source of 'illumination' for my reading and proof that Childs's emphasis on this concept is not misplaced has been the history of exegesis on the Sodom narrative. I cannot imagine having developed a reading in which Abraham proves incoherent if the two alternatives exemplified by von Rad (corporate) and Ben Zvi (individualistic) had not been available to me (although as I shall argue shortly, it would not have been impossible).<sup>174</sup> Equally, it is very noticeable that Abraham's position as the father of three great religions has led to a certain—rather problematic—sanctifying of the patriarch over the centuries. Recent studies (including especially those by people not religiously committed to these texts) have, however, been less concerned to defend him at all costs, another move which has facilitated the reading presented here (though I do not actually consider my reading disparaging to the patriarch at all; in contrast to the systematic theologian he is usually portrayed as, my reading at least recognises his essential humanity in the face of potential catastrophe).

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<sup>174</sup> Certainly not every text will have these kinds of alternatives available, but in other research carried out on the character of Gamaliel in Acts 5, I also discovered two contradictory exegetical traditions in which he was seen alternatively as either a fool and a Jew or as a closet spy and Christian (for further discussion, see Lyons, 1997).

It is tempting to see the current practice of deconstruction in biblical studies as opening the way for more confrontations of these alternatives, but in practice one or other is usually much more convincing—that is, relevant—to the contextualised reader. Even in my own reading of Genesis 18-19 here, it has to be admitted both that some will still continue to prefer either the exegesis of von Rad or Ben Zvi and that it may well be a rarity that a canonical exegete will choose not to accept one of the alternatives and develop a new reading.

But the marked effect of this changing attitude to Abraham on the exegesis raises the question of the reader's cultural location and, here, his (my!) autobiography. Although Calvin was asked the question, what about the children of Sodom, his response that they were all 'execrable' is one I cannot imagine giving. Perhaps the most obvious source of illumination provided by my Self is the way in which the 'problem' (for me at least) of the women and children of Sodom is developed. Even having been around feminism for the last ten years or so, I still do not know exactly what 'it' is, yet it seems clear that feminist concerns inform this present work and are being worked out in the exegesis as implications of the gender of the language in use. My 'feminist' problem—originating in an inability to deal with the role of Lot's daughters in Sodom—has certainly exerted a strong pressure to follow the implications of the models of justice problem to its conclusion, pushing it from an original two options—corporate and individualistic—to four options—adding patriarchal and egalitarian variants. The fact that this was a relatively late move in the writing of this thesis probably indicates the ease with which I might simply have covered over the problem in other circumstances.

In all these things, it is a question of balancing the sources of illumination, and I cannot claim to have got *the* right answer because other exegetes will weigh the evidence differently; at the very least they will now have to deal with my conclusions in a way in which I did not, and who knows what that will produce in the long run. The real question about the acceptability of this particular interpretation is therefore one of its momentary rhetorical persuasiveness as to the moves I have made and its general attractiveness to a believing community, rather than its correct application of a rigorous methodology.

#### D. The Canonical Text as Narrative

To any reader familiar with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament narratives the following comments may seem obvious, but they nevertheless demonstrate an essential



feature of the canonical approach—the nature of narrative itself. On a number of occasions, I gained the distinct impression that my ‘text’ was on the verge of collapse, that it would not bear any significant interpretative weight. When Lot finds his sons-in-law, the exegete can hardly help asking whether or not they are blind in view of Gen. 19:11. Equally, the very existence of additional אַנְיִים in Sodom is left ambiguous by Lot’s depiction as an alien and the use of the term ‘men of Sodom’ in 19:4, and there is a temptation to pursue this question into the murky depths.

