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Sarah/Sodom: Birth, Destruction, and Synchronic Transaction

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Abstract

This article proposes that reading Genesis 18–19, the announcement of Isaac's birth and the destruction of Sodom, as a cohesive narrative unit (and as a reversal of Gen. 13) reveals a deep structure of symmetry, opposition, and closure. Between counterpointed righteous birth and destroyed wickedness, opposed constructs move in opposite *movement* in dynamic synchrony and transformation. As the messengers of birth destroy Sodom, the aged barren Sarah becomes young and fertile while the fertile Sodom turns to ash and salt. Transacted opposition is established in the narrative's deep structure or at the linguistic level of literary association in similar and contrasted motifs, words, phrases, and word-play.

Keywords: Sarah, Abraham, Sodom, Genesis, Narrative Structure

What happens when we read Genesis 18–19, the announcement of Isaac's birth and the destruction of Sodom, as one narrative unit? (They are one paragraph in the Masoretic division and not two chapters.) Internal parallels and contrasts become more sharply nuanced in the narrative's unified integrity: birth/destruction and extreme kindness, hospitality, piety, modesty, and their extreme opposites. And between the counterpointed oppositions of birth/destruction and righteousness/wickedness come others: young/old, fertility/destruction, day/night, city/plain, seeing/

blindness, time/place, and more. Then we notice that they are not at all static. Significantly, they move in opposed *movement* in transition and transaction, in dynamic synchrony.¹ Thus, for example, while the fertile lush Sodom becomes ash and salt, the aged barren Sarah becomes young and fertile as the messengers of birth to Sarah destroy Sodom. The transactive opposition is established in the narrative's deep structure and at the linguistic level in contrasted motifs, words, phrases, and wordplay.

There is no need to read very deeply to find the underlying opposition of birth and destruction. God himself clearly notes their connection as he asks if he is hiding the *destruction* for *wickedness* from Abraham to whom will now be *born* a great nation whom he will teach *righteousness* (18.18-21). The question creates a contrasted sound pair, צדקה/צעקה, of Abraham's צדקה, *righteousness* (18.19), and Sodom's צעקה (18.21), the *screaming* of its victims (as in Isa. 5.7, לַצִּדְקָה וְהָנָה צַעֲקָה). In the larger unit, unthinkable birth or destruction are announced within opposed contexts of extreme hospitality or inhospitality. Those who will experience them laugh in disbelief: Sarah laughs at the possibility of birth (וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בִּקְרָבָה, 18.12) while Lot's sons-in-law will laugh at the possibility of destruction (וַיִּהְיֶה בַּמִּצְחָק בְּעֵינֵי חֲתָנֶיהָ, 19.14). In the angelic visit announcing both, God asks about *birth*: 'Is anything *hidden from God*' (הֲיִפְלֵא מִה' דָּבָר, 18.14)² just as he asks about *destruction*, 'Am I *hiding from Abraham* that which will do?' (הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם, 18.17). The connection becomes clear in his paraphrasing Sarah: הֲאֵפֶּה אֲמַנֵּם אֵלֹד, 'Will I indeed give birth?' (18.13) which directly precedes Abraham's prayer for Sodom: הֲאֵפֶּה תִסְפֶּה צָדִיק עִם רָשָׁע, הֲאֵפֶּה תִסְפֶּה וְלֹא תִשָּׂא, 'Will You indeed destroy?' (18.23, 24).

1. On the binary principle (and dynamic synchrony rather than synchronic/diachronic dichotomy), see R. Jakobson, *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), pp. 6-7; C. Levi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris: Plan, 1958).

2. On phonological sound pairs, usually in biblical poetry, see Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), Chapter 6, 'The Phonological Aspect: Sound Pairs', pp. 103-26; Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (JSNTSup, 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986); *idem*, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (JSOTSup, 170; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); and Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1998).

3. Cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, R. Saadia Gaon, at Deut. 17.8: כִּי יִפְלֵא מִמְּךָ דָּבָר לְמַשְׁפָּט, 'when something will be hidden from you'; Onqelos ה' קָדָם ה' הִתְכַּסִּי מִן קָדָם ה', 'will something be hidden from God' (18.14), and הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי, 'am I hiding' (18.17).

Structural Symmetry (and Asymmetry)

The narrative is framed symmetrically beginning with the imagery of Abraham running *towards* guests to do kindness to travelers on the plain at *the heat of the day* (בַּחֶם הַיּוֹם, 18.1) and ending with Lot running *from* the urban inhospitable Sodom to save himself *before the sun comes out* (הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יֵצֵא, 19.23). Similarly, וִירָא וְהִנֵּה appears at the beginning and end: Abraham first *sees* strangers whom he runs to feed (וִירָא וְהִנֵּה [שְׁלֹשָׁה], 18.2) and in the end *sees* Sodom destroyed (וִירָא וְהִנֵּה [עָלָה קִימָר], 19.26) after the Sodomites threaten those same guests, the angels. (He *sees* the guests from his *tent's opening*; the Sodomites threaten them at the *opening of Lot's door* and are *blinded*, 19.11⁴). Abraham's guests *gaze on the face* of Sodom (וַיִּשְׁקִיפוּ עַל פְּנֵי סְדוֹם, 18.16) leaving to destroy it, the impetus for his praying for it; in the end in a parallel phrase Abraham himself *gazes on the face* of Sodom (וַיִּשְׁקֹף עַל פְּנֵי סְדוֹם, 19.28) as it is destroyed. In a large frame the narrative begins as God *appears* (וִירָא, 18.1) to Abraham to say he will go *see*⁵ (וַאֲרָאָה, 19.21) the wickedness of Sodom and ends as Abraham *gazes* on Sodom's destruction at the same moment that Lot's wife *looks* back (וַתִּבְטֹ, 19.26) at it.⁶

