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Puzzling Further About Lot and his Daughters

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I discuss further curious details of the perplexing story of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19, following up my earlier episode:

<https://adversariapodcast.com/2019/09/15/lots-daughters-revisited/>

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I wanted to revisit the story of Lot and his daughters. It's a story I've commented upon in an episode a couple of days ago.

I've done separate standalone episodes focusing upon the earlier part of the story in my series on the story of the family of Abraham and then in a separate video, as far as I recall. Now, this, like many other stories in scripture, is complex and multifaceted. There's a lot going on within this text.

And in these sorts of cases, we need to return to the text and chip away at it bit by bit. And so, once again, this is not going to settle any of the questions definitively, but it will

give a bit more grist for the mill. So we'll be able to think about the text a bit better, see some of the issues that are at stake, some of the textual hints that might be worth following up on, and might give us clues as to the meaning that's taking place.

Now, the first thing we need to notice is that when we're dealing with a text, we need to think about the shape of the text. What are some of the other texts that are similar to inform or content? And here in the story of Genesis, there are a number of other narratives that have similarities with the story of Lot and his daughters. There are stories of paired siblings on a number of occasions, older and younger siblings.

We can think about Esau and Jacob, Cain and Abel, Judah and Joseph and the way their story plays off against each other, Ishmael and Isaac, the younger over the older, things like that. That's one pattern that we see. We also see the story of the endangered ancestress.

So someone like Sarah or Rebecca, they're given to pagan kings or taken in by pagan kings, and there are judgments upon the king and then they're released. There's a similar sort of thing here. The daughters of Lot are not just random daughters.

They are going to be the ancestresses of the lands of Moab and Ammon. And so the threat to them is a threat to the entire people that will descend from them. And this sets up Abraham and Lot as juxtaposed patriarchs, not just individuals of faith or unbelief, but as patriarchs.

Abraham will represent the entirety of his people. Lot will represent the people that flow from him. Other things, we've talked about the juxtapositions and parallels between chapters 18 and 19.

We didn't talk about the end of chapter 18 where Abraham intercedes for Sodom. Now, we can maybe contrast the way that Lot relates to Sodom and to his daughters with the way that Abraham relates to Sodom. Abraham intercedes for, seeks to protect Sodom by creating this association between the righteous and the wicked and ensuring that, arguing that God should not destroy the righteous with the wicked.

But we see Lot seemingly making the opposite judgment when he casts, or is prepared to cast his daughters out to the crowd in Sodom. He's prepared to sacrifice the righteous to the wicked to save his skin and the skin of his guests. Now, it's worth remembering the laws or the expectations, norms of hospitality, which were very high.

And you can understand to some extent Lot's action against that sort of backdrop. But clearly there's something seriously wrong. The judgment of Abraham ends with, or the conversation with Abraham ends with the decision that if there are 10 left, Sodom will be saved.

But then there's this breach between the people of Sodom and the people of Lot's house

that would save them if they were kept together. The other thing is that Lot is prepared to throw out people from his household to protect himself, which again jeopardizes both Sodom and his own household. So in that situation, we can maybe read that over against the story of Abraham interceding for Sodom.

There's a contrast to be drawn there. And the endangered ancestress presents again a contrast between what we can see in Abraham's story when God intervenes in those particular cases. He intervenes in the case of Lot.

He intervenes in the case of Sarah and Rebecca. But there are differences. The woman is taken in the case of Abraham and Isaac.

In the case of Lot, he's prepared to throw them out, his daughters out, to protect his skin. And so there are contrasts there to reflect upon. So you see the relationship again within the passage of chapter 19 itself between Lot's earlier action and the incest later on in the chapter.

Some Jewish commentators have seen the earlier action as connected to the incest. Lot is prepared to cast his daughters out to the crowd, which is a statement that he wants them for himself. Now that seems paradoxical, and Rabbi David Forman has a very interesting couple of videos on this.

But when you think about the logic of that, there is a logic to it. Lot treats his daughters as if their sexuality, as if their bodies, as if everything they are belongs to him. And he can just throw them to the crowd as bait in exchange for the guests that he has under his roof.

And so there's a complete claim over his daughters and their lives. And then later on in the chapter, we see that logic being expressed in an ugly form that reveals that at the heart of that, there's something incestuous about that. That he's not prepared to let his daughters go.