Two thoughts occurred to me on encountering this aspect of the Sodom narrative. First, that these questions do not seem very central, and therefore imply that a level exists within the text below which it would be unnecessary or unwise to go in deriving significant exegetical information. But assuming that this will always be the case is problematic; a canonical exegete investigating theophanies, for example, may come to define the very sketchy detail of the relationship between YHWH and the angelic figures as highly significant. But second, the fact that this feeling occurred more often in my exegesis of Genesis 19 created in me the suspicion that I was placing a greater weight upon texts which are not more secure in any textual sense, but which are simply more important to me. Why not dismiss the problems with the narrative of Abraham’s intervention as simply as I have done with the narrative of Lot and his sons-in-law? Why spend 27 pages explicating a now highly complex Gen. 18:23-25 and 4 pages on Gen. 19:12-14? (I suspect that I cannot easily invoke Gunkel’s view that some narratives are just better than others, though I feel like doing exactly that). Nevertheless, it seems likely that each—even perhaps every—narrative is capable of being mined for all manner of (strange) detail if aspects of it are pursued to their logical conclusion (for example, see Gossai’s claim that Lot stayed with his sons-in-law in the street all night, thereby demonstrating his indifference to the angelic warning of forthcoming destruction). It is the individual exegete who will decide which details are significant and to be pursued, but the problem of gaining acceptance of a given reading may become more significant, the more ‘tenuous’ the exegesis becomes.

A further example of the uncertainties surrounding the canonical narrative is derived from my experience of being forced on two occasions to make an interpretative decision based upon what may be described as a restriction of the space around the text. In rejecting both the Jewish traditions surrounding the appearance of the three men/YHWH recorded by Ginzberg (see pages 169-70) and the interpretation of Gen. 19:4 as indicating a desire to become acquainted with the two visitors to Sodom offered by R. Wright (see page 259, footnote 159), I applied Occam's razor to the narrative. I chose to see the text as being as simple as possible and regarded cumbersome extra-textual additions as unnecessary. But it is by no means clear that this decision is mandatory in a canonical approach. If a subsequent reader is content to expend a very little more effort on the space around the text (as, for example, those involved with the homosexuality debate have done with Gen. 19:4), there seems to be no difficulty in creating significantly different readings. Furthermore, I am also left open to the charge that other elements of the reading presented here are not as simple as they could be.

A final example of the effects of 'narrative' upon the canonical approach relates to the role of paradoxical formulations in a canonical approach to biblical theology; how should they be handled? In Genesis 18-19, a problem of this kind is caused by YHWH's announcement that Sodom is to be investigated. For some interpreters, this cannot be taken seriously because an omniscient YHWH must know the outcome of such an investigation—the text is therefore made to conform to an all-knowing YHWH with the result that the Sodom narrative becomes simply a test for Abraham; the narrative portrayal of a YHWH who does not yet know the outcome is destroyed.

The clash between the omniscient YHWH—the all-knowing unchanging deity—and the unknowing YHWH—who learns and repents—is one which has been played out in theology for millennia. Is YHWH the Aristotelian deity or is YHWH the deity of such as Process Theology? Or, as seems most likely canonically, are both to be affirmed with approbation reserved for anyone who resolves the problem in either direction? Childs himself has castigated Fretheim's study on the suffering of YHWH

(1992a:356-58) for straying towards the latter, but concludes himself by stating that 'the biblical language of depicting God in human form is not an unfortunate accommodation to human limitation, but a truthful reflection of the free decision of God to identify with his [sic] creation in human form and yet to remain God' (1992a:358); a formulation which, despite Childs's 'yes', merely restates the problem: does YHWH suffer?

But perhaps this is as it should be. Given the wide-ranging nature of this argument, it seems premature that a canonical reading should attempt to resolve this issue textually, by re-interpreting the unknowing YHWH of Gen. 18:20-21 as omniscient. That task appears rather to be a later theological one, in which the role of a canonical biblical theology would be to delineate the strands of text which show YHWH as all-knowing and YHWH as unknowing for subsequent consideration (for this problem on another aspect of the deity, see Moberly, 1998; on 'repentance' and 'non-repentance'). With that in mind, I have read this text as one in which YHWH does not know what the answer to the investigation will be, thus making it a genuine quest for divine knowledge of the outcry against Sodom. But others have not seen things that way (though often influenced by their view of the text as post-exilic rather than because YHWH is omniscient) and might consider my formulation of the responsibilities of the canonical approach to be an avoidance of the issue.

The problems of encountering differing levels of stability within the narrative of a canonical reader, of choosing which extra-textual material to place around the text, and of dealing with paradoxical formulations add further to the possibilities for variations in canonical exegesis. Once again, however, it is the lack of rules as to how much stability is required, how much space can be left around the text in the canonical approach, and how to deal with the paradoxical formulations of the final form which mean that actual validation of these readings can only be left to the particular community of faith in which the exegete is operating.