On the level of wordplay, in the beginning, Abraham *seeing* guests *standing* (נִצְבִּים, 18.2) offers them the *bread* (לֶחֶם, 18.5) his wife bakes; in the end, Lot's wife (who did *not* bake them bread) *looks* at Sodom's destruction though told not to (by those guests) and reverses metathetically (and otherwise) to a *pillar* (נִצִּיב) of *salt* (מֶלַח, 19.25). Abraham *hurries* (וַיַּמְהֵר אַבְרָהָם) to do kindness and to tell his wife to *hurry bread* (מַהֲרִי קֶמַח סֶלֶת, 18.6) and in contrast Lot and wife and family *hurry* (מַהֲרִי הַמֵּלֶט, 19.22) to escape destruction out of the valley *district* (הַכְּבֵר, 19.17) which also means a loaf of *bread* in a shared etymology.⁷ With the word עָמַד⁸ Abraham *serves* guests (וַהֲוָה עָמַד עֲלֵיהֶם, 18.7) and *prays* to

4. Ironically, Lot offered them his daughters to do as is 'good in your eyes'; after the blinding he is as if joking 'in his sons-in-law's eyes'.

5. *Onqelos* translates the anthropomorphism as וְאֵדוּן ('I will judge').

6. Yehuda Sarna, 'The Salt Saga: Lot's Wife or Sodom Itself', *Nachalah: Yeshiva University Journal for the Study of Bible* 1 (1999), pp. 73-82 (75), notes the narrative significance: she sees (וַתִּבְטֹ) the salt from close and is struck by the destruction's *permanence* as Abraham sees (וַיִּשְׁקֹף) the smoke from afar and is struck by its *totality*.

7. BDB, s.v. כֶּבֶר notes how both senses of כֶּבֶר share the same meaning of roundness; Y. Kil, *Sefer Bereishit Im Perush Daat Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997), Gen. 13.10, notes how it appears as a *loaf of bread* from afar.

8. F.I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), pp. 81, 83, notes an episode-final circumstantial clause //וַיִּקַּח הַמֶּלֶךְ וְחָלָב וּבֶן הַבָּקָר[

God (18.22) to spare Sodom (for oppressing guests⁹) before returning to his *place* of hospitality (ואברהם שב למקמו, 18.33), but Lot is told *not* to tarry (ואל תעמד, 19.17) in his (evil) *place* (הוצא מן המקום, משחתים אנחנו את המקום, צאו מן המקום, 19.12, 13, 14). At Sodom's destruction, Abraham returns to the *place where he prayed* (המקום אשר עמד שם את פני ה' אל, 19.27). His place of hospitality and prayer even for the inhospitable Sodom stands in opposition to the evil place for which he prays (האף תספה ולא תשא למקום, ונשאתי לכל המקום, 18.24, 26). He prays for Lot's *place* and returns to *his place* but Lot will never return to his.

Sarah's Laughter: Sarah Turns to Freshness/Sodom Turns to Salt

והצחק שרה בקרבה לאמר	And Sarah laughed inside her to say
אחרי בלתי היתה לי עדנה	After I have withered I shall have softness?
ואדני זקן	and my master is old? (18.12)

The primary opposed elements are foreshadowed in Sarah's laughing poetic internal speech. As Abraham sees guests, he runs to invite them in and then runs to tell Sarah to bake bread and then to the *oxen* (ואל הבקר) to prepare a *young tender calf* (ובן הבקר; ובן בקר רך וטוב, 18.6-8). At that meal the guests announce that Sarah will have a *son* (ולשרה בן, 18.10).

והוא עמד עליהם (18.8b) (in *x-qatal/wayiqtol* contrast) as ending a unit that starts with an episode-initial clause: וירא אליו ה'//והוא ישב פתח האהל כחם היום (18.1). (I note the *x-qatals* 'semantic contrast: והוא ישב//והוא עמד.) He calls 18.23, 33 ויפנו משם האנשים וילכו and וילך ה' כאשר בלה לדבר אל אברהם//ואברהם שב (למקמו) *x-qatal* episode-final clauses. It seems to me that these also close what began with וירא אליו ה'//והוא ישב פתח האהל and that a *series* of scenes that open and close with *wayiqtol* opposition to *x-qatal* movement. Abraham's hospitality is framed by ויקח חמאה וחלב ובן הבקר//והוא עמד and וירא אליו ה'//והוא ישב פתח האהל and ויקמו משם האנשים וישקפו על פני סדם//ואברהם הלך עמם עליהם. His prayer is framed by וילך ה' כאשר ויפנו משם האנשים וילכו סדם//ואברהם עמד לפני ה' and לשלח והוא ישב//ואברהם (18.1/33) is the *largest* frame (18.1/33) and וירא אליו ה'//והוא ישב, reversed alliterative return to the place of kindness. In Sodom, in the next verse (19.1b), a *wayiqtol/ x-qatal* contrast, ויבאו שני המלאכים סדם בערב//ולוט ישב בשער סדם, begins a unit ending with a chiasmic *x-qatal/wayiqtol* contrast, ויעש להם משתה//ומצות אפה, (19.3b). Larger circles frame inner ones: in 18.16-33, Abraham walks his guests out, ויבא אברהם אל אברהם//ואברהם הלך עמם and God tells of the *judgment*, עשו בלה, as Abraham finishes praying God leaves, וילך ה' כאשר בלה לדבר, Throughout is the dynamic reversed chiasmic *x-qatal* series: והוא ישב//והוא עמד//ואברהם הלך//ואברהם עמד//ואברהם שב.

9. Ezek. 16.49: 'This was the sin of Sodom your sister, pride, fullness of bread...she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy'.