Now that may shed some light upon what's taking place. Why do the daughters believe that there is no one left on the earth for them to go into? Now, could that be something about the extreme claims that their father has made upon them? That their father has withdrawn from all human society, cut them off from all human society, and retreated to a cave in the mountains? There's no one there that will perpetuate their name. They're not being let free.

They're kept with their father and their father is the only man left for them. And maybe that's part of what's taking place. And we can see a twofold picture of the perversion of Lot's relationship with his daughters there.

Maybe that's what's going on. And that would help us to connect those two passages together, those two parts of the passage together. The part that concerns being

prepared to cast out the daughters, and then the part where they have incestuous relationships with him.

And so there are further details within the narrative that are peculiar. We need to ask, why is this particular detail in the narrative? Why is this part of the story there? George Athos has commented upon the reference to the daughters being found, the reference to the son-in-laws and the conversation with them. It presents the virgin daughters in a different light, presumably that they are the fiancées of these men who are the sons-in-law, and they haven't yet consummated their marriages, but they've been betrothed.

Now, reading it that way, he suggests, gives us the possibility that the daughters were not in the house. That what Lot was doing was a particular ploy, and it wasn't necessarily, it was something to buy time. It wasn't necessarily a matter of him being prepared to sacrifice his daughters in that way.

When we look through the surrounding chapters though, there are other things that we notice. Abraham has to sacrifice his two sons, and the sacrifice of his two sons takes a different form. In some sense, he has to let his sons go away.

Lot is prepared to cast his daughters out for his sake, claiming them completely for himself in the process, and then he keeps them to himself, and they're not able to go out and have any other man in the world. And so maybe there's a play of the story of Lot and his perverse sacrifice of his daughters to the mob, and then his unwillingness to let them go in any way, and then the story of Abraham, who has to let his sons go, and the two parallel stories in chapters 21 and 22, Isaac being sent in, or Ishmael being sent into the wilderness by the hand of his mother, and Isaac being sent up to God, as it were, as a burnt, whole burnt offering. In those cases, you see the sacrifice of the two children that's juxtaposed with the sacrifice, in a perverse sense, of Lot and his daughters.

The sacrifice, but then also the non-sacrifice. He's not prepared to let them go. Maybe that's part of what's going on.

Think about also, this is a story of nations coming to birth, and the story of the nations coming to birth is, it would again invite us to think about the characteristics of those nations, and how those relate to the ancestor and ancestresses. If you think about the daughters of Lot, the way that they act is significant in this story. There's a sort of death throne to the mob, and then they are those who exercise their sexuality in a very perverse way.

And we don't necessarily have to have a negative judgment upon them here. Their motives seem to be fairly good. They want to continue their father's name.

It seems that there's no one else on the earth for them to go to, and so they're left alone. If their father's name is not going to die out, they have to practice some sort of weird

form of leverage relationship with their father. And then I've noted the parallels between this and the story of Tamar and Judah.

Again, a case where a woman is prevented from having relations by her father-in-law in that case, because he's not giving Sheila to Tamar. Tamar's just waiting around and Sheila's not being given to her. So it seems that on the one hand, Sheila's not being married off, and Tamar's not having relations.

So it seems like the father's name is about to die out. And here you have something similar, and there are some dramatic actions taken where the woman takes matters into her own hands and tries to address the problem. And so the statement upon the actions of the women in this case, the daughters of Lot, I think is a bit more ambivalent.

It's not straightforwardly bad. There are ways in which we can see noble and positive motivations for what they're doing, but yet it's clearly perverse in other ways. This is not a positive situation.

This is not the way things ought to be. And so when we're reading through the story of scripture, I think it's important that we see situations that have an ambivalence to them. I think another example of this could be the deception of Isaac by Jacob.

And in that particular story, there is an ambivalence to it. There are negative features on all sides. And it's not straightforwardly that one party is in the right, one party is in the wrong.

There are far more complicated features to that story. And we need to move beyond that sort of good-bad analysis and think a bit more carefully about some of the more subtle shading of the narrative and how there can be mixed motivations, how the motivations that are in principle good can lead people to tragic actions, etc. Now, other things to note that there is a sort of, Cheryl Exum has suggested that there's a sort of incestuous fantasy of Lot.