## E. Repeating Tradition and the Creation of New Readings

A further aspect of the canonical approach rendered problematic by my redescription of the 'thick canonical text' as 'thin canonical texts' is Childs's clear implication that the reading produced should stand in continuity with those of the Christian tradition. Initially this appeared to me to be a rather limiting feature, presupposing in some ways a lack of creativity, a view which presumably underlies the objections of critics of Childs such as Whybray (1981) and Collins (1990). In concluding my thesis, however, I find myself in the rather embarrassing position of offering a new reading based upon a canonical approach to the biblical texts. As yet, I do not know whether to claim this as a demonstration of the creative potential of the canonical approach or of its failure to hold to tradition. Given Childs's own characterisation of the approach as illuminating a single thick text, perhaps the latter is correct. But two factors should give pause for thought: First, we should now fully recognise that the controlling function of the canonical shape (as defined by the interpretive community's assumptions) and the freedom inherent in the act of exegesis in all its contextuality must go hand in hand, with both contributing to the meaning generated *wherever that position leads*. Second, the pressure which the canonical shape places on readings in fact works in my favour in the case of the Sodom narrative. In effect, it is my contention that previous exegetes have largely failed to take the final form seriously; for example, those who happily see Gen. 18:23-33 as proposing an individualistic judgement *despite* YHWH's words in Gen. 18:14a and the overwhelming number of subsequent corporate 'injustices' inflicted by YHWH on Israel. The emphasis on the canonical shape as restrictive may therefore actually lead towards newness and creativity in exegesis rather than towards a stifling repetition. And the essentially open-ended nature of human contextuality indicates that while a certain 'sameness' may exist about canonical interpretations, they are in fact 'infinite' in number.

This ability of the canonical approach to force Christian readers to new readings has several important implications. Though Sanders has pointed out that much of the early Church's use of the Bible was *oracular* rather than *canonical* (e.g., 1987:168-169; a view approvingly cited by Barr, 1999:449), it is important to note that this relates only to its actual usage; Kelsey's position that much of the early church adopted a canon of scripture still stands. It was in their practice that the text was used piecemeal, the correctness or 'orthodoxy' of its everyday application being controlled not so much by the canonical shape but rather by the theological sensibilities of its users. There are undoubtedly Christian communities today—this may even be the norm—who work in the same manner, perhaps through the use of liturgy, lectionaries, Bible notes, or the leading of prophetic structures (as with the Pentecostals). Equally some presently working in biblical theology have argued for a definition of the discipline as one operating in an ecclesiastical setting shaping, ordering and critiquing the continuing life of the Christian Community (e.g., Kelsey and Ollenburger), a definition which may tend towards the oracular and immediate rather than the canonical and mediatory. In these communities, rules for discernment of 'correct' interpretations may have biblical (non-canonical?) roots but they may also be ecclesiastical or simply sociological in origin; the canonical approach does not, therefore, provide the rule of orthodoxy for these groups that Childs claims it should.<sup>175</sup> This Barr characterises as the canon's ecclesiastical 'passivity' (1999:448).

Significantly, however, the rhetoric of these communities (and indeed virtually all 'orthodox' churches) explicitly claims that *the story of the Creator God and his Christ as told from Genesis to Revelation in the canonical scriptures* is the foundational myth which underlies their theology and praxis. They may operate in an

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<sup>175</sup> Whatever the contextual source of an oracular community's rules of discernment, it should be understood that contextuality functions rather differently in discernment than it does in the creation of the canonical text. The latter is produced out of their contextuality and then used as a rule to order the beliefs of the group, thus indirectly affecting their praxis. In the case of discernment, contextuality directly affects praxis through its immediate disavowal of unacceptable practices or readings. Of course, there is considerable overlap: the canonical shape will impact the criteria which govern the acceptability of any readings produced by an oracular community and community rules of discernment will result in the non-acceptance of some canonical readings.

oracular fashion in their praxis as Sanders suggests, but their self-definition usually claims that they operate canonically. A good example of this is provided by the Vigil section of the Church of England's Easter Liturgy. Its opening words include the following: 'As we wait the risen Christ, let us hear the record of God's saving deeds in history, recalling how he saved his people in ages past and in the fullness of time sent his Son to be our redeemer' (—,1986:228). Readings are then used in which a narrative or prophetic passage is linked with a psalm or song:

