

**‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door’:
The Function of פתח/דלת in Genesis 18–19**

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Abstract

The history of research into chs. 18–19 of the book of Genesis has tended to be a history of entrenchment and the provision of support for a ground-text which can be employed for the biblical condemnation of same-gender, genitally expressed sexuality. A close reading of the narrative reveals, however, that the story has been peppered with a number of clues consciously designed to lead the reader to a more or less comprehensive interpretation of an otherwise ambiguous text. This article contends that the ‘sexual’ reading of the Mamre–Sodom narrative is thus by no means the most comprehensive and that its author’s use, among other things, of the key words דלת and פתח further support an alternative reading in which sex and sexuality have no significant role to play.

Introduction

In the course of preparing a paper on the Mamre–Sodom narrative in Genesis 18–19, my attention was drawn to the specific moment in the story related in 19.4-11¹ and located outside the city of Sodom in which Lot’s house² and its ‘front door’ appear to play a significant role. The structure

1. The delimitation of the unit is based on the simple change of scene which moves at this juncture from the interior of Lot’s house to the exterior and the nocturnal visit of the people of Sodom. In v. 12 we return to the interior of Lot’s house.

2. The specific location of Lot’s house outside the city of Sodom has led to much speculation as to its size and relative permanence and the significance thereof for the portrayal of the character of Lot. We shall return to this below.

of the larger narrative segment dealing with Abraham and the promise of progeny (12.1–21.7), of which these verses constitute but a part, reveals their primary relationship with the figure of Lot, his settling in (13.1–8) and his flight from (19.1–38) the city of Sodom.³ This apparently minor incident in the story of Abraham and his nephew Lot seems to have lost its bearings in the history of exegesis; hence the need to study it in its immediate context and in relation to the parallel scene at Mamre related in Genesis 18 and to offer at least an alternative reading intended, albeit incidentally, to restore Lot to his rightful place in the narrative. In order to set the scene for what follows, readers are invited to read the initial article which was published in the journal *Theology and Sexuality*.⁴ For the sake of convenience, however, a brief overview of the major premises and findings of the initial article together with a number of observations that have arisen in more recent research is provided here as an essential precursor to understanding the structure of the present contribution.

The Sin of Sodom

Interpretations of the Sodom narrative and of the sin of Sodom as such can be roughly subdivided into three clusters: ‘male–male genital expression’ (widespread from Augustine to Westermann and more recently Waltke⁵), ‘inhospitality’ (Sirach, Wisdom, Ezekiel, Origen, Ambrose, many mainstream so-called ‘queer exegetes’⁶) and ‘shaming’ (Stone, Loader⁷). All three, however, ultimately focus on the first of these (some kind of sexual demand) as the content of the sin of Sodom,⁸ while the latter two can only

3. See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999), pp. 56–57.

4. Brian Doyle, ‘The Sin of Sodom: *yada, yada, yada*. A Reading of the Mamre–Sodom Narrative in Genesis 18–19’, *Theology and Sexuality* 9 (1998), pp. 84–100.

5. Doyle, ‘The Sin of Sodom’, p. 84 n. 1.

6. Doyle, ‘The Sin of Sodom’, p. 85 n. 2.

7. Doyle, ‘The Sin of Sodom’, p. 85 n. 3.

8. In a recent psychoanalytical approach to the Sodom narrative, Patrick Vandermeersch insists (‘Looking Back at Sodom: Psychoanalysis and Diachronic Reading’, in R. Kessler and P. Vandermeersch [eds.], *God, Biblical Stories and Psychoanalytical Understanding* [Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001], pp. 187–98) that a *prima facie* reading of the text would lead one to interpret it as a reference to homosexuality—‘a biblical statement on homosexuality’ (p. 190)—and that those (presumably exegetes) who would endeavour to suggest otherwise are guilty of falling into the trap of treating the Bible as an ethical authority. His concern would appear to be focused on the distinction between our present-day experience of homosexuality and that represented by the

claim to suggest its intention rather than its content: the people of Sodom wanted either to express their lack of hospitality or to shame their visitors in a sexual fashion. Judging by even the most recent commentaries and articles on the narrative (leaving aside the social and cultural representations thereof), the dominant and indeed still somewhat entrenched paradigm governing its reading remains a (homo)sexual one. It is the present author's contention, however, that it is possible and even desirable to read the narrative in a manner whereby same-gender sexuality is not the dominant paradigm.⁹

This contention is firmly supported by a number of clues within the Mamre–Sodom narrative taken as a whole. If one reads the narrative from the perspective of the apparently parallel text in Judges 19, as many do, one will be likely to deal with the data provided by the text in a different manner.¹⁰ Judges 19 also employs the terminology (פֶּתַח/דֶּלֶת) that I plan to investigate in the remainder of this paper. It will be evident, however, that the differences between the two narratives and the lack of connection with Abraham make it impossible to read both narratives in the same fashion. One might conclude that a sort of type-narrative is evident in both locations but that one is not at liberty to interpret both uses thereof in the same manner. S. Lasine correctly notes that there is little agreement among scholars on the significance of the similarities between the two texts. He thus offers his own attractive reading of the said similarities (more in fact of the 'differences'), insisting on a one-sided dependency of Judges 19 on

authors of Gen. 18–19 (incidentally he limits himself to 18.16–19.29). At the same time, however, he seems to uphold the idea that the 'homosexual' interpretation of the text should not be avoided in the context of preaching (p. 196). The problem with such an approach, however, is the evidently unaddressed need to break through the latter (preaching the Sodom narrative as a text about homosexuality) and become aware that there is in fact nothing *prima facie* about the text.

