VIII. EXEGETICAL IMPLICATIONS: "MAN" WITHOUT A COUNTRY

This memorandum set out to account for how I handled *'ish* in the preparation of *The Contemporary Torah*. My reading of *'ish* as a term of affiliation did prompt me in certain places to weigh in on one particular side in a longstanding exegetical debate—quite apart from consideration of a character's social gender. Another way to express this phenomenon is that if the text's ancient audience indeed construed *'ish* as a term of affiliation, then it understood certain biblical verses rather differently from how many interpreters have explained those passages.

Given that *'ish* is a leading word in Genesis, I will dwell on two examples from that book: 18:2 and 19:5. I will also treat a significant legal example from later in the Torah: Numbers 30:3.

VIII.A. Genesis 18:1–2

וַיֵּרָ֤א אֵלָיו֙ יְיָ֔ בְּאֵלֹנֵ֖י מַמְרֵ֑א	יהוה appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre;
וְה֛וּא יֹשֵׁ֥ב פֶּֽתַח־הָאֹ֖הֶל	he was sitting at the entrance of the tent
כְּחֹ֥ם הַיּֽוֹם׃	as the day grew hot.
וַיִּשָּׂ֤א עֵינָיו֙	Looking up,
וַיַּ֔רְא	he saw
וְהִנֵּה֙ שְׁלֹשָׁ֣ה אֲנָשִׁ֔ים נִצָּבִ֖ים עָלָ֑יו	three *'anashim* standing near him.
וַיַּ֗רְא	*Wa-yar'*
וַיָּ֤רָץ לִקְרָאתָם֙ מִפֶּ֣תַח הָאֹ֔הֶל	he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them
וַיִּשְׁתַּ֖חוּ אָֽרְצָה׃	and, bowing to the ground, . . .

VIII.A.1. In this passage, a crucial word is *'anashim.* The initial clause of the pericope, *wa-yera' Yhwh* (v. 1), has already occurred twice in Genesis (12:7; 17:1), both times followed immediately by direct speech. That is, although we customarily render *wa-yera'* in terms of "appearance," Genesis actually uses the term to refer to "delivery of a verbal message." The initial clause thus sets up the audience to expect a verbal message in this case as well.

VIII.A.2. In those previous revelations, the narrator made no mention of what Abram might have seen—or even whether visual perception was involved. But now the narrative spotlight is not only on what Abraham hears, but also on what he sees: verse 2 begins with two terms of visual perception (lit. "he lifted up his eyes and he saw"), followed by the word *we-hinneh,* which indicates that the forthcoming description will be from Abraham's perspective. And what he sees is "three *'anashim.*"

VIII.A.3. The next clause (v. 1b, stating the location in place and time) is syntactically parenthetic and connected by conjunction to what precedes it, while the information it discloses is necessary background to what follows. In short, there is no break in the narrative between verse 1 and verse 2. (In his commentary, Claus Westermann makes a similar observation: "The heading,

'Now Yahweh appeared to him,' . . . has a strong power of suggestion so that one reads the subject of the next sentence differently.")[1]

VIII.A.4. As this memorandum has argued, the text's original audience was well aware that the term *'anashim* conveys affiliation. Therefore, upon encountering *'anashim* in this text, the audience would reliably have had two inchoate questions, prompted by both the language and the context of situation. One question would be: "What sense of *'anashim* best connects Abraham's reported perception with the narrator's prior characterization of this event as conveyance of a divine message?" The other question, given that these are clearly not Abraham's own *'anashim*, would be: "With what group or party are these *'anashim* affiliated?"

VIII.A.5. Given an audience readily familiar with *'ish* in the sense of "agent" (see I.B.1, II.B.1, and II.E.1), that nuance is the obvious answer to the first question; it accords with the expectation created by the narrative (v. 1 in light of 12:7 and 17:1) that a message is soon to be delivered. The agency sense of *'anashim* also answers the second question, for it immediately makes sense of the noun's appearance in the text right after the reference to the Deity. It meets the linguistic need for *'anashim* to signal affiliation with a group or party: *Abraham immediately recognizes that these figures are God's agents.*

VIII.A.6. Such an understanding is further commended to the reader by a prior episode involving Hagar: a divine emissary (*mal'akh Yhwh*) "found" her in the wilderness and delivered God's message to her (16:7). In other words, because the text has already told the audience that God speaks through an agent, no interpretive leap is required to imagine that happening again here.

VIII.A.7. Such a reading would have been unremarkable given ancient Near Eastern communication practices. Because the dispatching of agents and couriers was an everyday occurrence (for purposes of commerce, diplomacy, family relations, and military need), the text's original audience would have considered it natural that a manifestation from God would be accomplished via envoys. For in the human realm, it was a commonplace that a designated agent or courier spoke in the sender's stead, in the first person; from the perspective of a recipient, the sender and the envoy were, practically speaking, one and the same with regard to the issue at hand.[2]

VIII.A.8. Ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly in the Western Semitic city of Ugarit, also depicts deities as relying on messengers for communication. It is thus not an unusual motif.

---

[1] Midrashic readings are of course not restricted to following the rules of grammar. Thus many classic midrashic readings isolate the revelation in verse 1a as being separate from the apparition of verse 2, as if the latter referred to a separate episode. "The majority of rabbinic traditions hold for the appearance to Abraham of *both* the Divine Presence . . . and three angels" (William T. Miller, *Mysterious Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok* [1984], p. 16, emphasis added.)

[2] Samuel Meier, *The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World* (1989), p. 200; James F. Ross, "The Prophet as Yahweh's Messenger," in Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson, eds., *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (1962), pp. 101–102. For general background, see also John T. Greene, *The Role of the Messenger and Message in the Ancient Near East* (1989); Alan D. Crown, "Tidings and Instructions: How News Travelled in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* XVII/3 (1974), pp. 244–273.

VIII.A.9. What I have stated so far is an elaboration of the views ad loc. of the 12th-century commentator Rashbam (whom Chizz'kuni also cites approvingly in the 13th century), R. Benno Jacob (Germany, 1862–1941), and Nahum Sarna (*JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*): the revelation consists of three *'anashim* who were divine emissaries. As R. Meir Malbim explains (at 18:1), this deduction derives from the standard exegetical principle that when a general statement is followed by a specific action, the latter specifies what the former referred to.

VIII.A.10. One might object that if "divine envoy" were indeed meant, the narrator could easily have used a more explicit synonym, such as *mal'akh Yhwh,* as in Gen. 16:7 or Judg. 2:1—or even *mal'akh* alone. This supposition overlooks that in the Bible and in the ancient Near East, when referring to an envoy or agent, *'ish* (or a cognate such as the Akkadian *awilum*) is a frequently attested term, though probably not as often as is *mal'akh* (and its cognates). It was not a vague or remarkable term to employ so long as the context was making the fact of agency clear. Furthermore, *'anashim* and *'ish* seem to serve as literary lead-words and linking words throughout Genesis, so that these terms carry a special meaning that their synonyms do not bear. (Together with its construct form *'anshei,* the word *'anashim* occurs ten times in this pericope: three times in Genesis 18, and seven times in Genesis 19.)