Sarah laughs ‘within her’ (בקרבה) in internal speech (אחרי בלתי היתה) ‘After I have *withered* I shall have *softness*/and my master is *old*?’, 18.12). Her inner laughter, בקרבה,¹⁰ plays against הבקר,¹¹ their kind meal of a *young tender son* of cattle (בן בקר רך וטוב; ובן הבקר) (the righteousness God says they will teach their sons [18.6-8]). Though she laughs, the kind hospitable meal in which the announcement is made, the *young tender calf* (בן בקר רך וטוב), serves as both merit and *metaphor* for what she laughs at: reversal to *young softness* to have a *son* (בן) whom they will teach kindness. R. David Kimhi¹² in fact explains ערנה, ‘softness’ (‘After I have withered I shall have *softness*?’), as ‘softness of the flesh to be *tender and good* (להיותו רך וטוב)’, which is the description of the calf in 18.6. Renewed fertility is linked with hospitality: she laughs at the news given by a guest, an ארח¹³ (‘a *guest on the road*’), since she has ceased having the ‘way of women’ (ארח כנשים, 18.11—poetic apposite of דרך¹⁴ as its equivalent: כי דרך נשים לי, 31.35). ארח is used explicitly in Judg. 19.17, the Sodom-like Gibeon concubine incident that deliberately mirrors¹⁵ our narrative: וישא עיניו וירא את האיש הארח.

Her laughter foreshadows Sodom’s destruction and creates reversed equation with it. Sarah laughs ‘*within her*’ (בקרבה) *inside* the tent (18.9) just before Abraham prays for Sodom for the righteous *within her*, אשר בקרבה (18.24) that is: ‘*inside the city*’ (בתוך העיר, 18.24, 26). Sarah’s בקרבה and Sodom’s בקרבה are transposed as birth and destruction, fertility and barrenness. As it turns out, there will *not* be *righteous men* (צדיקים, 18.24) *inside* Sodom but *inside* Sarah, the children she will bear

10. With the added sense of ‘laughing at her insides’ which cannot bear children; see Rashi, *Tanhuma Shoftim* 18.

11. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, notes Ps. 5.10, קרבם הוות/קבר-פתוח, as semantic-sonant chiasmus.

12. R. David Kimhi, *Commentary on Genesis* (Venice, 1477).

13. As in Jer. 9.1 (מלון ארחים), and 14.8 (ובארה נטה ללון), 2 Sam. 12.4 (לעשות) (דלתי לארח אפתח), Job 31.21 (לארח הבא לי).

14. S. Mandelkorn, *Concordancia LeTanach* (Schocken: Jerusalem, 1971), s.v. ארח. The ארח (of birth) is connected with *righteousness*: God says Abraham will teach his *children* the way of God (ושמרו דרך ה, 18.19) to do *righteousness and justice*. Lot invites his guests to stay and go on their way in the morning (והלכתם לדרךכם, 19.2); but his daughters sin when there is no one to come to them in the way of all the earth (בדרך בדרך, 19.31).

15. See Nachmanides, Gen. 19.8; Y. Kaufman, *Sefer Shoftim* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1962), p. 270; S. Lasine, ‘Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World’, *JSOT* 29 (1984), pp. 37-59; S. Niditch, ‘The “Sodomite” Themes in Judges 19–20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration’, *CBQ* 44 (1982), pp. 365-78.

which God says they will teach *righteousness* (צדקה, 18.19). Abraham invokes divine justice about destruction (השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט, 18.25) as Sarah had about their having a child: ישפט ה' ביני וביניך (16.5).

In the opposition of בלתי/עדנה, *softness//wrinkledness*, her laughing at reversal to *softness* (עדנה) plays on Abraham *still* praying (עודנו עמד) to reverse Sodom's destruction, as בלתי (spelled defectively) plays against Lot later praying for Zoar *not to be* destroyed (לבלתי, 19.21).

Her laughter is reflected in Lot's sons-in-law's laughter about destruction and reversed in his daughters' speech about birth. Just as Sarah laughs that Abraham is too old to have a son (ואדני זקן) they say they must have sons before their father is too old, אבינו זקן (19.31). Before the destruction we find miraculous birth for the righteous *old* man and lady (ואני זקנתי, ואדני זקן, ואברהם ושרה זקנים, 18.11-13) who become young; after the destruction comes the daughters' illicit birth because their father has become old (אבינו זקן, 19.31). In parallel Sarah denies laughing about birth 'because she was afraid' (בי יראה, 18.15) and Lot moves to the cave 'because he was afraid' of destruction (בי ירא לשבת בצוער, 19.30): as it turns out the daughters will give birth at that cave. God counters Sarah's laughter with לא בי צחקת (18.15); the angels counter Lot's *hospitality* with לא בי ברחוב נלין (19.2). God's paraphrase of Sarah (האף אמנם אלד, 'Will I indeed give birth?') precedes Abraham's prayers against *destruction* ('Will you indeed destroy?', האף תספה). God asks her about birth ('Is anything *hidden from God*', 18.14) and himself about destruction ('Am I *hiding from Abraham*?', 18.17).

As Sodom is punished 'from *young to old*' (מקטן ועד גדול, 19.10) for sinning 'from *young to old*' (מנער ועד זקן, 19.4),¹⁶ Sarah reverses in counterpoint from *old to young*, from wrinkledness to fertile youth as Sodom reverses¹⁷ from fertility to sulfur, ash, and salt.¹⁸ Salt particularly contrasts fertility: in the ancient Near East a site was strewn with salt to mark eternal barrenness¹⁹ as Abimelech planted the conquered Shechem with salt (Judg. 9.46). Abraham prays for Sodom describing himself as dust and ashes but it is *Sodom* that becomes this.²⁰ In the transaction, עדנה

16. The sin/punishment parallel is noted by Rashi at 19.4.

17. מתוך ההפכה בהפך אתה ערים, 19.25; ויהפך את... כל הכבר, 19.29.