9. For a survey of the evidently perplexed state of *ancient* biblical interpretation on the character of Lot and the people of Sodom and their 'sin', see James L. Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997), pp. 181–95. Since the publication of Mark D. Jordan's *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), however, there has been reason to understand the traditional approach to this text as a product of theological/sociological *eisegesis*, an invention of mediaeval Christendom rooted in part in the polemical writings of the hermit Peter Damien. The aim of my initial article was to try to see beyond the history of exegesis on these verses and to endeavour to interpret them on the basis of the clues provided by the narrative alone.

10. See especially Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (trans. J.J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

Genesis 19 and focusing his attention on the question of ‘topsy-turvy’ hospitality. Lasine does not account for the relationship between Genesis 18 and Genesis 19 in his analysis, nor does he deal adequately with the question of the identity of Abraham and Lot’s visitors (they are simply referred to as angels).¹¹ R. Kimelman is correct, I believe, when he insists: ‘If no single reading perspective can account for all the data, the only question is whether one reading can account for more of the data than another in a coherent way. In any case, it may take multiple readings to account for all the data’.¹² Ultimately it makes little sense in our interpretation of such narratives to insist that a particular meaning, literal/*prima facie* or otherwise, is the only possible meaning. Claims of this nature tend to ignore the fact that biblical literature is frequently intended to be read at different levels, none of which enjoys any priority claim to the truth.¹³ In the last analysis we must endeavour to account for as much of the data as possible in a ‘coherent way’.

Perhaps one of the most essential aspects of the narrative is the identification of Abraham’s visitor(s) at the Oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18 and Lot’s visitors outside the city of Sodom in Genesis 19. A close narrative analysis of both parallel segments makes it clear, however, that the similarities between the two are designed to suggest that the visitors in each case are identical, while the differences serve to distinguish the characters of Abraham (daylight, he sees/understands, he addresses his visitors as ‘My Lord’) and Lot (darkness, lack of understanding, addresses his visitors as ‘my lords’). I thus argue in favour of identifying the visitors as recognized/unrecognized divine presence.¹⁴

11. Stuart Lasine, ‘Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World’, *JSOT* 29 (1984), pp. 37-59.

12. Reuven Kimelman, ‘The Seduction of Eve and the Exegetical Politics of Gender’, *BibInt* 4 (1996), pp. 1-39.

13. My *reading* of the text as a *narrative* was supported by the narrative approach of David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell (*Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993]) who argue that: (1) literature is about people so we must pay attention to *characterization*; (2) *plot* is the medium through which narrative meaning is communicated so we must pay attention to plot; (3) *words* hold the key to the significance of the narrative world so we need to be attentive to words and their use. My initial article focused on all three elements in its reading of the Mamre–Sodom narrative. The present contribution will turn its attention more specifically to the use and significance of two particular Hebrew words פֶּהַח and דְּלֵהָ.

14. This is supported by Hermann Gunkel (*Genesis übersetzt und erklärt* [Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 4th edn,

The present author maintains that the key verb עָרַב should be afforded a neutral, non-sexual interpretation. According to the usual lexica, the verbal root עָרַב occurs 1058 times in the Hebrew Bible, only fifteen of which are taken to refer to some kind of sexual 'knowledge' and only two of which are found in a context which has been traditionally associated with male–male genital expression (Gen. 19.5 and Judg. 19.22). The LXX employs συγγενώμεθα in Gen. 19.5 (but not, incidentally, in Judg. 19.22), a form of συγγίνομαι which LEH¹⁵ renders simply as 'to have sexual intercourse with'. While LSJ¹⁶ includes this possible meaning among its renderings of συγγίνομαι, it is far from being the only possible rendering of the term. It