- |       |   |                        |
|-------|---|------------------------|
| I.    | Gen. 1:1-2:2  | (with Ps. 33:1-9);     |
| II.   | Gen. 3  | (with Psalm 130);      |
| III.  | Gen. 7:1-5, 10-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13                       | (with Psalm 46);       |
| IV.   | Gen. 22:1-18  | (with Ps. 16:8-end);   |
| V.    | Exod. 14:15-15:1a                                       | (with Exodus 15);      |
| VI.   | Deut. 31:22-30  | (with Deuteronomy 32); |
| VII.  | Isa. 54:5-14  | (with Psalm 30);       |
| VIII. | Isa. 55:1-11  | (with Isaiah 12);      |
| IX.   | Job 14:1-14   | (with Psalm 23);       |
| X.    | Baruch 3:9-15; 32-end                                   | (with Ps. 19:7-end);   |
| XI.   | Ezek. 36:25-28  | (with Ps. 42:1-7);     |
| XII.  | Ezek. 37:1-14   | (with Psalm 126);      |
| XIII. | Rom. 6:3-11;  |                        |
| XIV.  | Mt. 28:2-10 <i>or</i> Mk. 16:1-8 <i>or</i> Lk. 24:1-12. |                        |

Although the choice of texts is obviously slanted towards its setting within the Easter Vigil, it is clear that this sequence of readings is intelligible only in the light of its assumption of a canonical form of the biblical text.

This factor gives the canonical approach a decided advantage in its attempts to have its readings appropriated by such communities of faith. Unlike feminist, liberationist, and some of the more nihilistic post-modern approaches, the canonical approach is able to invoke a community's own belief statements in order to gain a hearing and perhaps eventual acceptance, even for those readings which are new and

creative. No doubt the sheer inertia of any long-standing interpretation will make this process of acceptance a slow one at best, but since, at least in my experience, many other readings never even get their foot into the Church door, that is a relatively minor problem for the canonical approach. When I first encountered Childs's work in 1993, a friend who was then training for ministry told me that the canonical work of Moberly was excellent for preaching. It is this excellence (or the lack of it) which will ultimately seal the fate of the canonical approach, but the strategic importance of its back door into these communities of faith should not be underestimated.

#### F. Reading the Canonical Text Backwards

It seems beyond doubt that it is inherent in the canonical approach as I have described and practised it here that there is no single canonical meaning of the Bible, no single biblical 'text'. But an infinite (that is, open-ended) number of texts does not mean that absolutely any reading of the canon is freely available to us. Rather the same unavoidable contextuality which *allows* an open-ended number of meanings being ascribed to the canon also *restricts* the kinds of meanings which can be 'discovered' in the text. The restricted availability of meanings for the whole of the canon filters down into the (still open-ended) number of meanings available to be ascribed to individual passages. This is because they each have to survive beyond the confines of their own immediate canonical setting.

A good illustration of this phenomenon—the failure of a reading to last the canonical distance—was supplied by my experience of reading the Sodom narrative canonically. As I began to study Genesis 18-19, I sought to find a reading on the text which I could use in my then larger project of a 'biblical theology of God as Judge'. I began by accepting that the 'individualistic' reading of Ben Zvi et al. was correct. But when I came to write a short section on YHWH's justice in the rest of the Old Testament, I found that these scholars were implicitly arguing that most of God's justice in the Bible was profane; as one reads the history of Israel, justice is dispensed

in corporate terms with not the slightest embarrassment. I then moved towards the opposite pole of seeing the text as corporate, but I soon discovered that von Rad's new collectivism does not last very long before being utterly swamped by the 'old' style collective judgements inflicted on Israel by its deity. At that impasse I developed/discovered the reading outlined in chapters 5 and 6, a reading which I will now happily defend for its own merit. After all, it does best justice to my canonical 'text'!

What I have been arguing for in the interpretation offered within this thesis is perhaps, ultimately, a reading driven by my assumption that an intolerable tension should not exist between this text and canonically subsequent ones; in that sense, I am reading back to front. The strongest justification for my rejecting the coherence of Abraham was not originally its obviousness as a reading of this text, but rather my personal discomfort with the implications of the readings of Ben Zvi and von Rad for subsequent texts, for the whole of the canonical text itself. I find it difficult to imagine how any canonical reader can do otherwise (Ben Zvi and von Rad, of course, are reading as historical critics and are not being criticised here). It is one thing to see the canonical text as containing paradoxes, even contradictions, but to see it as seemingly providing a standard of judgement which it then so comprehensively ignores without any apology, I deemed intolerable. Others might not.