And that we see within the text this sort of Freudian covering over this perverse fantasy to have incestuous relationships with his daughters. Now, I think that's stretching the text. But there is something there that suggests that that relationship, incestuous relationship with his daughters, is expressive to some extent or other of Lot's relationship with his daughters more broadly.

And I've hinted at that at various points. The way that he relates to them in the story of Sodom, where he almost claims complete possession over them, and at the same time refuses to protect them. He's not acting towards them as a father.

He's acting towards them as those who are his complete possession. He's not prepared to let them go in that sense. He owns them.

He's not prepared to let them go out and marry other men later on in the story. And those two things are related. There's a pattern there.

There's a turning in of the history upon itself. And so Lot's story ends up in a cave, a place of death. And there is this incestuous relationship that I think is related to what happens earlier on, a turning in of the story upon itself.

Now, we've noted already the relationship between this and the story of Judah and Tamar, but then also the story of Ruth and Boaz. In both of these cases, women are plotting to preserve the family line. You see that in the story of Lot's daughters, but then also in the story of Naomi and Ruth in the relationship with Boaz.

The further details, the man has been drinking and he's laying down and relaxed. And then in the story of Ruth, again, the woman seeks out the man and she lies down beside the man. And then the woman receives seed from the man.

And then the woman receives a son. We see also in that story of Ruth that the description of Ruth's departure might remind us to some degree of the departure of the daughters of Lot from him. So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognise another.

And he said, let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor. Now, in the story of Lot and his daughters, how are we supposed to recognise Lot's part in it? Is Lot completely innocent of what's taken place? Is he completely unaware? Well, I think there are suggestions that this is expressive of something of his relationship with his daughters. There's an ironic reversal, but also a continuation of the logic of the relationship with his daughters that exists earlier in the text.

And my thinking has moved a bit on this. I formerly was a bit more minded to have a positive impression of Lot having a particular ploy and he was trying to deceive the crowd. I'm not so sure of that now.

I think there's more going on in this that would suggest that there is a perverse intent in or perverse relationship between Lot and his daughters more generally. And that the logic of that is playing out later on. In the story of Lot and his daughters and in the story of Ruth and Boaz, there is a sort of Leverett dynamic playing out.

And in that dynamic, there's a sort of calling back to the story of Lot and his daughters. As Ruth plays the part of the Moabites, she lies down and uncovers the feet of Boaz. That's a sexual... There's all sorts of sexual connotations in that text.

Sexual connotations with the threshing floor, with the giving of seed, with going up in the morning before she can be recognized. All of this looks back to the story of Genesis chapter 19. So she's playing out the Moabites story, but there's something more going on here.

There's something going on that suggests that she's not just playing out the negative theme. She's doing something more positive. And she's redeeming that story.

All the negative themes in that story, there's a sort of recapitulation of them, but in a positive way. And Matthew Pagiote commented in that earlier video that within the story of David's ancestry, you can see this more generally. That there's a sort of redemption of these negative characters to some extent and the themes associated with them.

And this happens progressively over the course of the text. And so even characters like Cain or characters like Esau have negative features that are redeemed later on. You see that as I've commented in the story of David and his confrontation with Goliath.

There are Esau themes there. David is like Esau, not just like Jacob. Other things to see that parallels that the woman taking the initiative, going towards the man who's very much passive, asleep within the situation.

And the uncovering of the feet is language that's associated with incest in various... It's similar to the language associated with incest, uncovering the nakedness in chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus. This is a lot of stuff from Warren Gage, I'm commenting upon here. And then you have the pregnancy that follows.

And there's an original incest in the story of Moab. And then a sort of semi-incest in the story of Tamar and Judah. And both of those stories are referred to in that event in Ruth.

Where you have the descendant of Tamar and Judah and then the descendant of the Moabites. Now, other things to note that there are features within the text, again, I've mentioned that are peculiar. Why the conversation with the sons-in-law? Why mention that? It seems to be superfluous, perhaps.

Or it invites some sort of reflection. Why is this within the text? But another detail, perhaps even more interesting, is the fact that Lot's relationship with the small city of Zoar. He says, he said to him to... Lot said to him, Oh no, my lords, behold, your servant has found favour in your sight.

And you have shown me great kindness in saving my life. But I cannot escape to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. Behold, this city is near enough to flee to.

And it is a little one. Let me escape there. Is it not a little one? And my life will be saved.