1917]) and later in part by Benno Jacob, who considers the visitors to represent a 'manifestation of the divine will' (*Das erste Buch der Tora, Genesis, übersetzt und erklärt* [Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1934]). John H. Sailhamer (*The Pentateuch as Narrative* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992]) turns his attention to the numerical confusion surrounding the visitors and argues that it is far from haphazard. Counter to the suggestion of evidence of textual conflation, he maintains that it forces us to recognize a conflict in the presentation of divine presence, allowing the author to indicate the latter without the need for 'physical presence'. He notes, at the same time, that the key connecting both segments of the narrative is that of recognition: Abraham recognized the Lord but Lot did not. Lot, as we shall see, finally recognizes his visitors in 19.18, addressing them/him as 'My Lord'. Robert Alter argues that the Sodom narrative is central to the entire segment dealing with progeny for Abraham, insisting that God's blessing and future nationhood depend on the maintenance of *righteousness* and *justice*. The italicized terms likewise serve as *Leitwörter*, binding the broader context together. Sodom, by contrast, is a city with no concept of either virtue, nor is it willing to accept Lot's attempt to practise them (19.9). In spite of the fact that Alter's interpretation of the narrative turns around this 'new essential theme to the covenant idea', and that he is inclined to see the visit to Abraham and Sarah in chs. 17 and 18 as divine, he continues to argue that the narrator intends to contrast the promise of fecundity with respect to Abraham and Sarah with the 'sterile' [*sic*] (homo)sexuality of the people of Sodom. He thus falls under the first of the subdivisions outlined above. He does not include the terms דָּלָה and פְּתָה in his summary of key words, phrases and plots. As such he is guilty of the sin he himself warns the reader against, namely that of 'under-read[ing] the individual episodes and grasp[ing] at best imperfectly the broader horizon of meaning towards which the biblical writers mean to lead us' (Robert Alter, 'Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative', in Regina M. Schwartz [ed.], *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], pp. 146–60 [160]).

15. Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel and Katrien Hauspie, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2 vols.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992–96).

16. Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott and Henry S. Jones (eds.), *A Greek–English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 9th edn, 1996).

might be fair to conclude, therefore, that the basic meaning of such a word is ‘to be with’ and that its extended meaning, such as ‘to have sex with’, must rely on one’s interpretation of the context in which it is employed. The LXX would appear to have interpreted the context as one laden with sexuality (although once again it did not do so in the parallel text in Judg. 19.22 where it has a form of γινώσκω). Indeed, given the statistical weight of the non-sexual usage of ידע, contextual evidence would seem to be indispensable in establishing a sexual reading of the term. The verb is employed four times in the narrative context. The first (18.19) has Yahweh as subject and Abraham as object: Yahweh *knows* Abraham. The second use (18.20) also has Yahweh as subject, the goings-on in Sodom being the object of Yahweh’s *knowing* at this juncture. The third use (19.5—consistently understood as sexual *knowing*) is placed on the lips of the people of Sodom while the fourth use (19.8) is related to Lot’s daughters who ‘have not known a man’. The reader is aware here that Lot has not yet worked out the identity of his visitors. He unsurprisingly interprets the people of Sodom’s demand ‘to know’ them as sexual, offering his daughters for this purpose to the people pounding at his door. It is interesting to note that the LXX translates the fourth usage of the term, that which one might be inclined to grant an unequivocal sexual connotation, with a form of γινώσκω. While Lot and the people of Sodom may still have been basking in ignorance as to the identity of Abraham’s/Lot’s visitors, it seems clear that the audience/reader would have been obliged to interpret the people of Sodom’s demand ‘to know’ in v. 5 in its context: Abraham as father of justice and righteousness was ‘known’ (passive acceptance) by Yahweh—the people of Sodom as exemplars of wickedness had neither right nor access to this knowledge in spite of their active demands. One might argue that the people of Sodom, like Abraham but not yet Lot, recognize the divinity of Lot’s guests. This only serves, however, to heighten the narrative tension. The people of Sodom are thus located in an impossible association with Abraham. They are polar opposites at one level and yet they simultaneously recognize the divinity when they see it. The association further underlines the difference between the two actants.

Contrast and similarity between the figures of Abraham and Lot are essential to the narrative and the correct understanding thereof. Many commentators have correctly pointed out the complexity of the character of Lot yet have continued to insist on his importance for our understanding of the narrative. For some he is a man without morals who split from his uncle, Abraham, preferring to settle outside Sodom, who did not recognize

his divine visitors, thwarted their plans by forcing them to stay the night in his house (incidentally the verb פִּצַּר, 'to urge/press', is used with Lot as subject in 19.3 and with the people of Sodom as subject in 19.9) and seemed to offer his own daughters for sex to a ferocious crowd, misinterpreting their demand 'to know' his visitors as an expression of sexual arousal. For others, Lot's only redeeming feature is his relationship with Abraham. For others still, however, it is this relationship which holds the key to our understanding of the figure. For L.A. Turner, for example, Lot has become Abraham's surrogate son and is thus essentially interwoven in the sub-narrative of the promise of an heir. At the same time, however, he represents him as a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, capable of being genuine yet strongly inclined to wickedness.¹⁷ Y. Radday maintains that the name Lot, which means 'veiled', is the key to understanding the character. His actions reveal that his own reason is veiled. He does not recognize his visitors (although he does so later), he misunderstands the demands of the people of Sodom and he later misunderstands his visitors' advice to evacuate the city of Sodom and its environs.¹⁸ Ultimately, Lot is an ignorant character, set up as a foil to Abraham who 'knows' and 'is known'. At the very least, the contrast between the figures of Abraham and Lot in relation to the visitors clearly signals a need to be careful in our understanding of their identity and the designs of the people of Sodom in their regard. Lasine notes, in addition, some of the comic dimensions associated with Lot's behaviour: Lot looks but does not see.¹⁹