VIII.A.11. In the Talmud, Rav Hama ben Rav Hanina had opined that it was God who personally appeared to Abraham (BT *Bava Metzia* 86b).[3] Similarly, some modern interpreters prefer to read the biblical text in light of ancient tales wherein deities travel incognito, seeing the present story as of that type. In other words, one or more of the *'anashim* is actually an incarnation of God. For example, Edward L. Greenstein cites earlier scholars in pointing out that in the Aqhat and Kirta epics from Ugarit, a god similarly visits the hero, eats, and promises the birth of a child ("The God of Israel and the Gods of Canaan: How Different Were They?" in Ron Margolin, ed., *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies* [publ. 1999], Div. A, p. A-57*). Another exegete who perceives that the Deity is disguised among the visitors is Thomas M. Bolin, who points to the motif in Homer, Ovid, and elsewhere ("The Role of Exchange in Ancient Mediterranean Religion . . . ," *JSOT* 29.1 [2004], pp. 44–47; see the refs. on p. 47). However, the lexical meaning of *'ish* as a term of affiliation argues against such a reading. Whereas for the text's original audience it would have been ordinary usage of the word *'anashim* to refer to emissaries of a previously mentioned principal, it would have been an unprecedented usage to refer to both the principal and the agents by that same term. And for a plain-sense reading, the audience would have had little reason by the end of verse 2 to look beyond an ordinary meaning of the word in order to construe a new coinage here.

VIII.A.12. Greenstein presents an argument in favor of seeing God as being among the visitors: "only such a reading accounts for the repeated sudden addresses of God to Abraham (e.g., vv. 13, 17, 20) and the fact that . . . [otherwise] the third visitor disappears without a trace. . . . Assume that God is one of the three, and there are no gaping holes in the plot and the verses make sense in their present sequence." This argument is not convincing, because it overlooks the fact that ancient Near Eastern literature, including the Bible, sometimes equates an emissary's speech

[3] Other ancient interpreters see the three *'anashim* as distinct from God. The anonymous Talmud identifies the three visitors as divine messengers, naming them as Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael (BT *Bava Metzia* 86b). According to Miller (*Mysterious Encounters*, p. 10), several Targums explicitly make the same point.

with that of the principal—especially in cases like this, where potential distortion of the message is not at issue. Indeed, shortly before this story, the narrator characterized Hagar's encounter with a *mal'akh* as being a direct revelation ("יהוה who spoke to her," 16:13). Again, such conflation is a natural result of ancient messenger protocol.[4] Nor is it unusual in the Bible for a messenger—whether from God or from humans—to fade out of the scene without notice; once the message is delivered, it's simply not of sufficient narrative interest to dwell on what becomes of the messenger. (Where did the divine messenger go in Gen. 16 after speaking with Hagar? Where did the two envoys go in Gen. 19 after rescuing Lot? We are not told.) Indeed, the sudden appearance and disappearance of God's messengers is part of their mystique, as the tales of Elijah make clear. Finally, Greenstein points to apparent anomalies that occur too late in the story to be of use to the reader in fixing the identity of the *'anashim* in verse 2. As I have argued, by the end of verse 2 the original audience would reliably have concluded that the *'anashim* are God's envoys; and as I will continue to argue, the text thereafter gives no compelling reason to think otherwise.

VIII.A.13. Following the mention of *'anashim*, a repetition of the verb *wa-yar'* is telling; it suggests that after Abraham's initial glance, he perceives something less obvious about these visitors (so the commentator Rashi [1040–1105]). What does he notice? That they are God's agents. This conclusion follows from a straightforward reading of the first two verses: God manifests to Abraham (v. 1a), and the next clause with its participle states that the manifestation takes place right then and there: *we-hu' yoshev* ("while he was sitting," v. 1b). Furthermore, logic dictates that *no divine manifestation occurs until Abraham himself recognizes it as such.* The repetition of *wa-yar'* (v. 2) enables the audience to conclude that this condition has been fulfilled.

VIII.A.13. In other words, the context of situation predisposes the audience to read *wa-yar'* as conveying recognition. That the verb *wa-yar'* (lit. "he saw") can bear such a meaning is clear from a number of biblical instances; one of these is quite similar: *wa-yar' Gid'on ki mal'akh Yhwh hu'* ("then Gideon realized that it [namely, the figure he'd been conversing with] was a messenger of יהוה"; Judg. 6:22).[5]

VIII.A.14. The ancient versions and some interpreters do construe that Abraham recognizes the divine nature of his visitors right away, as reflected by their understanding of how he ad-

---

[4] "The messenger . . . tended to deliver the message itself in the first person as if he were the one who sent the message" (Meier, *Messenger*, p. 200). Literature often omits the messenger's initial self-identification, giving an impression of direct communication. Compare the comment of R. David Kimhi at v. 13—"the divine messenger is accorded the name of his Master, something that find also in connection with Gideon in Judg. 6:16." And this phenomenon of apparent directness is not restricted to occasions when God is the principal; the Bible sometimes portrays a character's reply to a messenger as if speaking straight to the messenger's human sender: Judg. 11:13, 2 Sam. 3:13, 1 Kings 20:4. Furthermore, a messenger was expected to improvise as needed to get the message across, as Sam Meier notes: "The *mal'ak* and the *mar shipri* were not neutral figures, but could stand as defendants of those who sent them, explicating their messages, arguing on their behalf. . . ." (p. 244). See for example, 2 Kings 18:23.

[5] Perception of the divine is a matter of seeing differently what we call "ordinary" reality—one might say, viewing it with an altered state of consciousness. James Kugel (*The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible*, 2003) argues cogently that this understanding suffuses the Hebrew Bible, although he misses that biblical literature apparently treats what we think of the "altered" state as being the commonplace one; see the excursus in § 15, below.

dresses them when he begins to speak in verse 3 (that is, whether or not he uses divine address).[6] In the 13th century, R. Bahya ben Asher proposed the same plain-sense reading from the repeated word here in verse 2: *we-hosif shenit leshon "wa-yar'" leva'er ki hosif lir'ot be-'ayin haskel we-hitbonen ba-hem we-hikkir she-hem mal'akhim,* "it adds the term *wa-yar'* the second time, to make clear that he continued to look thoughtfully; he reflected on them and realized that they were *mal'akhim*" (Gen. 18:2; so also Nachmanides at v. 3).[7]

VIII.A.15. The text does not inform us *how* Abraham made the determination that he was confronting divine emissaries. Note that the Bible generally begs the question as to precisely how anyone would identify a divine envoy just by looking—such recognition goes without saying. Procedurally speaking, the Bible expects its audience to infer that Abraham recognizes the divine source of the envoys precisely because the narration fails to tell us that he did not.