18. Gen. 19.26; Deut. 29.22; Zeph. 2.9.

19. N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), p. 138.

20. He pleads האף תספה ולא תשח, האף תספה צדיק עם רשע, though he is alliteratively עפר ואפר, 18.27 (a pair noted in Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, p. 106).

as plentiful moisture exactly parallels Sodom's being מִשְׁקָה ('entirely irrigated', 13.10) before it was turned to salt. Jonas C. Greenfield²¹ demonstrates that עֲדָנָה means abundant moisture, exact antonym of 'withered', like the Ugaritic verb *ʿdn* as providing luxuriant rainfall. (Some suggest עֲדָנָה as 'pregnancy' [as the Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew²² *ʿadah*] or [menstrual] flow, cognate with Arabic *gʿdw*,²³ or connected with the Aramaic עֵידָן, 'time', as feminine cycle,²⁴ and here it could have all these associative undertones.) Greenfield shows the Semitic root עֲדָן to mean 'moisten, cause luxuriance or lubricity by water, oil', etc. based on the bilingual Tell Fekherye Akkadian–Aramaic inscription where Aramaic מַעֲדָן is used to translate Akkadian *TuHHudu*, 'make moist by water, oil, or honey, cause luxuriance'. He cites Rabbinic Hebrew, where עֲדָן is lubricating skin with oil and for rain moistening, freshening soil and grass,²⁵ and the Talmud (*b. B. Meṣ.* 87a²⁶)—'After the skin had *withered* (נִתְבַּלָּה) and wrinkles multiplied, the skin was *freshened* (נִתְעַדָּן) and the wrinkles became smooth, and beauty returned'—in restoration of moistness, so that the noun עֲדָנָה contrasts with בִּלְתִּי ('I am withered') to refer to 'lubricious quality of the skin due to its being moist and freshened'.²⁷

Greenfield concludes, 'Sarah's words in Gen. 18.12 mean, "Now that I am withered am I to regain *lubricity* (עֲדָנָה)?"', noting, 'hence the

Lot greets the angels, bowing *his face* to the ground (פָּנָיו, 19.1), and *bakes* (פָּחָה) them flat bread (19.3). But Sodom is doomed.

21. Jonas C. Greenfield, 'A Touch of Eden', in *Orientalia, J. Duchesne-Guillemin Emerito Oblata* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984), pp. 219–24 (223). See N. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text* (New JPS Translation and Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), p. 130. (BDB defines it as 'pleasure'; Mandelkern, *Concordance*, s.v. עֲדָן as 'freshness of skin'.)

22. *Gen. R.* 20.23; 48.17; *Targum Ruth* 4.13; *Onqelos* to Gen. 3.16; Lev. 12.2. *Targum Jonathan* translates it here this way.

23. See A.A. McIntosh, 'A Third Root *ʿadah* in Biblical Hebrew', *VT* 24 (1974), pp. 454–73.

24. Rashi at 18.12. *Gen. R.* 48.17 connects עֲדָנָה associatively with undertones of *adornment* (עֲדָן), *feminine cycle* (Aramaic: עֵידָן) and *conception* (Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew עֲדָה).

25. See also *Sifre Deut.* 306; *Cant. R.* 1.2; *b. Pes.* 43a; *y. Ber.* 6.10b.

26. See also *B. Batra* 120b.

27. Similarly, Jeffrey H. Tigay, 'לֹא נָס לְחָדָה, "He Had Not Become Wrinkled"' (*Deut.* 34.7), in Z. Zevit, S. Gitin, and M. Sokoloff (eds.), *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), following Greenfield, notes the parallel with the Northwest Semitic root עֲדָן as well attested in rabbinic literature to describe youthful, luxuriant skin.

Biblical understanding of *Eden* (עֵדֶן) as a well-watered place of luxuriant growth'.²⁸

But Sodom was explicitly depicted as being irrigated ‘as the Garden of God’ (אֵת כָּל כְּבַד הִירְדֵן כִּי כָלָה מִשְׁקָה...בְּנֶגַח, 13.10) a description reminiscent of Eden’s הִנֵּן לְהַשְׁקוֹת אֶת הַגֵּן (2.5-15), which is precisely why Lot chose it. But his move to the Edenic valley (כִּי בָלָה) and his expulsion from it (מִשְׁקָה בְּנֶגַח ה', 13.11) and his expulsion from it (הַפְּכָה) echo the expulsion from Eden: בַּהֲפֹךְ אֶל הָעִרִים וְאֵת לֶהֱטֵם חֶרֶב (19.29). Instead of raining rainfall on vegetation as in Eden (אֱלֹקִים עַל הָאָרֶץ), God, in similar phrases, rains fire on vegetation in Sodom (וַצִּמַּח), the הָאֲדָמָה...אֵת כָּל הַכֹּכַב וְאֵת כָּל...וְה' הַמִּטֵּיר עַל סָדֹם וְעַל עִמְרָה גִּפְרִית וְאֵשׁ (2.6, וְאֵד יֵעֹלָה מִן הָאָרֶץ). Unlike wetness rising in Eden (וְהָנָה עֹלָה קִיטָר הָאָרֶץ), smoke rises from Sodom (וְהָנָה עֹלָה קִיטָר הָאָרֶץ).

Personified Contrast

As personified contrast to Sarah, Lot's wife is transformed like Sodom to *salt* (unlike Sarah she did not bake bread for the guests).²⁹ The syntactic ambiguity of 19.26, וַתֵּבֶט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נְצִיב מֶלַח ('His wife looked from behind him and *she* became a pillar of salt'), interpreted as either *Lot's wife* became a pillar of salt or that *Sodom* (הָעִיר הָאִמּוֹרִית = feminine) did,³⁰ *itself* suggests equation in the feminine imagery.³¹ There is further

28. See also U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press/The Hebrew University, 1953–88), I, pp. 107–108, and R. Hess, ‘Eden—A Well Watered Place’, *Bible Revue* 7.6 (1991), pp. 28–33, for Semitic parallels.

29. Sarah bakes *bread* (לחם) for guests but Lot's wife turns to salt (מלח). In *Gen. R.* 50.4, 51.5 Lot's wife was punished for refusing the guests *salt* or for asking her neighbors for it to betray them. In *Yalkut Reuveini, WaYera*, her *name* was מלח; when the poor asked for *bread* (לחם) she gave *salt* (מלח) so they prayed that *she* be *turned* to salt.