The blindness suffered by the people of Sodom in their efforts to access the 'door' and the divine presence behind it should be read as an inability to perceive, as access denied. The term employed for blindness in Hebrew is סָנוּרִים, an unusual term that only occurs elsewhere in 2 Kgs 6.18 where Elisha prays to the Lord that he will close the eyes of the Syrians so that they 'may not see', in order to fool them into going to Samaria where the Lord opens their eyes once again. The term would appear to indicate a degree of perception granted by God without which there is only lack of perception. Victor P. Hamilton maintains that we should not interpret the

17. Laurence A. Turner, 'Lot as Jekyll and Hyde: A Reading of Genesis 18–19', in David J.A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essay in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (JSOTSup, 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 85–102.

18. Yehuda T. Radday, 'Humour in Names', in Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 92; Bible and Literature Series, 23; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 59–98.

19. Lasine, 'Guest and Host', p. 40

term literally but should understand it as a metaphorical statement for ‘the impossibility of knowing’.²⁰ The LXX, interestingly enough, employs the term ὀρασία (‘inability to see, blindness’). The other biblical references provided by LEH (Deut. 28.28; 2 Kgs 6.18; 2 Macc. 10.3) would appear to support the idea of irrational madness rather than literal blindness. The demand ‘to know’ is countered with a firm refusal of ‘knowledge’. The door is slammed shut, as it were, in the face of the people of Sodom who, as the audience is aware, have no right to access the visitors inside Lot’s house. Lasine insists that there is also a comical element at work here in that the people of Sodom continued to search for the door even though they were unable to see. In the present author’s opinion, however, the comical aspect of the unrighteous seeking access to the divine would likewise not have been lost on an attuned audience. Although the door is closed from the inside and the ‘blindness’ of the people of Sodom is similarly inflicted from within Lot’s house, the former ultimately close off any access to the divine by their own behaviour. Their ‘blindness’ as such might also be considered self-inflicted.

What then were the people of Sodom really after? They wanted ‘to know’ but not in the ‘biblical’ sense! Their sin was ultimately one of hubris. Ezekiel, arguably the first to offer serious exegesis of the narrative in Genesis 19, places ‘pride’ at the top of the list of Sodom’s vices. The people of Sodom were not out on a frenzied search for sexual gratification, their ultimate plan was ‘to know’ the divine presence and thereby rise above the divine in an act of hubris. Their efforts were thwarted by their own lack of perception. Only the righteous can know and be known by God. The people of Sodom were after knowledge of the divine which for them was ultimately inaccessible.

Exegetes and the Door

A comprehensive review of the history of exegesis found in the commentaries, monographs and articles dealing with this specific pericope would take us beyond the intention and scope of the present contribution. A representative survey of the said exegesis of the text reveals, however, that ‘the door/opening’ in the Mamre–Sodom narrative has been afforded little if any attention. The rabbis treated the terms literally, although they make a distinction between ‘door’ and ‘opening’ in their translation thereof. In

20. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

any event it remains just a door/opening.²¹ Procksch briefly notes that the bolting of the door to prevent further attempts to gain entry was an act of chivalry on Lot's part but he makes no further allusion to דלתה or פתחה.²² Jacob likewise makes only a passing reference to the difference between דלתה and פתחה, the former being the *Türtafel* and the latter the *Türöffnung*. He affords no other significance to the terms, however, beyond this simple distinction.²³ Speiser makes the link between Lot's house here in ch. 19 and Abraham's tent in ch. 18 and distinguishes between the entrance and the door itself, the combination of which he takes to be evidence of a substantial dwelling.²⁴ Westermann follows Jacob, focusing on the significance of Lot's actions, and follows Speiser in his interpretation of 'blindness' but makes no specific reference to the door or the entrance.²⁵ Waltke's most recent commentary does not miss the fact that the narrative intends us to compare and contrast the characters of Abraham and Lot. He notes that Lot probably closed the door behind him in an act of courage, putting himself at risk to protect his guests (cf. Jacob and Westermann). In his theological reflection on the text, however, Waltke notes a parallel with the story of Noah and the present narrative and draws particular attention to the 'closing of a door' by God (or his angels) as an act of divine protection (Gen. 7.16 uses a form of the verb סגר meaning 'to shut' with God as subject; in Genesis 19 the same verb is used with the visitors and Lot as subjects but only the דלתה as object.). It seems evident, however, that Waltke should have taken his own advice and examined the parallels between the 'door/entrance' in ch. 18 and ch. 19, which he does not do.²⁶

21. Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1986), pp. 678-90. See also Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis/בראשית: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 5749/1989), pp. 135-38.

22. Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis übersetzt und erklärt* (Leipzig: Erlangen, 1924), pp. 125-28.

23. Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Torah: Genesis* (New York: Ktav, 1974), pp. 453-58.

24. Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB, 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 136-43.

25. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, pp. 294-302.

26. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 265-81. Victor P. Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* [NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995], pp. 28-38) lists the similarities between the two narratives, rooting himself in the list of seventeen similarities proposed by John Van Seters (*Abraham in History and Tradition* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975],

Clearly no more than a functional distinction is proposed between the terms employed for ‘door/entrance’—דלת and פתח—and no reference is made to the fact that of the ten uses of the latter term in Genesis, three are found in the context of the Mamre episode in which Abraham features as the primary actant and three appear in the context of the Sodom episode in which Lot appears as the primary actant. It should be evident by this stage that both segments of the narrative are to be read together as a sort of exercise in counterpoint and that the terminology employed as ‘notes’ in the contrapuntal setting should not be ignored. The following semantic/contextual analysis of the terms in question should serve to illustrate the point.²⁷

Semantic/Contextual Analysis of פתח and דלת

If we understand the depiction of the characters Abraham and Lot as a complex interweave of personal/ethical characteristics and behaviours and the words employed by the author as significant ‘notes’ sounding repeatedly, as it were, in the counterpoint of the likewise interwoven narratives of Genesis 18 and 19, then it would be appropriate to examine the way in which the most frequently repeated ‘notes’ in the narratives—namely דלת and פתח—are employed and to endeavour to establish their relationship with the said characters. The primary characters in Genesis 18 are Abraham (who recognized divine presence and addressed his visitors as ‘My Lord’—see above), his wife Sarah and his visitors:

- 18.1: Abraham is sitting at the פתח of his tent at Mamre
- 18.2: Abraham runs from the פתח of his tent to meet his visitors
- (18.10: Sarah is listening at the פתח of the tent)

Thus, where Abraham and Sarah are concerned the term פתח is employed exclusively in the narrative and always in specific association with Abraham’s and Sarah’s tent. In the light of our reading of this encounter between Abraham, Sarah and their divine visitor(s) outlined above, the repeated use

pp. 215-16), but does not offer an interpretation thereof. He notes in addition, however, that there is a dual emphasis on ‘know’ in 18.19 and 19.5, 8 (p. 30 n. 16). The verb ידע is not employed elsewhere in association with דלת/פתח.

27. It goes without saying that both terms have a concrete meaning that fits in the narrative context. A tent normally has an entrance but no door and a house can have both. The literal meaning of a narrative and its potential figurative significance, however, need not be mutually exclusive. The term דלת is not employed in the Old Testament in relation to אהל.

of the term פתח would appear, at least at this juncture, to be part of the scenario of divine encounter.

The primary characters of Genesis 19 are Lot, his visitors (ambiguous, unrecognized then recognized divine presence) and the people of Sodom gathered en masse outside the door of his house.²⁸ When it comes to Lot's encounter with his visitors and the people of Sodom, however, two different terms are employed, two different notes in the narrative counterpoint, namely דלת and פתח:

- 19.6: Lot goes to the פתח of his house²⁹ and closes the דלת³⁰
- 19.9: The people of Sodom try to break down the דלת
- 19.10: The visitors pull Lot inside and shut the דלת
- 19.11: The people of Sodom are at the פתח

The people of Sodom are struck 'blind' and cannot find the פתח.

With respect to Lot, therefore, both דלת and פתח are employed evenly three times each. The physical dynamics of the narrative are worthy of comment at this juncture. Lot moves in one direction, namely outside the פתח, after which he closes the דלת. Once outside, however, he is pushed, as it were, by the people of Sodom in the other direction, against the דלת. In the struggle of opposing forces—unrecognized divine presence and the people of Sodom—with Lot caught in the middle, his back against the דלת, Lot is then drawn in to safety by his divine visitors who close the דלת to the ferocious crowd outside. Lot has in fact been drawn into the פתח from which he exited in 19.6, pushed by the people of Sodom and pulled by his divine visitors. Once the דלת is closed, however, the action outside can begin in earnest. Blindness, confusion and evident hysteria grip the people of Sodom who seek in vain for the פתח.

According to the lexica,³¹ the term דלת refers to the physical door that fills the entrance to a house. It carries connotations of hospitality and

28. Lot's wife and daughters represent secondary characters.

29. Note that Lot has a house as opposed to Abraham's tent. A house may suggest a more settled existence in Sodom, an observation employed by some exegetes in their characterization of Lot.

