

Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative

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The very terms we habitually use to designate the sundry biblical narratives reflect an uncertainty as to whether the stories taken in sequence have something that could be called a structure, and as to what sort of larger configurations they might form. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are usually called the Primeval History, as though they constituted a continuous historical narrative, despite the repeated scholarly arguments that they are in fact an uneven stitching-together of the most heterogeneous materials. On the other hand, we often speak of the Patriarchal Tales or the Wilderness Tales, a designation that suggests something vaguely anthological. Or again, it is common practice to invoke with a certain ring of academic authority the Abraham cycle, the Jacob cycle, the Elijah cycle, but if that term has a precise application for Norse sagas or Wagnerian opera, it seems chiefly an evasion in the case of biblical narrative. We do, of course, talk about the Joseph story and the David Story, but this is only because these are rare exceptions in which the ancient Hebrew writers have given us a relatively lengthy, continuous narrative—apart from a few seeming interpolations—that follows the chronological movement of a central figure's life.

If one's standard of unitary narrative is drawn from self-consciously artful novels like *Madame Bovary*, Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, or even, on a more ambitiously panoramic scale, *Anna Karenina*, it goes without saying that biblical narrative is far from unitary. Scholarly opinion has by and large jumped to the conclusion that if biblical narrative is not unitary, it must be episodic. Episodic structure, as Aristotle first observed, means no necessary sequence among the incidents told. In the case of a single author, episodic structure may be quite intentional and often expresses a rejection of hierarchies, an enchantment with the teeming heterogeneity of experience, as in *Don Quixote*, Lesage's *Gil Blas*, or *Huckleberry Finn*. By contrast, the episodic character of biblical narrative, as it is usually represented in scholarly analysis, is the result of editorial inadvertence rather than author-

ial intention: the anonymous redactors, working under the constraints of authoritative ancient traditions in ways we can no longer gauge, are imagined patching together swatches of very different materials, sometimes splicing two or more versions of the same story sometimes inserting extraneous stories that originated in radically different contexts.

It may be helpful in trying to think about the larger configurations of biblical narrative to keep in mind that only a minority of long narratives anywhere, whether pre-novelistic or novelistic, are consistently unitary. Dickens, for example, often used the devices of tightly sustained suspense of the detective-novel plot, and modern criticism has celebrated the symmetries of his symbolic structures, yet the typical Dickens novel is studded with anecdotal digressions and, in the earlier phase of his career, with interpolated tales. Fielding is justly praised as one of the most architectonic of English novelists—Coleridge rated the plot of *Tom Jones*, along with that of *Oedipus Rex* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, as one of the three most perfect in world literature—yet both *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* include long interpolated tales that are different from the surrounding narrative in style, tone, genre, and personages. The instance of Fielding is particularly instructive because it suggests that even a writer so supremely conscious of unified artifice—in *Tom Jones* one might mention the structural symmetry of six books in the country, six on the road, six in town, or the tonal unity conferred by the ubiquitous ironic narrator—might for his own good reasons introduce materials whose chief connection with the main narrative was a matter of shared theme or mere analogy.

Let me propose that something quite similar repeatedly occurs in biblical narrative in the juxtaposition of disparate materials that are purposefully linked by motif, theme, analogy, and, sometimes, by a character who serves as a bridge between two different narrative blocks otherwise separated in regard to plot and often in regard to style and perspective or even genre. Obviously, in the Bible the proportion of such insertions is quite

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unlike what one finds in Fielding, who makes only occasional use of them. Indeed, it may be inaccurate to speak at all of "insertions" in the case of the Bible, for the artful juxtaposition of seemingly disparate episodes is more like a basic structuring procedure, a feature especially evident in Numbers, Joshua, Kings, and, above all, in the Book of Judges, but also discernible elsewhere. This would appear to be the expression of an activity that in recent years has come to be called redactional art, but in what follows I shall speak of the writer rather than the redactor in the interests of accuracy as well as of simplicity, for we need to remind ourselves that the redactor, however enshrined in modern biblical scholarship, remains a conjectural entity, and the more one scrutinizes his supposed work, the more the line between redactor and writer blurs.