30. Gersonides, Hizkuni, R. Bahye. Though not apparently syntactically multivalent at the lexical level, it is certainly possible for both *realities* to be true if she was warned not to look back because the destruction might overtake her (as some commentaries interpret it).

31. In *PRE 25*, Lot's wife's name is עִידִית, while in other Midrashic versions (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Nachmanides, Bahye, *Sefer HaKaneh*, *Maarechet Elohut*, Riccanati, *Baal HaTurim*) it is עִירִית or עִירִיה (*Pirkei Heichalot*) playing on the city (הָעִיר). The Midrash (*b. Sanh.* 109b) personifies 18.20-21's feminine imagery (...וְעָקָה סָדֵם וְעִמְרָה בִּירְבָּהּ... זָעָקָה סָדֵם וְעִמְרָה נֹא וְאִרְאָה הַכְּנַעֲנָה הַבָּאָה אֵלַי [אִרְדָּה נָא וְאִרְאָה הַכְּנַעֲנָה הַבָּאָה אֵלַי], 'The screaming of Sodom... is great (רַבָּה)... I shall go down now and see if it is *her screaming* that comes to me', as the screams of a *young girl* (רַבָּה) tortured and killed for feeding a hungry man, *Sodom's screams* becomes those of a *young girl*. In *PRE 25*, *Targum Jonathan* 18.21, it was *Lot's older young daughter*

personification in the reprieve of the city of *Zoar* (צוֹעַר) playing on Lot's younger daughter (הַצְעִירָה, 19.31-38).³² Zoar's decree is reversed because it is *small, young* (וְהוּא מִצְעָר אִמְלֵמָה נָא שְׁמָהּ הִלָּא מִצְעָר הוּא, 19.20), 'therefore it was called *Zoar*' (19.22). (Lot contrasts its *smallness* with God's *large* kindness [וְהוּא מִצְעָר... הִלָּא מִצְעָר הוּא, 19.19-20].³³) Ezekiel 16.46-61, 'The sin of Sodom your *sister*', preserves the image of Sodom as a *wicked sister-city*. Lot's *older* daughter sinfully leads the *younger*, like Zoar younger and more innocent, to conceive since their father is *old*, contrasting Sarah's righteous old/young birth reversal. Sarah laughs that it is too late to bear a son since Abraham is too old (וְאֵדְנִי זָקֵן); Lot's older daughter says they must conceive before it is too late, before their father is too old (אֲבִינִי זָקֵן).³⁴ It becomes a race against time, like Lot's running into *Zoar* just ahead of destruction (19.23). As the lushly *watered* (מִשְׁקָה) plain becomes ash, Lot's daughters think he is the last man in the land and thus *ply him with wine* (וַתִּשְׁקֵינָּהוּ, 19.33, 35) before he is too old and infertile. In a pattern of קִרְבָּה, בְּקִרְבָּה, הַבְּקָר, Sarah, who laughs *inside her* (בְּקִרְבָּה), will have righteous *sons inside her* in analogy of the righteously offered *young tender* calf (הַבְּקָר), but the *older* Sodom with no righteous people '*inside her*' (בְּקִרְבָּה), will be destroyed; the *younger*, more innocent Zoar will be reprieved because it was *close*: קִרְבָּה לְנוֹם (= defective spelling, 19.19).

In the deep structure, Sarah, who is old, becomes young and fertile as Sodom (and Lot's wife) turn to salt. The older Sodom is turned over in destruction as the younger more innocent Zoar is reprieved, paralleled by the older sister and more innocent younger sister and their births. Abraham and Sarah return to youth as Lot becomes old (אֲבִינִי זָקֵן, 19.31) and his wife turns to salt.

who was burned (as, we note, Sodom will be). M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1991), p. 239, argues her name there, פִּלְטוּיָה, plays on Lot's (לוֹט). However, the *Palestinian Targum* translates לוֹט בִּי בְּרָחוּב נִלְוִי ('in the public square we will sleep', 19.2) as בְּפִלְטוּיָה, from Latin *Palatea* (Greek: παλατεια): the *girl* is thus equated with Sodom's public square.

32. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, p. 94.

33. In equation of welcoming guests and praying for a city, Lot pleads against Sodom's wickedness (אֵל נָא אֲחֵי הָרֵעִי, 19.7) to offer his young daughters as an alternative (הִנֵּה נָא לִי שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת, 19.8) and later pleads against (his) destruction (אֵל נָא אֲדֹנָי, 19.18) to offer the young Zoar as an alternative (הִנֵּה נָא הָעִיר קִרְבָּה, 19.20).

34. Of Sarah's birth (= twice, 18.10, 14: כַּעֲת חַיָּה וְהַגְדֵּבָן לְשָׂרָה); of the daughters' (= twice, 19.32, 33: וַנַּחֲיָה מֵאֲבִינִי זָרַע).

Reversal of Genesis 13

All this reverses Genesis 12–13. There, though God promised Abraham, ‘To your *seed* I will give this *land*’ (לְזֶרַעְךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת) (12.7) both fertilities (*seed/land*) are frustrated as his nephew Lot appears to become heir apparent, able to choose the *fertile land* of Sodom because Abraham is *childless*. Wickedness/fertility opposes righteousness/childlessness as Lot goes to the *fertile* Sodom even though ‘the men of Sodom were *wicked*’ (וַאֲנָשֵׁי סְדֹם רָעִים וַחֲמָאִים לֵה’ מְאֹד) (13.13). But with the birth of a legitimate inheritor to Abraham (כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת) (19.18–19) Lot must be displaced as heir and displaced from his *place*, Sodom: his *place* is literally *displaced* in upheaval for its *wickedness*. With this comes moral displacement as heir: like Abraham Lot welcomes guests and prays for a city but his actions turn to ash as he offers his daughters to protect his guests and his prayers for a city become prayers only for himself.