[**EXCURSUS** ON IMPLICIT RECOGNITION OF GOD'S AGENTS: The text presumes that its audience will infer that biblical characters *recognize that God is the source of a messenger or envoy, except when the narration indicates that they do not.* The specific biblical evidence for that presumption includes:

1. Whenever the text says that God speaks *directly* to individual characters, it doesn't tell us how they knew it was God talking. The audience is supposed to assume that those character just knew. Indirect communication warrants no more scrutiny than the direct kind.
2. When Abraham reassures his slave by telling him that a divine envoy will accompany him, and when the slave in turn recounts that reassurance to Rebekah's family (24:7, 40), all the characters clearly presume that the slave is able to recognize such divine intervention when it occurs. It goes without saying. As for encounters with a divine envoy where visual recognition is not an issue (the calls to Abraham "from heaven," Gen. 22:11, 15; Jacob's dream, 31:11), again the text is not troubled with the question of how the recipient knows that it's an angel speaking
3. When a divine envoy speaks to "all the Israelites" (Judges 2:1–5), everybody present knows its identity without that being an issue. Similarly, when God's messenger appears twice to Elijah, recognition is not an issue (1 Kings 19:5, 7).
4. In four of the cases where the visage of a divine messenger is immediately recognized as such by a character (by Balaam's donkey, Num. 22:23; by Balaam, 22:31; by David, 2 Sam. 24:17; by Ornan, 1 Chron. 21:20), the logically separate acts of seeing and recog-

---

[6] I will not dwell here on the issue of Masoretic pointing of the word *'adonai* in Abraham's initial speech, because such pointing is ambiguous. In the Masoretic system, the pausal accent alone would be sufficient to induce a change in vocalization that mimics "divine" address, while such pausal changes do not follow a consistent rule.

[7] NJPS instead renders the repeated verb temporally: "as soon as he saw them"; so already Saadia in the 10th century. Such a reading does not preclude that Abraham perceives the provenance of his visitors at this point, but it does leave the reader without a linguistic indication *somewhere* in the story that Abraham realizes who sent them. Although (as I will now argue) we are as a matter of course supposed to presume that Abraham does recognize their origin, the text nevertheless has reason in this case to provide some indication. Hence CJPS renders the second *wa-yar'* as "Perceiving this, . . ."

nizing the *mal'akh* are conveyed by the same word; the recognition elicits no extra signal from the narrator. In a fifth such case (by Hagar, Gen. 16:7–8), the protagonist's recognition does not need to be stated outright because it is implied by the verb *we-yimtza'ah* ("he found her"; similarly Sforno: the *mal'akh* "found her in a state of readiness for seeing the divine"; the verb may also imply the messenger's disclosure of identity, cf. 1 Kings 11:29, 19:19). It is further implied by the fact that the *mal'akh* addresses her as "Hagar slave of Sarai," which a human stranger could not have known. Her recognition is nonchalantly confirmed by her later act of naming the place (v. 13). In the sixth such case (by Abraham, 18:2), a simple repetition of the word "see/recognize" is needed because of the odd introduction and the term *'anashim*, but that is a sufficient indication.

5. So what does it mean when the story indicates that a character *does not* recognize one of God's messengers? In one case where a character at first takes a divine envoy as being human (Joshua in Josh. 5:13), it seems to me that this verse is so rife with intertextual allusions (from Gen. 18:2 and Num. 22:23) that a reader is expected to presume that Joshua would recognize the divine source of this *'ish*. That Joshua instead challenges the angel is a calculated surprise for the reader. (According to Robert Polzin's cogent analysis, this episode exemplifies "the theme of Israel's inability to predict their destiny by interpreting and applying the word of God"; *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History* [1980], pp. 111–112, 171.) In the other two such cases of non-recognition (by Gideon, Judg. 6:13; by Manoah and his wife, Judg. 13:20–21), the narrator must soon take pains to explain that "he/they recognized him." In other words, those characters should have recognized the angels as such, and the surprise for the reader is that they don't. (Polzin cogently explains that Gideon's unusual lack of perception signals the Israelites' "inability to distinguish at times who the god was who was delivering them from the Midianites" [p. 170], while for Manoah and his wife the narrator "appears intent upon underscoring his characters' limitations of knowledge and understanding" regarding their own role in Israel's deliverance [p. 184]. These narratives, says Polzin, accord with the overall theme of the Deuteronomic History: how unworthy Israel was of God's salvation—which exemplifies the mystery of divine mercy.)[8]

In the biblical world, everyone knows that God's envoys can show up at any moment; they are part of the landscape—and every bit as real as wind or rain.[9]]

Returning to Gen. 18:2, the text presumes that the reader will conclude that already at this point, Abraham identified that these *'anashim* were envoys from his Deity. Such recognition does

---

[8] In one case, an angel "appears" as fire rather than as human (Exod. 3:2); it should not be surprising that Moses doesn't recognize it right away as a divine envoy, because a burning bush is not the normal model for communication.

[9] Let me note an error in logic that many interpreters make: just because a character objects to some extent to what a divine envoy tells them doesn't mean that the character fails to recognize that the envoy is divine and that the message's source is God. Indeed, the Bible is filled with characters—even ones called "righteous" such as Abraham and Moses—who take issue with what God tells them either directly or indirectly.

not necessarily demonstrate Abraham's extraordinary perspicacity and readiness of will, although some interpreters have drawn that conclusion—after presuming that he would not otherwise have discerned his visitors' provenance.[10]

VIII.A.16. Both the intervening details of verse 2a and the immediately following details of verse 2b support (but do not themselves establish) the conclusion that Abraham recognizes that these *'anashim* are divine agents:

VIII.A.16.a. *The three figures appear seemingly from nowhere, at a bizarre time of day.* To the ancient audience, the suddenness of the apparition would underscore the visitors' supernatural identity: it is another clue that would plausibly lead Abraham to infer a divine origin. Ordinarily persons do not travel during mid-day because of the heat; cf. 2 Sam. 4:5, where the same temporal phrase (*ke-chom ha-yom*) indicates the perfect time for a stealth attack. Furthermore, an ordinary messenger normally strives to arrive with fanfare, so as to increase the likelihood of being ushered in quickly to an audience ready with refreshments and a receptive ear. The behavior of these *'anashim* is extraordinary.