He said to him, behold, I grant you this favour also. That I will not overthrow this city of which you have spoken. Escape there quickly, for I can do nothing till you arrive there.

Therefore, the name of the city was called Zoar. The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar. And then later on, now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters.

For he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in the cave with his two daughters. Why all this mention of Zoar? I think a couple of things.

First of all, this draws our mind back again to the previous chapter and the intercession of Abraham for Sodom and Gomorrah. Here, Lot is interceding for Zoar. Lot is going to be settling in Zoar.

And for his sake, the angel will not destroy the city of Zoar. Now, there is a parallel. And I think that is a reflection.

Those two passages reflect each other to some extent. And if we think about that, we may be able to see some of the reasons why. But there's something more about Zoar.

Zoar would maybe remind us of the younger daughter. It's the same Hebrew, pretty much the same Hebrew root as the one used for the younger daughter. And that maybe asks, it challenges us to ask whether there is a relationship between the incident concerning Zoar and the relationship with the younger daughter.

Why is he saying this? Why is this particular dialogue there? Now, I think probably because of the parallels with the previous chapter. But then probably also because Zoar is connected with the younger daughter. And the relationship that Lot has with that is maybe he wants to put down roots.

He wants to settle there. He wants to grow up there. Now, the problem is that he's afraid that that city is going to be destroyed.

So he goes out of it in the end. And he ends up settling in a cave with his daughters. Now, the younger daughter is the one who Hebrew, I think, is associated with Zoar.

And maybe there's something going on there. I'm not sure again. This is one of the passages where I just do not have a clue on how to fit these pieces together.

But looking at the pieces closely is fascinating. There's a lot within this text that invites our reflection. Other things to note, the daughters are anonymous throughout.

They're defined primarily by the relationship with their father. There's emphasis upon kinship language. And so that, as it were, Talia Setskova talks about the way that the volume of that particular dimension of the text is turned up.

So you're thinking about this kinship theme because the text is foregrounding that. And the way that the story is told is always significant. Why does the text bring certain details to light? Why does it foreground particular details? Why does it not give us particular details? Why does it not tell us the daughters' names? Why does it always refer to them as the daughters and constantly refer to them as the daughters of Lot, even when it could just say they? Why is it foregrounding the fact that they are Lot's

daughters? So that sort of thing, I think, is important.

Pay attention to the way the story is being told. And then there are slight differences between the way that the account of the older and the younger daughters lying with their father is described. So they are highlighted not just as a pair having relationship with their father, but as a distinct pair.

And so they are distinct characters. And there's sort of younger, older distinction maybe playing out here. As you read through the text, pay attention to some of the slight details that would invite comment.

In verse 32, or verse 31, The firstborn said to the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come into us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father. So they made their father drink wine that night, and the firstborn went in and lay with her father.

He did not know when she lay down or when she arose. The next day the firstborn said to the younger, Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine tonight also.

Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father. So they made their father drink wine that night also, and the younger arose and lay with him, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father.

The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-Ammi.

He is the father of the Ammonites to this day. Now a number of commentators over the years have distinguished between the character of the two daughters of Lot, and a number of them have come down with a more favourable judgment upon the younger daughter, the mother of the Ammonites. As you read the text, what might lead you to this impression? First of all, note that everything is instigated by the older sister.

She is the one who's going through, or the older daughter, we should probably say. She's not described primarily as a sister. The older daughter is the one who instigates everything, and she instigates it the first night, and she says, let us lie with our father.

And then you have the fact that she is the one who carries it out that night, and she lies, comes upon her father, and there's difference in the phraseology here. It's not come into her father so much as come upon her father. It's the language that we find in the story of Tamar and Amnon in 1 Samuel chapter 13.

In that text, you see a distinction between Amnon saying, lie with me, to Tamar, and that

more forcible laying with her that occurs later. And so there's that more negative, maybe suggestive of forceful sexual relations in the description of the older daughter's coming into her father. She comes upon him maybe rather than coming into him.

Other details that are worth paying attention to. In the second night, it's again instigated by the older daughter. And then she says, she refers, I lay yesterday with my father or the previous night.

Let him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him. Now, note how she describes the father.

In all the previous occasions, it's been described as, or the previous occasions, it's mostly been described as our father. Let us make seed live for our father. And then she lies with her father.

And then later on, you have the description that she lay with her father. I lay with my father. Now, that language is interesting.