30. Rahlfs' edition of the LXX translates פתח here in Gen. 19.6 with πρόθυρον. The remaining usages are translated with θύρα (cf. Alfred Rahlfs, *Septuaginta*, I [Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 2nd edn, 1982]). The Cambridge edition translates consistently with θύρα (Alan E. Brooke and Norman McLean, *The Old Testament in Greek* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906]). The Vulgate translates with *ostium* in both Gen. 18 and 19 (*Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio* [Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979]).

security, both clearly appropriate in the present instance. It is sometimes used in a metaphorical sense in statements such as the ‘doors of the lips’ (Ps. 141.3) or the ‘doors of the womb’ (Job 3.10) or the ‘doors of heaven’ (Gen. 7.11; 8.2; 2 Kgs 7.2, 19; Isa. 24.18; Mal. 3.10). In the present instance, however, it would appear that the usage is quite literal. The term פתח, on the other hand, seems to be a bearer of greater significance. The nominal form accounts for roughly half of the usages of the term, the majority of which occur in Exodus to Numbers and in Ezekiel. The term implies a place of going in and out, of entrance and exit, serving as a barrier between the public arena outside and the intimate world inside. It is used to refer to the ‘opening of the heart’ in Gen. 4.7 and is the place of divine encounter for Elijah in 1 Kgs 19.13. In the description of the construction of the temple in 1 Kings 6 it serves as the entrance to an *Ort der Begegnung mit der Gottheit* (‘place of encounter with the divine’).³² Ezekiel employs the term with some frequency especially in chs. 40–47, once again in the context of the temple, where it serves as an opening to places in which divine reality is revealed. A further concentration of uses of פתח can be found in relation to the אהל מועד or the Tent of Meeting. For Bartelmus, this usage is key to the theological understanding of the term. For him, Genesis 18 serves as a loud echo of the Tent of Meeting, the earthly representation of the presence of Yahweh, the point of access to the divine, as a place of revelation with respect to the continuation of the promise (Sarah is to become a mother): ‘The theological conceptualization of Gen. 18.1 ff. is repeated at a higher level of abstraction’.³³ The apparent fact that a tent, as in the case of Abraham and Sarah, cannot have a דלת in the sense outlined above (protection, hospitality) underlines our understanding of פתח in both segments of the narrative as signifying something more than a simple opening or entrance, something associated (certainly in the minds of the reader/audience) with the temple as a place of encounter with God.³⁴ According to den Heyer and Schelling, the פתח

31. See the respective treatments of דלת by A. Baumann, in *TDOT*, III, pp. 230–33, and Richard S. Hess, in *NIDOTTE*, I, pp. 961–63.

32. See Rüdiger Bartelmus’s article on פתח in *ThWAT*, VI, pp. 832–52.

33. Bartelmus, ‘פתח’, p. 848 (my translation).

34. Several places in the New Testament employ the Greek equivalent of פתח/דלת in reference to a point of access to the divine or a place of divine encounter (e.g. Mk 1.33 says that demons knew him; 2.2 and also Lk. 11.7, 9–10 [and parallels] indicate that access is available to the persistent; the Emmaus narrative [Lk. 24.13–53] exhibits significant parallels with the present narrative with its references to blindness and ultimate recognition of the risen Jesus). The New Testament does not appear to make any

spoken of in Gen. 18.1-3 thus serves as an image for expected revelation, while the magnificent decoration of the temple entrance in 1 Kgs 6.31-35 is intended to illustrate the value of this location as a place of encounter and communication between God and humanity.³⁵ Bearing this in mind, and given the implications of our research into the identity of the visitors at Lot's house, the punishment of 'blindness', and above all the necessity of reading the Sodom narrative together with the Mamre narrative, it seems reasonable to propose the following reading of the Lot text.

In 19.6 Lot (who is already inside but is unaware of the significance thereof) goes to the *entrance* of his house and closes the *security door*. In 19.9 the people of Sodom try to break down the security door in an endeavour to get inside. In 19.10 the divine visitors pull Lot inside (he still needs to be pulled at this stage) and shut the security door. In 19.11 the people of Sodom, all of them, are milling around at the *entrance* trying to find their way inside. Finally they are struck 'blind' and cannot find *the entrance to the divine*. They are doomed to remain outside. Lot, and presumably his family, enjoy the security of the door and the favour of being inside, of having crossed the threshold into the presence of the divine. It is interesting to note that Lot's manner of addressing his visitors changes after this point. He now uses the expression typically associated with addressing the divine, 'My Lord' (19.18 [singular]), and speaks of having found favour 'with you' (19.18 [singular]), followed by a whole series of second-person masculine singular suffixes.³⁶ Thus, having been drawn inside the house, the 'veil' is lifted from Lot's understanding and he recognizes his visitors in a fashion akin to that of his uncle Abraham in 18.2-3.

Repetition as a Literary Device

From a literary perspective, the repetition of both *דלת* and *פתח* within such a limited literary space seems redundant or at least overstated.³⁷

distinction between *פתח/דלת*, perhaps under the influence of the LXX's tendency to use both for the same purpose. The term *πρόθυρον* is not found in the New Testament.

35. Cees J. den Heyer and Peter Schelling, *Symbolen in de bijbel. Woorden en hun betekenis* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2000), pp. 91-92.