The urban/plain oppositions may be the most underlyingly significant. Lot left this plain for the urban Sodom in Genesis 13, no longer wishing to wander with Abraham to build altars on the plain and call out the name of God. With Abraham’s offer of ‘*all the land*’ he chose the valley’s populous cities despite their wickedness (13.13). He *lifted his eyes and saw* (אֶת כָּל כְּבֹר) (וַיֵּשֶׂא לוֹט אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא) *all the valley* entirely *watered* (13.10), contrasted with Abraham’s righteously *lifting his eyes and seeing* (וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא) wayfarers on the plain (18.2). But as ‘*all the valley*’ (כָּל הַכְּבֹר) is destroyed as God rains fire on its vegetation (19.24–25), instead of Lot lifting his eyes to see the lush valley, his wife *looks back* as it become ash (as Abraham *sees* it too). Lot moves from the plain’s populous cities to an isolated cave. Though he was offered ‘*all the land*’ (כָּל הָאָרֶץ לְפָנֶיךָ) (13.9), his daughters now think he is the last man in ‘*all the land*’ (וְאִישׁ אֶין בָּאָרֶץ לְבוֹא עֲלֵינוּ כְּדֹרֶךְ כָּל) (הָאָרֶץ, 19.31); as the lushly *watered* (מִשְׁקָה) plain is destroyed, they *ply him with wine* (לִכְּחַ נִשְׁקָה אֶת אַבְיָנוּ יִין, וַתִּשְׁקֶנּוּ אֶת־אֲבִיהֶן יִין) (19.33, 35).³⁵

35. The valley’s quality and quantity was ‘entirely watered before *God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah...until you come to Zoar*’ (13.10): אֶת־סְדֹם is a parenthetical aside and ‘as you come to Zoar’ is an idiom of distance. But in retrospect, בָּאִכְבָּה צֶעַר, sounds as if it referred to Lot as the angel says ‘I will not be able to do anything until *you come there*’: עַד בָּאֵךְ שָׁמָּה (19.22) perfectly parallels 19.23–29, וְלוֹט בָּא צֶעַרָה וְהָהָמָטִיר עָלָיו, ‘*Lot came to Zoar and God rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire...as God destroyed the cities of the valley*’.

As Genesis 13 closes, Lot and Abraham *sit* apart (// יֹשֵׁב בְּאַרְצָן כְּנַעַן), Lot sitting in the cities of the fertile valley. Genesis 18–19’s first episode opens as Abraham *sits* on the plain (והוא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל) looking to do kindness and closes with his *return* there (ואברהם שָׁב לִמְקוֹמוֹ) after praying against *destruction*, to where God promised to *return* to grant *birth* (והנה בן לשרה... 18.10). The second episode begins as Lot *sits* at Sodom’s city gate, יֹשֵׁב (19.1), closing as he *sits* in the mountain cave’s isolation (וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּהָר, 19.30) as the cities in which he *sat* (הָעָרִים אֵשֶׁר) (19.29) are destroyed: he will *never* return there. Abraham *returns* to where he prayed (‘where he *stood* before God’, אֵל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר, 19.27) and sees Sodom destroyed.

The announcements of birth and destruction are made within two meals whose initial similarities only heighten their differences. And what a difference there is between a meal of a young, tender, moist calf (18.5-8) at which the angels announce birth (and return to moist freshness), and a meal of dry flatcakes (19.3) at which they announce annihilation to infertile ash. Both Abraham and Lot sit at a doorway (the tent or city gate), see guests, get up to greet them and bow before them to ask them to please come to them, calling them masters and themselves servants having come to their place, and prepare meals.³⁶ But Abraham (by day, on the plain)

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offers bread but serves milk, butter, and a young, tender, moist calf (18.5-8); Lot (by night, in the city) makes a drinking feast (משחה, 19.3), baking only dry unleavened flatbread, not 'cakes of fine flour'. Both Abraham and Sarah prepare the meal and Sarah bakes cakes (לחם); Lot's wife is strangely absent (Lot bakes them unleavened breads), only later absented in turning to a pillar of salt (מלח).

The guests outside Sarah's tent ask where she is (איה שרה אשתך, 18.9) to convey the news into it modestly. At Lot's house they are inside as the Sodomites outside ask where they are (איה האנשים, 19.5) to be brought out for immorality. The first meal centers on modesty and righteous birth for the old Abraham and Sarah who become young. Conversely, Lot's drinking feast (the wine, the offer of the young daughters, Lot's wife's absence) foreshadows the later events at the cave³⁷ of the old Lot and his young daughters. 'The Sodomites demand to *know* (ונדעה) the guests of that *night* (הלילה) before they *lay down*' (טרם ישכבו) and Lot offers his daughters who did *not know* a man (לא ידעו איש, 19.3-8). In the cave his daughters offer him *wine at night* (משקה את אבינו יין) (ושקנו יין גם הלילה, ונשכבה, ונשכבתי, ושכב את אביה, ותשכב) and he did *not know* (לא ידע בשכבה ובקומה, ולא ידע בשכבה ובקמה, 19.31-35). Unlike the righteous old/young reversal the *young* daughters sinfully bear sons since Lot has become *old*. Abraham 'will teach his children righteousness' but Lot offers his daughters to protect his guests. Abraham hospitably offers his guests a *good, young tender calf* (רך וטוב) but in warped hospitality Lot offers Sodom his *young* daughters to do as is *good* in their eyes (בטוב בעיניהם, 19.8).

In transactional wordplay, Abraham's kind meal of the young calf and לחם and חמאה וחלב is meritorious metaphor while only God's *mercy* (בחמלתו, 19.16) intercedes against Lot being turned to salt (מלח). And לחם (and קמח, 18.6, and Sodom's צמח, 19.25) permutes assonantly, consonantly, and actually, to מלח (19.26-27). After the first meal, Abraham pleads against Sodom's destruction; it *is* destroyed after the second meal.