VIII.A.16.b. The manifestation of divine emissaries is equally sudden throughout the Bible. They simply materialize before the people to whom they direct their attention, as with Hagar (16:7), Abraham (22:11, 15), Jacob (32:2, 25), and Joshua (Josh. 5:13). (Even the messenger who "came and sat" before "appearing" to Gideon [Judg. 6:11–12]—whence did he come?) The consistency of this portrayal suggests that the audience shared a conventional understanding with the biblical text: divine messengers have no past, only a present existence that corresponds to their assignment.

VIII.A.16.c. *The three figures are just standing there* (*nitzavim 'alaw*). According the interpretation of *'anashim* as "envoys," a static stance would not be unexpected. For elsewhere in the Bible, "standing there" is what envoys from God sometimes do (Moses and Aaron, Exod. 5:20; an angel, Num. 22:23, 31; Samuel, 1 Sam. 19:20). The portrayal is at least consistent with the rest of the Bible and may even have been considered a characteristic presentation. (Rashi's remark on the preposition, ad loc., makes a similar point.)

VIII.A.16.d. *Abraham rushes to greet them.* In the ancient Near East, it was a normal sign of respect for the envoys' sender to receive them with alacrity (cf. 24:29, 29:13). As Benno Jacob explains, "to meet an honored guest one hurries a shorter or longer distance according to his rank" (transl. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob).

VIII.A.16.e. *Abraham greets by bowing to the ground.* In the ancient Near East, people do not bow to the ground before others of lesser status, or even before peers.[11] When greeting someone, the gesture of standing up indicates respect for equal social status (Isa. 49:7, Job 29:8), whereas bowing acknowledges higher social rank.[12] By the end of 18:2, the degree of deference

---

[10] Genesis does not disclose until later—in 20:7—that Abraham is a prophet.

[11] Westermann justifies the bowing as follows: "Abraham does not know who the strangers are, but he cannot and will not exclude the possibility that they are worthy of honor." This is, in a word, nonsense. In the eyes of the text's ancient audience, pre-emptive deep bowing would be a foolish move, for the recipient could so quickly establish that it was insincere.

[12] Mayer Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (1980), p. 303.

signaled by Abraham's bowing is not yet clear, but taken together with the relationship terms that he employs when speaking in verse 3, it signals not only a recognition of his social inferiority but also outright submission.[13]

VIII.A.16.f. Subservience is precisely what the reader would expect if Abraham recognizes the visitors as God's envoys. To the extent that God is figured as a king, then one would bow low before God just as one normally bows before one's king or suzerain. Bowing is also a characteristic posture of worship in the Bible, and the Hebrew term refers to both contexts of bowing ("All the assemblage . . . prostrated and bowed down to יהוה and to the king," 1 Chron. 29:20). And one would do the same before God's envoy, for it was customary to treat an envoy according to the sender's status, particularly with regard to bowing: "Prostration was the mark of submission rendered to the relative superior (the messenger representing his sender in this capacity)" (Meier, *Messenger*, pp. 158, 160).[14] As Benno Jacob explains, "[Abraham's] deep bow before God's messengers corresponds to falling on his face before God (17:3, 17)."[15]

VIII.A.16.g. Abraham's behavior as explained here is consistent with other cases in the Bible where a human being encounters a stranger who turns out to be an envoy from God. Consider the episode in which Joshua similarly "looks up and sees" an *'ish* standing before him (Josh. 5:13–14): Joshua first confronts that *'ish,* who bears a drawn sword; he does not bow down until that figure's status as a divine envoy is apparent to him. Likewise, Manoah and his wife do not bow down to the "awesome" stranger who visits twice, until they recognize that *'ish* as a divine apparition (Judg. 13:20–21). The rule seems to be that one does not bow down until having recognized a stranger's true status.

VIII.A.17. In conclusion, by the end of 18:2, the ancient audience would have understood that Abraham perceives the three *'anashim* for who they really are—God's envoys. This interpretation holds up well throughout the following verses, although that is largely beyond the scope of the present study. I should note, however, that the ancient audience would not have been troubled by the present account's delay in disclosing God's word (compared to the immediate disclosure in 12:7 and 17:1), on two grounds. First, they had the precedent of the divine agent in Genesis 16, who did not deliver the message to Hagar until after first "finding" her and conversing with her. Second, in the ancient Near East, the protocol upon an envoy's arrival was that an offer of hospitality precedes delivery of the message; and normally such an offer would be accepted (Meier, *Messenger*, p. 145; cf. Gen. 24:28–33).

VIII.A.18. Some scholars (e.g., Driver [1909]) have objected that if Abraham had recognized God's envoys right away, he would not then have offered refreshments (vv. 4–5). But how

---

[13] Gruber gives a general rule: "The lord-vassal language of master-subject shows that the verb denotes a posture of obeisance" (p. 189). Such is the language that Abraham employs. (Gruber—and Sarna after him—unfortunately then failed to apply that statement in considering this case, because he did not believe that Abraham recognizes that the visitors are God's envoys; p. 305.)

[14] Along these lines, R. Obadiah Sforno (Italy, 1475–1550) infers from the bowing that Abraham "thought that they [the *'anashim*] were emissaries from some king or other," on their way to another destination.

[15] Balaam bows down as soon as he realizes that he is facing a divine envoy (Num. 22:31), but admittedly such a gesture of obeisance is a wise move whenever facing someone with a drawn sword.

is Abraham (or the reader) supposed to know that messengers from God do not eat or drink? Indeed, this particular story presumes that they do—as William John Lyons has pointed out.[16]

VIII.A.19. Some scholars have objected that if Abraham had recognized God's envoys right away, he would not have assumed that the visitors were on their way to another destination (vv. 3, 5). However, as Meier has noted, in biblical literature God's messenger normally travels alone—in contrast to ancient Near Eastern practice for human messengers, who found safety in numbers (pp. 123, 96 ff.). In normal circumstances, it seems, the safety of God's messenger is guaranteed by the principal's prestige and power. Evidence suggests that this convention was shared in ancient Near Eastern literature; as Meier concludes, "the solitary divine messenger . . . we have seen to be normative" (p. 126). Thus the text's composer(s) could reliably presume that its audience was aware of this convention. So when Abraham sees the envoys, their multiplicity is prima facie evidence of other business besides visiting his household.

VIII.A.20. Some scholars have concluded that the visitors disguised the fact that they were God's envoys—that is, they hid their principal's identity—because the text does not state that they initially disclosed it. Such reasoning is, however, is not only an argument from silence but also a weak one at that; the Bible rarely notes that messengers disclose their sender's identity (Meier, p. 186). Generally speaking, such disclosure can go without saying precisely because it is a required step in the delivery of a meaningful message.