36. The person addressed is clearly second-person singular in 19.18 in spite of the suggestions proposed by *BHS*.

37. It might be argued that Hebrew and other Semitic languages are repetitive by their very nature. Nevertheless, the concentration of repeated terms within a limited textual space, whereby the use of pronominal suffixes or other grammatical procedures to refer back to an antecedent reference to the door/opening is possible but not

According to Bar-Efrat, ‘the repetition of words (or roots) is a stylistic feature found often in biblical narrative’.³⁸ Bar-Efrat also notes that when a word is repeated meaningfully within a text or sequence of texts—as is arguably the case here—it can be regarded as a key word.³⁹ Bar-Efrat also refers to Buber’s understanding of the *Leitwort* as establishing

a relationship between the separate stages of the narrative [in our case between Gen. 18 and 19], conveying the essential point directly. It reveals the meaning and the implicit message of the narrative, without adversely affecting its pure artistic form in any way. In other words, the meaning is not expressed by any supplement to the actual story, through exposition of the ideas or views [the history of exegesis of this narrative], but becomes apparent from the story itself, through its repetition of key words.⁴⁰

It might be fair to say, therefore, that repetition at this juncture is a quite deliberate tactic on the part of the narrator designed to draw attention to the repeated words and invite the reader/audience to reflect on their meaning in relation to both their immediate and extended context, particularly Genesis 18. Likewise, repetitions of entire phrases and sentences (and perhaps scenes), even when these are not literal, may serve to highlight similarities and differences between the segments of the narrative in question. This is clearly the case with respect to Genesis 18 and 19: ‘modifications are important in reflecting the similarity or difference between situations, in describing characters, in emphasising a topic or a concept, etc.’⁴¹

exploited, further adds to the probability that the repetition is deliberate and significant. See Hennie A.J. Kruger, ‘Subscripts to Creation: A Few Exegetical Comments on the Literary Device of Repetition in Gen 1–11’, in André Wénin (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Genesis* (Leuven: Peeters/Leuven University Press, 2001), pp. 429–48, in which the author notes the presence of ‘parallels and reversals’ built on the repetition of key words in the text of Gen. 1–11. Kruger also insists that ‘These repetitions not only form an integral part of the literary structure of these chapters, but carry theological ideas as well’ (p. 445).

38. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup, 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), p. 211.

39. Depending on further factors related to the frequency of use of the terms in question in the Bible as a whole and the concentration thereof in the narrative under discussion (Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, p. 212).

40. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, p. 213; cf. also Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1936), pp. 262–64. Alter also relies on Buber’s description of the phenomenon; cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

41. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, p. 215.

At the same time, the repetition of *דלת* and *פתח* may suggest a rather clever literary device intended to reflect the confusion of the scene.⁴² While the syntax of these verses is unexceptional and the passage quite intelligible as it is, it may nevertheless reflect the use of confused language as a deliberate literary technique (as the numerical confusion related to the visitors almost certainly does) designed to illustrate the wildness of the encounter, highlighting at the same time the people of Sodom's uncontrollable urge to gain access to Lot and Abraham's visitors and the frenzy it engendered among them. Repetition renders the pounding of the people of Sodom on Lot's door and ultimately their furious efforts to find the entrance when their vehemence brought them beyond reason to blindness.

From a literary perspective there is reason to suggest that we are dealing here with a build up of repetition towards a climax in which only *פתח* is used and that 19.11 is ultimately an echo of 18.1 with all its connotations. Yahweh 'appeared' (niphals *ראה*) to Abraham who 'looked up' (*נישא עין*) and 'saw' (qal *ראה*). The people of Sodom searched and could not find (*במצא*) because they could not see (*סנוורים*). Lasine points out the comic aspect of these verses:

Perhaps the most comical element in Genesis 19 is the absurd persistence of the mob, who wear themselves out groping for Lot's door *after* angels have blinded them! Their rigid focus on their original goal, apparently oblivious to what has just happened to them, is a classic trait of the comic character...⁴³

Although he identifies the visitors as angels and does not make any particular distinction between *דלת* and *פתח*, Lasine's focus on the blind determination of the people of Sodom as comical is insightful of a reality that would not have gone unnoticed to an audience who were already attuned to the signals in the text that invite us to compare Genesis 19 with Genesis 18. Access to the divinity for the people of Sodom would have been all the more absurd.

Conclusions and Interpretative Hypothesis—פתח as the Key

By way of conclusion it seems appropriate to return to a number of disputed questions already raised in the course of the present article and endeavour

42. Parallel at least to the literary technique described in Gary A. Rendsburg, 'Confused Language as a Deliberate Literary Device in Biblical Hebrew Narrative', *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 2 (Article 6) (1999), available online at <www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS>.

43. Lasine, 'Guest and Host', p. 40.

to provide a brief answer thereto, bearing in mind the advice of Kimelman mentioned above (p. 434) and the need to account for as much data as possible in interpreting a narrative open to multiple interpretations.

With respect to the question of the delimitation of our narrative unit, it seems evident from a variety of perspectives that we should not be limited to the incident outside Lot's house at Sodom. The apparent similarities and significant differences between the narratives of Genesis 18 and 19, the presence and repeated use of significant and significance-constructing *Leitwörter*, the characterization of the major figures of Lot and Abraham, the true identity of their visitors, all compel us to read both incidents together. Mamre and Sodom constitute a single narrative.