But my response to this tension between Genesis 18-19 and subsequent texts is not the only one available. Calvin also struggled with the difficulty of reconciling an individualistic judgement with subsequent actions thus rendered unjust and resolved the question by refusing to see Gen. 18:25 as providing an eternal standard of justice; God must be free to be God and so this text only provides a temporary and localised justice (1965:488). Though its acceptance would have perhaps left me within the tradition as Childs envisaged his project, I rejected this option on the grounds that I did not see Abraham as positively as Calvin, and because I could only see Abraham's question as requiring a definitive answer. If YHWH affirmed an answer at all in this text, it seemed to me that it must be universally valid. Eventually I discovered an



alternative reading in which YHWH does not affirm a particular mode of judgement but leaves the question of Genesis 18:25 open in rather different fashion.

This description of my journey with the Sodom narrative raises questions about the linearity of the canonical approach. Childs has always acknowledged that the exegete begins with his or her own faith; there is no *tabula rasa* as one approaches Gen. 1:1. But the actual process of reading seems to involve decisions taken retrospectively as the ensuing canonical shape denies earlier accepted readings (and, as I also discovered, a constant re-appraisal occurs as *earlier texts* are re-read and shed a changing light on the text in question). A strong element of provisionality is, therefore, to be acknowledged as readings progress. This cannot involve a total silence from the exegete until such time as all provisionality is removed because that in fact never happens. Rather, two stages of acceptance are presumably created: the first when a reading is proposed and the second when that reading has survived the test of the canonical shape. While it is tempting to assume that a text as long as the Bible will only allow a single reading, such a conclusion is to be rejected. Ever-widening contexts in which these texts are encountered mean that only a limited (by the canonical shape) indeterminacy exists. Knowledge of the deity through this source is partial indeed!

In theory then, the reading of the Sodom narrative proposed here could be denied by subsequent exegesis and I could be thrown back with Calvin or even with Ben Zvi or von Rad. My confidence that this will not happen (easily at least) is due mainly to the ironic nature of my exegesis. YHWH has left open the question of justice for subsequent investigation. As texts concerning justice are encountered, their content effectively gives form to the answer which will eventually be given to Genesis 18:25. But because YHWH has refused to answer clearly that question now, any subsequent divine pronouncements which appear to define justice will invite the suspicion that the deity is once again educating rather than informing. Indeed the subversive nature of this reading seems to be well matched to the vexed question of

YHWH's justice. After all, if the answer was obvious, theodicy would not be such a tricky business.

The ultimate device for forcing a 're-reading' of the Christian canon is, of course, Christ himself. Although Childs disagrees with Luther's view of Christ as a *Sachkritik* which simply divides the texts into Law and Gospel, this is largely a matter of not wishing to reduce Christ solely to a formula such as 'justification by faith'. For Childs, Jesus Christ does function as the true norm of the canon of Scripture and though he writes only of re-reading the Old Testament in the light of the full reality of the divine contained in both Old and New Testament and not of changing its *sensus literalis*, a considerable temptation will exist for exegetes to change the canonical text in the light of Christ, producing a potentially Marcionite attitude to the Old Testament. But the implications of that aspect of the canonical approach must await another day!

#### G. Ideological Constraints Leading to a Defence of YHWH's Justice

With the effective removal of the canonical text from a context in which exegetical decisions can be justified with the words 'for the ancient Israelite, this could only have meant...', two further implications of the canonical approach arise; namely, that choices about how to interpret particular actions or words must be made, and that these choices are themselves open to the ideological influences placed upon exegetes by their setting within a community which has a vested interest in the interpretations being proposed. In Genesis 18-19 for example, it was my own discomfort with subsequent texts defining YHWH as unjust which led to the rethinking of my whole approach to the Sodom narrative. Why did I not simply allow the tension between YHWH's justice in Genesis 18 and subsequent texts to stand?