37. Midrash, *Tanhuma WaYera* 12; Nachmanides at 19.8: 'It shows the matter was not repugnant to him'. R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), notes how the purported 'innocence' of Lot's double use of ולא ידע contrasts with the wickedness of ידע/ונדעה. It also contrasts with the daughters' *genuine* innocence (אשר לא ידעו איש).

Irony in Abraham's Prayer, Sodom's Failure

Sodom itself undoes Abraham's prayers: we see it in the opposed words which describe this. God tells him of their *judgment* (וְאֵם לֹא אֶדְעָה, 18.20) because he *knows* him (כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו, 18.19), but Sodom will demand וְנִדְעָה (19.5): 'Bring them out to us and we will *know* them'. Abraham *approaches* God in prayer (וַיִּגַּשׁ אֲבֹרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר, 18.23) but they threaten Lot גַּשׁ הֲלָאָה ('Approach here'), and themselves *approach* to break his door (וַיִּגְשׁוּ לְשֹׁבַר הַדֶּלֶת, 19.9). Abraham's *praying* (הוֹאֵלְתִּי, וַיִּגַּשׁ, 18.23, 27, 31) is echoed in their *threat* (גַּשׁ הֲלָאָה) as they approach to do that. He prays לְדַבֵּר הִנֵּה נָא הוֹאֵלְתִּי (18.27, 31) and they, struck with blindness, are *unable* to find the door (וַיִּלְאוּ לְמִצָּעַת הַפֶּתַח, 19.11) though they try. Abraham confronts God (הֲשַׁפְט כָּל הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט, 18.25), but Sodom confronts Lot (הֲאֶחָד בָּא לְגֹר וַיִּשְׁפֹּט שְׁפוֹט, 19.9). And Abraham's appeal (כַּדְרִי, הֲשַׁפְט כָּל הָאָרֶץ) is countered by the actions of the daughters (כָּל הָאָרֶץ, 19.31).

In the repeated pattern of הִנֵּה נָא, אֵם נָא, אֵל נָא, Abraham invites guests (18.3) and protests and *pleads* for Sodom (הִנֵּה נָא הוֹאֵלְתִּי לְדַבֵּר אֵל לֹה'... אֵל-נָא יַחַר לֹה' וְאֶדְבַּרְהָ... אֵל-נָא יַחַר לֹה' הִנֵּה-נָא הוֹאֵלְתִּי... אֵל-נָא יַחַר לֹה', 18.27-32). But Lot's invitation (הִנֵּה נָא אֵדְנִי... הִנֵּה-נָא) and pleading protest to Sodom (אֵל-נָא אֲחִי תִרְעֻ הִנֵּה-נָא לִישְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת, 19.7-8) become parodic as he offers his daughters and prays for Zoar only for himself (אֵל-נָא אֲדִנִּי... הִנֵּה-נָא הָעִיר הַזֹּאת... אֲמַלְטָה נָא מִצָּעַת עֲבָדְךָ חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ... הִנֵּה-נָא הָעִיר הַזֹּאת... אֲמַלְטָה נָא, 19.18-20). Ironically, *his* prayers for a city are accepted.

Time

Clearly the events happen against the backdrop of the transition of time. They begin as Abraham sits at the *heat of the day* (בַּחֶם הַיּוֹם, 18.1); the angels come to Sodom at *evening* (בְּעֶרֶב, 19.1) and the townspeople demand the men who came *that night* (הַלַּיְלָה, 19.5). As the *morning star rises* (19.23), the angels bring Lot out of Sodom. From then, he has time to argue (unsuccessfully) with his son-in-law and with the angels (successfully), escape Sodom with his wife and daughters, lose his wife, and come into Zoar as the *sun rises* (הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָצָא, 19.23). Sodom is destroyed at *sunrise* as Abraham *rises early* in the *morning* (19.27) to see their fate. (Lot prudently told his guests to rise early [וַהֲשִׁכְמָתֶם, 19.2] and go on their way to avoid Sodom's evil, but in the end it is *Abraham* who

risers early [וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֶּקֶר] to see their fate.) In the minimal time between dawn and sunrise, especially in Israel, Lot's entry into Zoar is quite a run. Abraham's kindness and prayers are by *day*, Sodom's wickedness by *night* (day = good/night = evil). Destruction by morning follows Sodom's night wickedness; Lot's daughters' deeds in the cave are *at night* (וַתִּשְׁקִין אֶת־אֲבִיהֶן יַיִן בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא, 19.33, 35); the *next morning* (וַיְהִי מִמָּחָרֶת, 19.34) they discuss the *evening* (אָמַשׁ, 19.34) as אָמַשׁ echoes (יָצָא) הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ and Sodom's night foreshadows the cave's. The unit's beginning/ending imagery contrasts Abraham's running *towards* guests to be kind to travelers on the plain at *the heat of the day* (בַּחֶם הַיּוֹם, 18.1) with Lot's running *from* the urban inhospitable Sodom to save himself *before the sun comes out* (יָצָא) הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, 19.23). The larger unit opens with an episode (18.1-33) about a day followed by a night, and closes with the cave's night followed by the next morning. The narrative's opening verse, 'and he sat at the opening...at the heat of *the day*' (וַהוּא יָשָׁב כְּתַח הָאֵהָל בַּחֶם הַיּוֹם) is echoed in the closing verse, 'she called his name Ben-Ami, *he* is the father of the sons of Amon until *this day*' (וְהוּא אָבִי...עַד הַיּוֹם, 19.38).