VIII.A.21. Most modern interpreters and translators have rejected the idea that Abraham immediately recognizes the provenance of his visitors. Their conclusion has been heavily influenced by misunderstanding or overlooking the nature of the word *'anashim*. For instance, from that term Nahum Sarna establishes that the visitors initially appear to Abraham in a rather vague sense, as if *'anashim* here meant "figures." (So already Saadia.) Similarly, for the sense of *'anashim* here, Westermann points to 32:25 and to Judg. 13:10f., both passages in which *'ish* refers to a divine envoy whom the protagonist does not yet recognize as such. Both interpreters thus construe this pericope as being about hospitality to strangers—the usual modern interpretation. Such a view is fine as midrash; indeed, like much ancient midrash, this reading must have been compelling partly because it is so boldly absurd in plain-sense terms—that is, it runs quite counter to the plain-sense interpretation as likely perceived by the ancient audience.

VIII.A.22. To reiterate, a "hospitality to strangers" reading discounts four factors that the Israelite audience would have taken seriously as indications of the plain sense:

- the prior notice of a "visitation" from God in v. 1, creating the expectation of agency;
- the unsurprising employment of *'anashim* in that context;
- the need always to assign an indirect referent to *'anashim* (see Part IV), which is readily accomplished by presuming that the just-mentioned God is the principal; and
- Abraham's responses as evidence of his submission and devotion to the principal.

Given that a straightforward reading was readily available to them, the ancient audience would not have construed the story as an enigma—nor taken Abraham as the model (or caricature) of a gracious (or perhaps befuddled) host, nor even as one who is unusually able to apprehend the divine presence.

---

[16] *Canon and Exegesis: Canonical Praxis and the Sodom Narrative* [2002], p. 160).

VIII.A.23. As for rendering in the present verse, I would provide an ambiguous term such as "personages" or "figures" if I thought that the text's original audience would have had reason to construe the foreground sense of *'anashim* as being vague or equivocal. However, in this instance, the nature of *'anashim* as a term of affiliation forces only one sense into the foreground, in which these visitors are agents—and whom Abraham recognizes as such from the start.

VIII.A.24. Most translations, including NJPS, render *'anashim* as "men."[17] NJPS may have meant "men" in either a vague sense ("figures"), or a simple sense ("adult males"), or an elevated one (Webster's: "a prosperous or successful person : a person of consequence or high estate"). In any case, rendering as "men" does not convey the salient agency sense of *'anashim*, and it also overtranslates the social-gender component of the Hebrew term (see Part VII). These features are severe disadvantages. A more accurate rendering is "[divine] envoys."[18]

VIII.B. Genesis 19:5

וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־לוֹט וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ	And they shouted to Lot and said to him,
אַיֵּה הָאֲנָשִׁים	"Where are *ha-'anashim*
אֲשֶׁר־בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ הַלָּיְלָה	who came to you tonight?
הוֹצִיאֵם אֵלֵינוּ	Bring them out to us,
וְנֵדְעָה אֹתָם׃	that we may be intimate with them."

VIII.B.1. Genesis predisposes readers to interpret the present account in light of an earlier notice—one with many verbal and thematic links to the present passage—namely, that Sodom's leaders[19] were "very wicked sinners *le-Yhwh*" (13:13). In other words, the problem is not wickedness per se so much as their rejection of accountability to God for their sins.[20] (Hence the NJPS, NRSV, and TNIV rendering as "against the LORD" is preferable to the more vague KJV rendering: "before the LORD.") If so, we should expect to find in Sodom a citizenry eager to poke a finger in God's eye, so to speak.[21] And they would not stoop to say aloud the name of a deity that they have no regard for, so we should not expect to hear that name mentioned.

---

[17] NJPS, Speiser, NRSV, Stern, Alter, and TNIV render as "men"; Friedman, "people"; Mitchell, "beings."

[18] This is not to say that they themselves are necessarily divine, but that their principal is.

[19] On the technical terms in the description of the Sodomites in 13:13 and in 19:4, see, e.g., Scott Morschauser, "'Hospitality', Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1–9," *JSOT* 27.4 (2003), pp. 467–9: "the responsible citizenry . . . the official members of the community—the ruling elite."

[20] The expression *chata' le-Yhwh* appears 16 more times in the Bible, and it always carries the sense of a pointed affront to God specifically. Thus when couched in the first person perfect (Exod. 10:16; Deut. 1:41; Josh. 7:20; 1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Sam. 12:13) it becomes a confession formula, the first step to making amends.

[21] Genesis does not state the reason for the Sodomites' antipathy because it is beside the point; what counts is that they function as a foil to Abram's household *in terms of devotion to* יהוה. The text counterposes Abram's household with Sodom via a long series of literary vehicles:

VIII.B.2. Conventional analysis of this passage denies that the story's characters recognize that these *'anashim* are God's envoys, on two grounds: (*a*) the narration does not explicitly disclose the act of recognition; and (*b*) Lot and the crowd refer to the visitors as *'anashim*, a term that designates only human beings—and rather vaguely at that. At 18:2 (VIII.A.), I demonstrated that both of those arguments are mistaken, and the same reasoning holds here. Again, the Bible expects its readers to presume generally that its characters recognize the divine source of messengers unless the narration tells us otherwise.

VIII.B.3. As for the sense of *ha-'anashim* here, because of the presumption that Lot and the citizenry do recognize the visitors as God's envoys, this context evokes the agency sense of the word. As shown in Part II, *ha-'anashim* is quite a common way for the narrator or characters to refer to particular emissaries when what matters is their affiliation rather than their individual identities (e.g., Gen. 18:16, 22; 24:21 [*ha-'ish*]; 43:15; Num. 13:16; 22:9, 20, 35; etc. and especially Josh. 2:3, 7[22]). Here, the most significant linguistic influence on the nuance of *ha-'anashim* is the qualifying phrase that follows: *'asher ba'u 'elekha ha-laylah* ("who came to you tonight").

- In Genesis 13, Lot's transfer from Abram's household to Sodom initially helps sets up the opposition between Abram's household and Sodom.
- The story in Genesis 14 reinforces this pattern by bringing the characters into direct relationship with each other: Abram and his household retainers rescue the Sodomites from captivity, and then Abram converses with the king of Sodom, with whom he pointedly disagrees.
- The arc of the story in Genesis 18–19 further counterposes Abraham's household with Sodom via God's sending the same envoys to both parties; in Abraham's case the envoys stay during the day and initiate reward, whereas in Sodom's case they stay overnight and initiate punishment.
- In 18:16, Abraham is accompanying the envoys as they walk down toward Sodom (how far will he go in that direction?).
- In 18:17–19, God's commitment to Abraham is parenthetically affirmed just before God question's Sodom's fate—and engages none other than Abraham in dialogue about it (18:20–33).
- At the start of Genesis 19, Lot once again helps to cement the oppositional relationship between Abraham's household and Sodom by echoing in Sodom some of the same gestures of hospitality that Abraham had displayed toward the same envoys; he thus stands in for Abraham, pointedly setting up a contrast with the Sodomites' own reaction that follows.
- In 19:27–28, the narrator again brings Abraham into contact with (the remains of) Sodom, while underscoring the opposition between the two: God had earlier become manifest to Abram after darkness fell, via *'esh* (fire) and *tannur 'ashan* (a smoking oven) (Gen. 15:17); but with Sodom, God has become manifest after daybreak, via *'esh* (fire) and *kitor ha-kivshan* (the smoke of a kiln) (Gen. 19:15, 24, 27).
- In 19:29, Lot again serves as the final link between his uncle Abraham and "the cities of the Plain."