I could perhaps argue that this tension was rendered problematic by the canonical shape itself, but that would be inaccurate for two reasons: first, there is no *a priori* reason why the canonical shape should give a consistent portrait about any aspect of YHWH (compare the various assessments of the divine Christ in the New

Testament). Second, the canonical text includes sections in which YHWH's justice is already seen as in tension, perhaps even as being denied (e.g., Job 9:22). If these texts can query YHWH's justice, why not this canonical reader?

The obvious answer is that I have an undeclared (though now obvious) vested interest in defending the justice of YHWH, and it is for that reason that I expended so much energy in providing an interpretation in which YHWH's justice is defended. Much to my chagrin, however, I now realise that what I have actually done is probably provide a justification of YHWH's actions as 'just' wherever they occur in the Old Testament. Or rather, I have effectively removed the concept of YHWH as judge from the discussion altogether by raising over it concepts such as YHWH as educator and YHWH as planner. But once aware of this ideology, why not simply discard it and take what comes, read canonically but without the insistence on defending YHWH?

There are numerous reasons why it is difficult to envisage a canonical approach which denies this ideology (or a version of it). Canonical exegetes may not be willing to reject the ideology because they are wholly unable to contemplate the concept of an unjust deity; they feel that they must respond with Paul's words, *μη γένοιτο* (Rom. 3:6). Or they may be so enamoured of the gloriousness of YHWH that they forget to play Abraham's role in questioning (the justice of?) the deity. Alternatively, they may choose to retain the ideology because of the market value of the reading it has partially created; arguing that YHWH is not unjust is unquestionably a popular move with faith communities (even if one cannot then easily say that the deity is just). Fear of being unpopular, of being rejected, of being unpaid (!), (in former times) of being burnt at the stake for the blasphemy of postulating an unjust deity, (and for myself particularly) of not having something 'original' on which to write a thesis on Childs's canonical approach, all may lead to an implicit acceptance of the necessary justness of YHWH; as W. Brueggemann might put it, one may be tempted to 'legitimate the structure' but forget the 'embracing of pain'.

But the occurrence of such an ideology in itself does not require the abandonment of the canonical approach. If that were so, it seems highly unlikely to me

that any canonical interpretation would ever be offered. The problem here is one of fit between my own readerly ideology and the ideology of my own version of the canonical text. How will I react when I encounter passages in which YHWH's justice is questioned? Will I over-write them with platitudes or will I be able to 'embrace the pain' they demonstrate? Or perhaps most intriguingly, will the reading I have proposed here, whatever its ideological origins, be able to generate a new, even creative, synthesis on the justice of YHWH? Perhaps I can even now argue that my reading does not actually require the ideology that produced it because—having now been propounded—it can actually be derived from the text without having to read the text backwards.

#### H. Reading Against the Canonical Grain

The final point I wish to consider concerning ideology and the canonical approach is that raised by those who see any reading which attempts to work within the ideology of a text as inherently flawed, as an abrogation of one's own moral responsibility. This view would, of course, be considered irrelevant by those who approach the text with the mind of a Barth or a Childs. They are concerned with the reflection of God and are unimpressed by the moral abilities of human beings. Not unnaturally, this makes them appear highly dangerous, even deluded, to those who wish *a priori* to resist the grain of the text.

In this thesis, I have attempted carefully to chart a course between these two approaches to the canonical text. Initially I resisted at a number of points the urgings of others to read against the grain of the canonical text *whilst carrying out my exegesis*. Sometimes it appeared that the only way I could appear to be carrying out a critical project would be to do just that. But I argued that it was only through a thorough application of the canonical approach that judgements may eventually be made as to the nature of its text, of its grain. In effect I immersed myself totally in its

grain in order to avoid the later charge that I had sabotaged the project by stepping outside the presuppositions of the approach as I was attempting to carry it out.

But now that the preliminary grain of at least one canonical reading has been made apparent in this thesis, I find that I am not in the best position to decide how to proceed on this question. Perhaps it is a case of being too close to one's own work, of liking its results too much. I have enjoyed the ironies generated by my reading of Abraham's speech and as yet I do not know what manner of foolishness may find justification in it. (The inevitably partial nature of this reading of only two chapters of Genesis also creates difficulties when considering the full implications of the canonical text.) But the most likely source of reading against the grain of this text is not yet available to me, the response of critics to my arguments.

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