Place

Events contrast at the *opening* of *Abraham's tent* on the plain, the urban *door* of *Lot's house* (which he closes), the *city gate* (where Lot sits as Abraham did at the tent's opening), and at the *mountain cave*. At the *city gate*, Lot *presses* (וַיִּפְצֹר, 19.3) the angels to come to his house and not sleep in the city square (רְחוֹב הָעִיר, 19.3) beyond the city gate; this is undone as the townspeople *press* (וַיִּפְצֹר, 19.9) to break the *door of his house*. For the *city's* sin (עוֹן הָעִיר, 19.15), the *city* dwellers (יֹשְׁבֵי הָעָרִים, 19.25) are destroyed in the *city* (בְּעִיר, 19.12). Opposed to the cultivated Sodom valley are the cave and *mountain* (הַהָרָה, 19.17, 19, 30) to which Lot runs, which plays on the subsequent *conceiving* there (וַתַּהַרֵּן שָׁתִי, 19.36),³⁸ foreshadowed in the city. The plain where Abraham does kindness to travelers on the road mediates between the teeming city and the isolated cave.

Abraham's tent, *place* of hospitality and prayer (וַאֲבָרָהָם שָׁב לְמִקְוֵה, 18.32; הַמִּקְוֵה אֲשֶׁר עָמַד שָׁם, 19.27), even for the inhospitable Sodom,

38. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, p. 239, notes how the root בָּלַט ('escape'), playing on Lot's name (לֹט) and appearing five times in the interlude (19.17-22), becomes a *Leitwort* to bring to prominence his absorption in his own deliverance.

contrasts with the place for which he prays (הָאָרֶץ תִּסְפָּה וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא לְמָקוֹם... וּנְשֹׂאֶי לְכָל הַמָּקוֹם, 18.24-26). In inside/outside opposition, Abraham *brings in* guests *at the opening of his tent*; the Sodomites standing outside the *door of Lot's house* demand that he *bring his guests out*. The messengers *outside* Sarah's tent ask where she is (אֵיחָ שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ, 18.9); she is *in* the tent into which news of birth is modestly transmitted. In the equation, she laughs there *inside herself* (בִּקְרִיבָה) while *Sodom's* destiny can be changed for fifty righteous men *inside the city* (חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים), *within it* (בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר... אִם אִמְצָא בְּסֹדֶם חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר (אֲשֶׁר בִּקְרִיבָה)). In *Sodom* the mob *outside* Lot's house immodestly asks where those same messenger/guests are (אֵיחָ הָאֲנָשִׁים, 19.5), demanding that they, now *inside*, be brought *out* for immoral oppression. They try to break *into* Lot's house where the guests are protected by his hospitality. He goes *out* to offer to bring *out* his daughters for immorality. The guests bring Lot *inside* to protect him and tell him to get *out*³⁹ of Sodom. He goes *out* to his sons-in-law who laugh as he tells them to go *out* of the city. In the contrast of בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר/מַחוּץ לָעִיר, the potential reprieve (חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר) contrasts with the reality in which the Sodomites (and the sons-in-law) are destroyed *in the city* as Lot's family is *out of it* (מַחוּץ לָעִיר, 19.14).

In similar contrast, Sarah hears the angel announce birth with the tent's opening *behind him* (וְשָׂרָה שָׁמַעַת פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו, 18.10); this underscores hospitality and modesty, the righteousness which God says Abraham will teach his children *after him* (אֵת בְּנָיו וְאֵת בִּתּוֹ אַחֲרָיו, 18.19). Lot, however, goes out to the *opening* of the house and closes the door *behind him* (וְהִדְלִית סָגַר אַחֲרָיו, 19.6) in the face of sin and destruction. At the end, Lot's wife, until then absent and hidden in a way very different than Sarah, looks *behind him* (וַתִּבֶּט אֲשֶׁתוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו, 19.26) at Sodom and is destroyed. Abraham and Sarah, פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו ('at the opening of the tent and *he was after it*') and אֵת בְּנָיו וְאֵת בִּתּוֹ אַחֲרָיו ('his son and

39. The townspeople say to *bring out* the guests (הוֹצִיָאם אֵלֵינוּ וְנִדְעָה אֲתָם, 19.5); Lot goes *out* to them (וַיֵּצֵא אֱלֹהִים לוֹט, 19.6), offers to *bring out* his daughters (וַיִּצְיָאָהֶנָּה אֵתָהֶן, 19.17) and goes *out* (וַיֵּצֵא לוֹט) to urge his sons-in-law to go *out* of the place (צֹא) (מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה); the angels *take out* his family (וַיִּנְחֲלוּ מַחוּץ לָעִיר, 19.14); he comes to Zoar as the sun comes *out* (וְהָשֶׁם יֵצֵא עַל־הָאֲרֶץ וְלוֹט בֶּאֱצֶרָה, 23). This (and Lot's *bread and wine*) connects with 14.17-18: Sodom's king went out empty-handed to Abraham (וַיֵּצֵא מֶלֶךְ סְדוֹם לִקְרֹאֲתוֹ) who rescued Sodom (and Lot) while Melchizedek brought *out* bread and wine (וַיַּמְלִיכֵם הַצִּדִּיק הַצִּדִּיק לֶחֶם וַיֵּין), with wayyiqtol/(we)x-qatal of יֵצֵא highlighting Sodom's wickedness. There too in the war the men of Sodom escape *to the mountains* (14.10).

household *after him*'), subsume birth/kindness/modesty; Lot and his wife, וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ (‘And he closed the door after him’) and וַתִּשְׁתָּבֵר (‘And his wife looked after him’), entail sin and destruction.

Narrative Wholeness

These examples may suffice to show how reading the narrative as one cohesive unit instead of as two chapters, and as a reversal of Genesis 13, reveals a deep structure of symmetry, opposition, and closure. Birth and destruction contrast in the narrative’s opposed motifs and underlying structures. Motifs, events, words, phrases, associations, and wordplay resonate in the contrast. In the narrative’s larger wholeness, oppositions become sharper and clearer, and not merely in static contrast. Against the movement in the narrative from plain to city to the mountains and back (as Abraham runs towards kindness and Lot runs from destruction) wicked unkindness moves towards destruction but kind goodness moves toward what will become righteous and fertile birth.