Rather than try to describe the overarching design of a whole book or sequence of books, a project that would require a great deal of space for persuasive execution, I would like to demonstrate the general principle by following the biblical text at a point where there seems to be a break in narrative continuity. In fact, the example I have chosen involves what looks like a triple break from the surrounding narrative, but I shall try to show that all three stages of the break are firmly linked together and locked into both the immediate narrative context and into the larger thematic design of Genesis and subsequent books in a way that complicates the thread of meaning.

In Genesis 17, God appears before the 99-year-old Abram, changes his name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah as an affirmation of the covenant, and resonantly announces a future of progeny through Sarah—a promise so improbable that it causes Abraham to laugh in disbelief. In the first half of the next chapter, we have the story of the three mysterious visitors who come to Abraham (from what one can make out, they are God himself and two of his messengers), one of whom brings the good tidings that within the year Sarah will bear a son. This time, it is she, overhearing the promise from the tent-opening, who laughs in disbelief, perhaps even sarcastically. Documentary critics have been quick to identify these two sequenced stories as a duplication from two different sources, P and then J. Whether in fact scholarly analysis has succeeded in "unscrambling the omelette" here, to borrow a telling phrase from Sir Edmund Leach, is something I shall not presume to judge. More essential to our purposes is that the

writer wants a double version of the promise of progeny, partly for the sheer effect of grand emphasis, but also because he needs first a patriarchal version and then a matriarchal one. In chapter 17, Abraham alone is present before God; the plight of the 90-year-old barren Sarah is mentioned only in passing and in secondary syntactic position after Abraham (verse 17); and male biology is very much at issue in the stress on the newly enjoined commandment of circumcision (though Abraham undertakes it for himself and all his future sons, its placement in the narrative sequence makes it look like a precondition to the begetting of the son, as, analogously, in Exodus 4, the tale of the Bridegroom of Blood, the circumcision of the son is the necessary means for his survival). In the first half of chapter 18, we encounter the inaugural instance of the annunciation type-scene. As a conventional tale, it is pre-eminently matriarchal, for the good news always comes to the wife, often in the absence of the husband. Here, however, perhaps because of the force of the idea of Abraham as founding father, there is a partial displacement from matriarchal to patriarchal emphasis, the angel speaking to Abraham while Sarah eavesdrops on her own annunciation. In any case, it is she who laughs, and it is her biology—the twice stated fact of her post-menopausal condition—that is at issue. This shift, even if it is a somewhat qualified one, from patriarch to matriarch in the second version of the promise is crucial, for in what follows women and sexuality, women and propagation, will be central.

Now, in all other occurrences of the annunciation type-scene,¹ the first two motifs of the conventional sequence—(a) the woman's condition of barrenness; (b) the annunciation—are immediately followed by the third motif of fulfillment (c) the birth of the son (cf. Gen. 25:19-25; Judges 13:1; Sam. 1:2; Kings 4:8-17). Here, however, there is a long interruption before the birth of Isaac at the beginning of Genesis 21. First, God announces to Abraham his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham launches upon his memorable effort to bargain with God over the survival of the doomed cities, starting with the possibility of fifty righteous souls therein and working down to ten (18:17-33). The

1. I have followed out this particular type-scene in "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3:2 (May 1983), 115-130. I first proposed the concept of type-scenes as a component of biblical narrative in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), ch. 3.