As Robert Polzin would say, the "character zones" of Abraham's household and the Sodomites decidedly overlap. The text places the two parties along the same continuum, as polar opposites—as different as night and day. Taken together, they represent the terms of the Covenant with Abraham's descendants: devotion to יהוה is what ensures one's continued presence in the land of Canaan.

[22] Interpreters are quick to notice the parallels between this narrative and the account in Judges 19, yet they usually overlook the significant parallels that also exist with the story of Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6. In both that story and this one, a resident of a walled city provides hospitality to a pair of foreign emissaries and refuses to turn them over to the authorities; eventually those same emissaries rescue that person's household, while the rest of the city is destroyed by fire. Verbal expressions also link the two narratives.

That phrase focuses on their recent arrival, which underscores their status as "foreign" envoys. Again, we should not expect the Sodomites to verbalize a more explicit identification.

VIII.B.4. Given the presumption of recognition by the Sodomites and their known attitude toward the God of Abram, the text's original audience would have construed the crowd's stated intent ("to be intimate" with these envoys) as a *calculated act of humiliation*—and by this means a brazen rejection of the envoys' patron.[23] Such a reading would seem natural, given ancient Near Eastern protocol regarding envoys: the significance of an envoy derives from the identity of that person's superior,[24] and thus "a slight to the royal messenger was an offence to the master" (Crown, "Tidings and Instructions," p. 258). Such provocations were not unusual in the ancient Near East. As Sam Meier emphasizes (employing masculine pronouns in their gender-inclusive sense), "A messenger could never be sure what type of reception he would receive upon arrival at his destination. If he was an international envoy, the changing winds of politics could blow insult or honor in his path" (*Messenger*, p. 160). Meier adduces many reports of hostile parties in the ancient Near East who intentionally insulted principals by humiliating their envoys. Various means of mistreatment were employed, including even murder; and this could occur either prior to or after the envoys delivered a message.[25]

---

[23] The text supports the expectation of a hornet's nest by supplying the language of menace at the end of v. 4 (a nuance noticed by Westermann ["surrounded the house"] and Speiser ["closed in on the house"]) and at the start of v. 5 (a nuance noticed by NJPS ["they shouted to Lot"]). This language of hostility supports the Sodomites' intent to do harm to the envoys—and not to get some perverse pleasure from them. The citizenry confirms their hostile intent later when they say to Lot, "Now we will deal worse with you than [we were going to do] with them" (v. 9). Some interpreters understand that the Sodomites' demand is to "examine" or "get acquainted" with the visitors (e.g., Morschauser, p. 472, citing also Victor H. Matthews). Morschauser claims that even the "official questioning of individuals in the ancient Near East could often be brutal" (p. 473), but unfortunately most (if not all) of the examples and sources that he cites deal with criminal punishment rather than interrogation. The real problem with the "interrogation" proposal is that the Sodomites have turned out in large numbers, in force, and with official communal bodies—which is far more firepower than would be necessary to interrogate a suspicious pair or even arrest them (contrast Josh. 2:3; 2 Samuel 17:20; 2 Kings 6:31–32). The setting makes intended public humiliation a much more likely possibility. Although Morschauser prefers a different explanation of the story, he nevertheless anticipates the interpretation presented here when he footnotes his conclusion and says, "The scene may also be interpreted against a background of 'international law,' regarding the safe passage of messengers" (p. 483).

[24] TDOT, s.v. *mal'akh,* p. 309.

[25] To my knowledge, rape is not attested in extant ancient Near Eastern documents as a means of humiliation of envoys. Our sources' silence with regard to envoys is inconclusive (as the saying goes, "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence"). We do know that the Middle Assyrian Laws A ¶ 20 prescribes homosexual rape as a judicial punishment, and that rape was a tool of terror in wartime (Isa. 13:16; cf. Deut. 28:30). As Lyn M. Bechtel points out, in the ancient worldview rape is "deeply shameful and status reducing . . . In a society where social bonding is central, . . . rape is the antithesis of bonding" ("A Feminist Reading of Genesis 19:1–11," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* [1998], p. 117). (Bechtel contends that text's presentation of the Sodomites' intent is at this point "intentionally ambiguous" because "there are no clues about" their intentions, but I argue that in their function as the "anti-Abraham" their intent is predictably hostile.) That violence (rape) is the Sodomites' intent here has been cogently argued by Lyons, pp. 226–9; he contends that on the basis of Judg. 19:24–25, the verb *yada'* can mean "to rape" (so also NJPS, NRSV, TNIV). Furthermore, the reference to sexual "in-

VIII.B.5. A biblical model for the proposed reading is the Ammonites' extended public humiliation of King David's emissaries (2 Sam. 10), which—as the narrator there explains—was an act of war (v. 6, esp. in light of 1 Sam. 13:4).[26] A pre-biblical model is the mistreatment of an envoy sent by King Shulgi of Ur (ca. 2000 B.C.E.), in which an entourage of "five thousand standing at his right and left" witnessed that envoy's shaming by his host.[27] The more witnesses, the greater the humiliation. This explains the size of the crowd that masses around Lot's house.

VIII.B.6. In conclusion, the term *'anashim* is not vague or ambiguous in this context if one understands it as a term of affiliation. Rather, the context would reliably evoke for the original audience the agency sense of the word. They would understand that the visitors go the city not to test Sodom's reaction to anonymous strangers but rather to envoys of the Deity in particular.[28] This reading provides a clear motive for what follows: an insult "delivered" to God's representatives, rather than wanton rape of ordinary strangers, is what offers an eminently reasonable justification—in ancient Near Eastern terms—for God to then destroy the city.[29]

VIII.B.7. Most translations, including NJPS, render *'anashim* as "men."[30] NJPS may have meant "men" in either a vague sense ("figures") or a simple sense ("adult males"). In any case, rendering as "men" does not convey the salient sense of *'anashim* as agents, and it also overtranslates the social-gender component of the Hebrew term (see Part VII). These features are severe disadvantages. Hence, CJPS renders *ha-'anashim* here as "the envoys [of יהוה]."