Why not say, lay with our father? There's an expression of an intimacy between the daughter and the father there that highlights something of the impropriety of the relationship. That the intimacy of the sexual relationship has perverted the relationship between father and daughter. Because the relationship between father and daughter is one that is less exclusive.

As the daughter, she can relate to her father as our father. But because of that sexual relationship, she refers to her father as my father, rather than our father when she's talking to her sister. And that, I think, is suggestive of a far more negative overtone to the relationship between the older daughter and Lart than between the younger daughter and Lart.

The description of the younger daughter's relationship with Lart is far more subtle. It's not as negative in its connotations. Again, it's instigated by the older daughter.

The suggestion is that on the previous night, the intended goal was that both of them would lie with the father. But that only the older daughter did so. And the younger daughter may have been reticent and hesitant.

And then she has to be pushed on that second evening to do so. And then it goes through the same account. And so what we see is pretty much, blow by blow, the same events taking place.

But the way it's described in the narrative, slight differences in the phraseology, suggest maybe a difference in the way that those two actions are viewed. Jonathan Grossman has an interesting article on this where he talks about that reflective meaning and the way that those two narrative, the way a narrative is told, can describe the same events.

But slight differences in the phraseology can juxtapose them in a way that presents narrative judgment upon the respective events relative to each other.

So those are some more details to think about. Another thing to focus upon perhaps would be the later story of Moab. Moab and Amun have different relationships with Israel.

Both are judged in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verse 3. And so that's a negative judgment upon both Amun and Moab. Now, it seems that they're treated as a pair there. And that would explain as they're related to Lot, both of his daughters, focus not so much upon the distinction between the daughters, but this common pairing.

Now, there's something more though. As we look in Numbers chapter 25, we'll see that the Moabite women have sexual relations with Israel in a way that leads them astray in association with Baal of Peel. When Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.

These invited the people to go to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peel, and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. Think about the story of the Moabites.

The story of the Moabites is one that begins with the events in Sodom. It begins with the failure of Lot to exercise appropriate hospitality, his unseemly relationship with his daughters. And his daughters, as those who exercised a sort of... They had a perverse relationship with their father, and they twisted things.

But they're showing a sort of perverse hospitality that's maybe related to their father's, failed hospitality. Rather than showing hospitality and giving bread and water, which they failed to do when Israel asked for those things and really needs it, they exercise a different sort of hospitality. Hospitality that's a sort of publicisation of sexual relations.

So there's either this turning in of sexual relations upon the family, or this publicisation of sexual relations as they're turned out to this more public, whoring relationship. And so on both aspects, we might think back to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom, as characterised by this public perverse sexuality that is... seeks to humiliate the guests of Lot.

And then sexuality as perverse turned in upon the family in the story of Sodom. In the story of Lot and his daughters. Now all of this, again, should be read against the background of Abraham.

Abraham is... His sexuality is, as it were, pruned in circumcision. And so there's a preparation of his body and his sexuality for appropriate sexual relations. His wife's womb is opened up.

And so there are lots of sexual themes playing in these texts that need to be attended to. And the later story of Moab with their unseemly sexual relations, again, is probably looking back to this passage. And that helps us again to think more about the story of Ruth.

Because Ruth seems... She has these characteristics. She's coming to the threshing floor by night. She's someone who's acting in a way that is having all these sexual connotations, uncovering the feet, etc.

And that maybe might make us think of a whore. Because the whores were very often associated with the threshing floor. And here you have that whore-type figure again.

Think of Tamar. Tamar is presented in that way. And so there's that setting which brings up all these memories.

But it doesn't play out in that way. Moab is associated with these unseemly and inappropriate, immodest sexual relations. But then something that has all those characteristics turns out to be a profound act of hospitality, a profound act of loving kindness towards the family of Malon and Kilion, the name of Elimelech and Naomi, that's preserving them.

But in a way that brings all these memories of this negative history. But it purges that history of its negative content. And it shows something of the positive intent that was at the heart.

The desire to raise up a name for their father, which was a positive thing even within all these perverse elements. And in the story of Ruth, we have that positive element. With all that memory of the negative elements, but those are purged away.

There is so much more going on here. I do not have a clue how to make sense of all of this passage. Again, if you have any questions or any thoughts that might shed further light on it, please leave them in the comments because I would love to know.

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