first half of chapter 19 tells the story of the destruction of Sodom, concluding with what looks like an etiological tale (to explain a geological oddity in the Dead Sea region) about Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt. The second half of the chapter is a very different kind of etiological tale, accounting for the origins of two trans-Jordanian peoples, the Moabites and the Ammonites, in the incestuous copulation of Lot and his daughters. The whole of chapter 20 is then taken up with the second of three versions of the sister-wife story: the patriarch in a southern kingdom (here, Abraham in Gerar) who proclaims that his wife is his sister, in consequence almost loses her to the local potentate, but in the end departs with wife intact, and heaped with riches by the would-be interloper. Since nowhere else are there such interruptions of the annunciation's fulfillment, we are surely entitled to ask what all this has to do with the promise of seed to Abraham. Let me suggest that in the view of the biblical writer, progeny for the first father of the future Israelites involved a whole tangle of far-reaching complications for the adumbration of which these three intervening episodes were necessary, and that Sodom, far from being an interruption of the saga of the seed of Abraham, is a major thematic nexus of the larger story.²

We should observe, to begin with, that the dialogue between Abraham and God in the second half of Genesis 18 sets up a connection between the covenantal promise and the story of Sodom by adding a new essential theme to the covenantal idea. The two previous enunciations of the covenant, which take up all of chapters 15 and 17, are ringing promises of progeny and little more: your seed, God assures the doubting Abraham, will be as innumerable as the stars in the heavens. The only condition hinted at is that Abraham remain a faithful party to the covenant but, remarkably, no *content* is given to this faithfulness. It looks almost as if a trap were set for the audience, encouraging them at first to think that the divine promise was a free gift, entered into through a solemn ritual (the sacrificial animal parts of chapter 15) and perpetually confirmed by still another ritual (the circumcision of chapter 17). Now, however, when God reaffirms the language of blessing and the future of nationhood in chapter

18, he adds this stipulation about Abraham and his posterity: "For I have singled him out (new JPS) so that he might instruct his sons and his family after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord *to do righteousness and justice*" (18:19, my emphasis). Survival and propagation, then, depend on the creation of a just society. This idea is immediately picked up as God goes on to warn Abraham of his intention to destroy the Cities of the Plain because of their pervasive wickedness. Abraham, aghast at the possibility that the righteous might be wiped out with the wicked, tosses back the very phrase God has just used about human ethical obligations: "Will the judge of all the earth not *do justice*?" (18:25). The echo of *shofet*, judge, and *mishpat*, justice, will then sound loudly in a jibe about Lot made by the citizens of Sodom, whom he has implored to desist from their violent intentions: "This fellow came to sojourn, and now he presumes to judge, yes, to judge" (19:9). The verb *shofet* also means "to rule," which may be its primary sense here, but the play with "doing justice" of the previous chapter is quite pointed: Sodom is a society without judge or justice, and a latecomer resident alien will hardly be allowed to act as *shofet* in any sense of the word.

As many commentators have noted, the hospitality scene between Abraham and the divine visitors at the beginning of Genesis 18 is paralleled by the hospitality scene between Lot and the two angels at the beginning of Genesis 19—paralleled with a nuance of difference, for Lot's language to the angels is more urgent, in a string of imperative verbs, less deferentially ceremonious than Abraham's language, and here the narrator gives us nothing like the details of the menu and the flurry of preparations for the feast that we are offered in the pastoral setting of the previous chapter. Lot's rather breathless hospitality—is he already scared by what could happen to strangers in his town?—is of course the single exception to the rule in Sodom. This story of the doomed city is crucial not only to Genesis but to the moral thematics of the Bible as a whole (compare the use of Sodom in Isaiah 1 and Judges 19) because it is the biblical version of anti-civilization, rather like Homer's islands of the Cyclops monsters where the inhabitants eat strangers instead of welcoming them. If we wondered momentarily what God had in mind when he told Abraham that the outrages of Sodom—literally, its "crying out"—were so great that they reached the very heavens, we now see all the male inhabitants

2. J. P. Fokkerman provides an excellent discussion on progeny and survival as organizing themes of Genesis in his article on that book in *The Harvard Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (forthcoming).

of Sodom, from adolescent to dodderer, banging on Lot's door and demanding the right to gang-rape the two strangers. The narrator offers no comment on the homosexual aspect of the threatened act of violence, though it is safe to assume he expects us to consider that, too, abhorrent, but in regard to this episode's place in the larger story of progeny for Abraham, it is surely important that homosexuality is a necessarily sterile form of sexual intercourse, as though the proclivities of the Sodomites answered biologically to their utter indifference to the moral prerequisites for survival.