---

timacy" has rhetorical import within the Bible. The Sodomites' desire to "know" alludes not only to the first humans' transgression in eating forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:5–6), but also to the instances of sexual *nevalah* ("outrage," or "breaking accepted rules of civilized interaction"; so Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible,* p. 109) in Gen. 34 (see v. 7) and in Judg. 19, where it becomes a provocation to war (see 20:6, 10); both of those stories share a number of literary features with the present tale. As Weston W. Fields concludes, the element he calls "'sexual harassment of strangers' . . . occurs widely in biblical narrative in various forms, and . . . serves to illustrate behavior in conformity with accepted legal and social norms. . . . Such sexual improprieties eventuate in communal punishment" (*Sodom and Gomorrah: History and Motif in Biblical Narrative* [1997], p. 187).

[26] For discussion, see Lyn M. Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel," *JSOT* 49 [1991], esp. pp. 67–70.

[27] Meier, *Messenger*, p. 137, citing Ali.

[28] In 18:21, God had expressed a desire to *y-d-'* ("know") the Sodomites that is met here in 19:5 by their desire to *y-d-'* ("be intimate with") God's envoys. It is as if they say in mocking reaction, "Oh, you want to know us, do you? Well, we'll show you 'knowing'!" In short, the Sodomites' mortal sin is not inhospitality to travelers in general but inhospitality to God in particular.

[29] By defending the envoys and in risking his own life and his future (his daughters) to do so, Lot in effect becomes part of God's mission to the city. As Morschauser puts it, "the attempted attack on Lot validates the divine *casus belli* against the city, ensuring its destruction" (p. 479). Possibly, too, the citizenry's exchange with Lot in front of his house showed disregard for the envoys and is thus was already a provocation.

[30] NJPS, Speiser, NRSV, Stern, Mitchell, Alter, TNIV: "the men"; Friedman: "the people."

VIII.C. Numbers 30:3

אִישׁ כִּֽי־יִדֹּר נֶ֜דֶר לַֽיהוָ֗ה	If an *'ish* makes a vow to יהוה
אֽוֹ־הִשָּׁ֤בַע שְׁבֻעָה֙ לֶאְסֹ֣ר אִסָּ֔ר עַל־נַפְשׁ֑וֹ	or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself,
לֹ֥א יַחֵ֖ל דְּבָר֑וֹ	he shall not break his pledge;
כְּכָל־הַיֹּצֵ֥א מִפִּ֖יו יַעֲשֶֽׂה׃	he must carry out all that crossed his lips.

VIII.C.1. The grammatical construction of the opening of verse 3 is "*'ish ki yiddor neder la-Yhwh*"—that is, "*'ish* + *ki* + imperfect verb + accusative"; this construction occurs in several other places within the genre of priestly ritual law. The word *'ish* often appears by itself (not counterposed with *'ishshah*), as in the similar expression *'ish ki yafli' neder* (NJPS: "when any-one explicitly vows," Lev. 27:2; cf. Lev. 13:40; 22:14, 21; 24:17, 19; 25:29; 27:14; etc.). In such settings it has the sense of "anyone," that is, any party who happens to be in the position described by the law. Linguistically speaking, the construction is indefinite and therefore not gender-specific. That is, the verbal inflections and pronouns that refer to *'ish* are masculine for the sake of grammatical gender concord only. In such situations, biblical Hebrew presumes that women are included in the law's scope unless the topic by its nature is one that does not involve them (see Part V).

VIII.C.2. We can productively contrast this construction with the expression *'ish 'o 'ish-shah ki yafli' lindor neder nazir* (NJPS: "if anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a nazirite's vow"; Num. 6:2). That instance also deals with vows, but in that case, *'ish* is not gender-inclusive. Presumably the opening words in the treatment of that type of vow specify "*'ish o' 'ishshah*" because there is something about the nazirite vow such that typically a woman would not be in view from the start. As Lev. 27:2 ff. and other biblical passages show, the issue is not vowing per se; women are expected to take part in making vows.

VIII.C.3. This shows the distinctiveness of the present case: *'ishshah* does appear eventu-ally, but not in the same phrase as *'ish*. Rather, it shows up in the next verse—in a parallel for-mula (*we-'ishshah ki tiddor neder la-Yhwh*); this dual pattern is unique in the Torah.

VIII.C.4. The significance of our passage's relative placement of *'ish* and *'ishshah* is somewhat ambiguous, which has led to two schools of thought among interpreters. According to one reading (e.g., Jacob Milgrom [pers. comm., 2/19/04]), *'ish* and *'ishshah* are mutually exclu-sive and complementary terms: *'ish* refers to the case of a man (v. 3), while *'ishshah* refers to the case of a woman (vv. 4–13). According to the other reading (*Sifrei*; Targum Jonathan; Mayer Gruber [pers. comm., 6/2/04]), *'ish* is a generic term ("anyone") that includes *'ishshah* as a spe-cial case—that is, *'ish* introduces a general principle (v. 3), followed by a limited number of sub-cases centered on females in various situations (vv. 4–13). Yet the weight of the linguistic evi-dence favors the second opinion, for as stated in VIII.C.1, when the audience encounters *'ish* by itself (without being counterposed with *'ishshah* in the same phrase) it would as a matter of course construe *'ish* as a socially non-gendered term.

VIII.C.5. Nonlinguistic considerations—the situational context and the topic—then become paramount in determining the sense of *'ish*. Remember, *'ish* is a term of affiliation, such that the audience must always ascertain its indirect reference—the group or party in question with which the *'ish* is affiliated. Can the matter be already settled by the time that the reader reaches verse 4?

VIII.C.6. The group to whom Moses is speaking is identified in v. 2 as *ra'shey ha-mattot li-vney yisra'el*. As Jacob Milgrom comments, "it is rare to find a law addressed to Israel's leaders rather than to the people themselves." Although "the heads of the Israelite tribes" is a terse—and thus vague—designation, nevertheless it is clear that all of the addressees are themselves householders, whereas the dependent members of the populace are decidedly not present. This setting creates the expectation of a law with special relevance to the immediate audience. The first sense of *'ish* that would come to mind is "a member of this particular audience."