Bearing this in mind, therefore, we are free to identify Lot's visitors and Abraham's visitors as the same: Yahweh present in response to the cry that went up to him concerning the terrible injustices of the people of Sodom. The confused language relating to the visitors is intentional and even necessary and need not (in the first instance) suggest the conflation of different source narratives. The key, according to Sailhamer, is recognition:⁴⁴ Abraham recognizes immediately and gains access to the divine; Lot gets off to a poor start but the 'veil' cloaking his understanding is gradually lifted as he is brought into the presence of the divine, thus allowing him to express recognition thereof later in the text; the people of Sodom ultimately recognize the divine presence but their response echoes their character—a proud and greedy demand to have access to the manifest divine presence that would have been little more than ridiculous to the narrative's earliest audience. It is the present author's contention, however, that the narrative's listeners down through the centuries and including many in the present day have gradually come to misunderstand the dynamics of the narrative and thereby misunderstand the demands of the people of Sodom.

It should be noted, in addition, that the people of Sodom, all of them, young and old, male and female,⁴⁵ and not only the men of Sodom, desired to gain access to Lot's visitors. Their verbal and physical violence towards Lot reflects their character. They want to break down the security door closed by Lot and opened and closed again by his visitors. Their true goal, however, is the פֶּתַח. The דָּלֵת is only a physical obstacle in their way. The דָּלֵת serves to protect, it is a security door with a literal function. The פֶּתַח,

44. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 162.

45. The contemporary reader is at liberty to distinguish this gender category on cultural grounds based on the awareness of the ancient text's restrictions in this regard.

on the other hand, is a point of access, a place of encounter with the divine, associated with the Tent of Meeting and the Temple. It is a key word designed to express the essential point of the narrative and to establish its boundaries. It is not to be taken literally⁴⁶ but rather to be understood as a point of access to God or 'entrance to the sacred', to the manifest divine presence in the house of Lot at Sodom.

If one accepts that the term פתח serves as a key to knowledge of God, who then can enter through this פתח and gain access thereto? Abraham already sits in the פתח of his tent in Gen. 18.1. It is here that he encounters the divine and receives the all-important message that Sarah is to bear a son. The promise is to continue in spite of every setback. Lot is likewise a part of this promise via his relationship with Abraham. In the parallel narrative of Genesis 19, Lot's albeit late (only after he has been dragged back into the house by his visitors) recognition of manifest divine presence provides him also with access to the knowledge of God. While he is already inside the פתח when the people of Sodom arrive at the דלת of his house, his awareness of the divine reality in which he finds himself remains veiled until after his encounter with the demanding crowd. Indeed it is partly because the visitors pull him inside the protective enclosure and secure bounds of the דלת that he comes to recognize their true character. דלת and פתח would thus appear to have a role to play in the gradual development of the figure of Lot. His interaction therewith underlines the ambiguity of his personality. Indeed, in a certain sense he learns from them about the identity of his visitors. In the last analysis, however, the people of Sodom cannot enter through the פתח and have no access to knowledge of God because their wickedness is exemplary.

The term פתח as access thus comes to parallel the notion of sight as knowledge or vision as cognition which also plays a significant role in the narratives. The blindness of the people of Sodom serves to illustrate their fundamental inability to have access to the divine. Their lack of 'sight' echoes their lack of 'knowledge'. Vision is cognition for the righteous Abraham in Gen. 18.2—'He looked up and saw...'—but blindness is the only possible fate of the wicked people of Sodom. I agree with Wenham in this regard: 'As elsewhere in Scripture (Isa. 6.10; Jn 9), this physical

46. We already noted that the LXX does not appear to make significant distinction between the דלת and the פתח. The Christian Testament abounds, however, in non-literal uses of 'door'. Of particular interest are those references in which Jesus is described or describes himself as a 'door' (e.g. Jn 10; ch. 9 narrates the story of a blind person who received light).

blindness is probably symbolic of intellectual or spiritual blindness. The men [*sic*] of Sodom cannot see physically or spiritually where they are going.⁴⁷ Their wickedness blinds them to such an extent that they cannot find the point of access essential to their evident purpose.

In the last analysis, Kimelman's statement continues to serve as a challenge to reading the Mamre–Sodom narrative: 'If no single reading perspective can account for all the data, the only question is whether one reading can account for more of the data than another in a coherent way'.⁴⁸ I would suggest that the present contribution's reading of the narrative accounts for a more than significant amount of the data, is able to explain apparent contradictions and inconsistencies, is attuned to the humour of the text and is aware of its important key words and their function. The key to the reading of the narrative is, I would argue, the word פתח itself, a point of divine access and place of divine encounter for some, a closed door to others who have no possibility of knowing God on account of their wickedness.

47. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC, 2; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), p. 56.

48. Kimelman, 'The Seduction of Eve', p. 1.

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