At this ominous point, in one of the most scandalous statements uttered by any character in ancient literature, Lot's daughters, not previously mentioned, are brought into the story. "Look," Lot tells the assailants, "I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you want. But to these men do nothing, for they have come under the shadow of my roof-beam" (19:7). Some have sought to naturalize this outrageous offer by contending that in the ancient Near East the host-guest bond (someone coming under the shadow of your roof-beam) was sacred, conferring obligations that exceeded those of a man to his virgin daughters. The impassive narrator, as is his wont, offers no guidance on this question, but the unfolding of the story, and its contrastive connections with the surrounding narrative, cast doubt on this proposition that Lot was simply playing the perfect ancient Near Eastern host in rather trying circumstances. It is important for what happens at the end of the chapter that the two girls should be virgins, and Lot clearly imagines he is offering the rapists a special treat in proclaiming their virginity. What we are not told, in a shrewd maneuver of delayed exposition, is that both the girls are betrothed. This information is not divulged until verse 14, when Lot, at the angels' insistence, entreats his prospective sons-in-law to save themselves from the imminent destruction. Their response is to think Lot must be joking, *metsabeq*, the same verb of laughter that designates Abraham's and Sarah's response to the promise of progeny, and that here, in polar contrast, becomes a mechanism of skepticism that seals the doom of the two men. Now, at least according to later biblical law, the rape of a betrothed woman is a crime punishable by death (cf. Deut. 22:23-27), and it is reasonable to infer that Lot evinces a disquieting readiness here to serve as accomplice in the multiple enactment of a capital crime directed

against his own daughters. The implicit judgment against Lot is then confirmed in the incest at the end of the chapter, to which we shall turn momentarily.

Let me first add a brief comment on the motif of sight and blindness, which helps structure the story thematically and also links it with the surrounding narrative. The transition to Sodom was first signaled visually when Abraham escorted the two visitors out on their way and they "looked down" on Sodom, far below in the Dead Sea plain (18:16). The conclusion of the destruction is symmetrically marked at 19:28 when the next morning Abraham, in the equivalent of a cinematic long shot, "looks down" (the same verb) on the Cities of the Plain and is able to discern columns of smoke rising from the distant ruins. In the Sodom story proper, the angels smite the assailants with blindness so that they are unable to find the door of Lot's house. Then, before carrying out the terrible devastation, the angels warn Lot not to look back; and, most famously, when his wife does just that, she is turned to a pillar of salt. I don't pretend to know precisely what this taboo—also attested to elsewhere—of looking back, or looking on the destruction, meant in the imagination of the ancient folk. I would observe, however, that the taboo against seeing has regular sexual associations in the Bible (as, of course, it also does in psychoanalytic terms). To "see the nakedness" of someone is the standard biblical euphemism for incest. Genesis 19 does not use that idiom, but this rampant mob struck with blindness at a closed door is, after all, seeking forbidden sexual congress, and the story ends with a tale of incest.

That episode (19:29-38) is presented in an unsettling manner of impassive factuality, the narrator providing no indication whether the double incest should in any way be condemned. It would sadly reduce the story to think of it simply as a satiric representation of the dubious origins of two enemy peoples, the Moabites and the Ammonites, for its more important function is to tie together several thematically significant connections with the immediate and larger context of biblical narrative. Lot, we recall, has fled with his two daughters to the city of Zoar, which, as a special dispensation for his sake, has alone been saved from destruction among the Cities of the Plain. But Lot is afraid to stay in Zoar, whether because he fears still another wave of cataclysm or Sodom-like behavior on the part of