VIII.C.7. The Torah's laws are addressed most directly to those parties who are most in a position to abide by them. Vows typically involve a donation of economic assets to a shrine.[31] In such a case, the responsible party would be the head of the household and its chief administrator, namely the householder's (principal) wife.[32] Indeed, the Torah characteristically addresses the

---

[31] A vow was a gamble—a conditional verbal commitment in response to a threat, such as marauders, severe illness, or difficult childbirth. Generally a vow promised a dedication to the sanctuary either of a person's value or of an animal (so Jacob Milgrom, following Rashbam). A nazirite vow in particular led to a temporary forbearance from consuming grape products (which, given their being staple foodstuffs, was not easy to manage), avoiding corpses, and bringing a sacrificial offering afterward. For its part, an oath of abstention could be used to restore a perceived breach in one's relationship with God; it resulted in a period of self-denial, such as fasting (Milgrom at v. 14). Each of these measures potentially impacted the thriving or even survival of the household. Their perceived achievements could be significant, yet they could come at a cost. A vow or oath might temporarily reduce the household's productive capacity—and its resilience. It could not only deplete the household's assets but also make the individual less available for work. (For example, one who voluntarily made a sacrifice was not only depleting the household's assets but also was unavailable for work while traveling to and from the sanctuary; likewise, one who was fasting was temporarily less productive.) The extent of the impact could be negligible or significant, depending upon the household's economic situation and upon the timing of the commitment. One calculated the wisdom of a given vow or oath via assessments of risks and probabilities, and thus different persons might well have come to different conclusions about whether a particular vow or oath was in the best interests of the household.

[32] The ancient Israelite audience would understand the discussion in terms of the household—the society's basic economic unit, which typically consisted of several nuclear families. Such a household was the locus not only of consumption but also production—it made or processed nearly all that its members needed for survival. The Israelites lived in corporate households because of the economies of scale: they could hardly survive as individuals. Household members depended upon each other for sustenance and for the basic production of goods. As for the leadership of this corporate household (to paraphrase Carol Meyers), the chief executive officer was the *av* ("father"), while his principal wife was the chief operating officer (COO). Among other duties, they coordinated the efforts of the household's members so that the enterprise would remain a going concern.

Legally granting the household's executive a limited right to annul the vow or oath of a household member would have had a survival function: it provided a way for the needs of the household to be considered in the decision. It would have weighed the interests of the corporate household against those of the individual member. For it was the executive's responsibility to make an overall cost-benefit calculation and to act on behalf of the needs of the household as a going concern. The closest analogy in contemporary society is found in the modern corporation: a manager's right to place reasonable constraints both on reimbursement for employee travel and meal expenses, and on the employees' ability to take time off for personal matters. The success of both organizations requires a measure of coordination and discipline. This need for the executive to "weigh in" from the household point of view applied without regard to the indi-

situation of a certain segment of society: farmers who also own livestock (not town-dwelling artisans, traders, prostitutes, or civil officials); slave owners (not slaves); employers (not servants or day laborers); married parents (not single individuals); etc. The principal executives of a household are the conventional (default) subjects of the Torah's laws; this would go without saying.

VIII.C.8. The nature of vows decisively restricts the scope of the type of person in view.

VIII.C.8.a. In Israelite society, the ability to freely make and fulfill a vow exemplified the autonomous authority that the head of a *beit 'av* possessed. (See Deut. 12:17–18; Judg. 11:30, 35; 1 Sam. 1:21; Jer. 44:25. Note that although Absalom was in charge of his own household, it was subsumed under the *beit 'av* of his father, David, which explains why the prince needed to ask David's permission to fulfill a vow; 2 Sam. 15:7–8.) The householder's position is distinctive. Other things being equal, the audience would expect that any discussion of vowing would begin with the autonomous case of the male head of an extended-family household.

VIII.C.8.b. As expected, the topic of verse 3 is precisely the ability to make a vow freely and autonomously. And in fact, the sense of *'ish* as "householder" is well attested in the Bible. Logically it can be derived from the primary sense of *'ish* as a "member of the group"; it apparently focuses on the capacity of an *'ish* to represent the group—the group here being the household. (On that sense and for a list of other passages in which it appears, see I.B.2 and II.B.2.)

VIII.C.9. In conclusion, verse 3, especially in light of verse 2, cements the sense of *'ish* as a householder. For the text's original audience, the context would reliably evoke and establish that sense—and do so prior to the mention of *'ishshah* in verse 4. That being said, two considerations later in the passage serve to confirm the proposed reading:

VIII.C.9.a. For vows and self-denying oaths in a patrilocal society, the most instructive case is that of a female, because a woman customarily moves from one domicile to another when she marries. It is she who grows up in one household (vv. 4–6), moves to another household (vv. 7–9), and takes on a new legal status as a wife (vv. 11–13), possibly even functioning as the household's COO (see note 29). Legally treating the case of a female is *necessary and sufficient* to cover all members of the household, including its males. Her case establishes that the authority for annulment remains local as individuals come and go. Further, it exemplifies the potentially conflicting assessment of the executive versus the other household members. This is because over time, his (principal) wife becomes an expert in the household's resources, having management authority in the household roughly equivalent to his. Next to her husband, she is the most likely to make decisions with the overall household's interests in mind, in her capacity as COO. If anyone's vows or oaths ought to be *exempt* from the executive's review, it ought to be hers! Thus if even her vows or oaths are subject to review, how much the more so would the same law apply to

---

vidual member's gender. Logically, the ancient audience would expect that the head of household had a limited right to annul the vows or oaths of all members of the household—male or female, whether offspring or cousin or servant. The point of the law, then, is that individuals are accountable for their commitments, and their personal religious needs are to be respected whenever they don't conflict too strongly with the overall interests of the household, as determined by the executive who's responsible for such decisions. This would be consistent with the authority that the Torah elsewhere grants to the head of household (and his wife) with no evident regard to the gender of its members (Exod. 20:12; 21:15, 17; Lev. 19:3; Deut. 5:16) except where gender roles make such distinctions relevant (Deut. 21:18–21; 22:13–21).

the rest of the household's members, whose status and authority are less than that of the COO. (But the converse is not true: for example, the disposition of the vows of an adult son living in his father's household would not necessarily apply to his mother, who had greater household authority than he.)

VIII.C.9.b. The wording of the passage's summary in v. 17 better accords with the view that *'ish* in v. 3 refers to "householder" rather than to "a man." The summary (which does not mention vows or oaths) pointedly omits reference to v. 3, regarding the *'ish* who is accountable only to God. It also omits the widow and divorcée who were discussed in v. 10. The summary speaks only in terms of the paired relationships covered in vv. 4–9 and 11–16. In other words, the text's own categorization is in terms of autonomous versus attached persons, rather than upon "a man" versus "a woman."

VIII.C.10. Most—if not all—English translations, including NJPS, render *'ish* as "man." Such a rendering does not convey the salient sense of *'ish* as a householder; it misleadingly suggests that the passage is framed in terms of a male/female dichotomy; and it also overtranslates the social-gender component of the Hebrew term (see Part VII). These features are severe disadvantages. Hence, CJPS renders *'ish* here as "householder."

Thus ends Part VIII of this eight-part series.

Link to Part I

Link to Home Page