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Morning in the Agora (בקר בהרחוב)

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MORNING IN THE AGORA (בקר בהרחוב)

by

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"Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?'

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

We begin, perhaps counterintuitively, in the shadowy opening lines of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As the play begins, the audience (or, as the case may be, the reader) finds themselves privy to the comings and goings of castle Elsinore's midnight watchmen. The dialogue opens with a series of questions. "Who's there?" asks the sentry Bernardo, only to receive a jumpy reply from his colleague Francisco: "Nay, answer me! Stand and unfold yourself." Then, in rapid succession: "Long live the king." "Bernardo?" "He."[1] In one sense, these opening lines tell us almost nothing about the play's contents. They are circuitous, cagey, and disorienting. We learn the name of one character—Bernardo. We learn, implicitly, that the drama is set in a kingdom. But we certainly do not meet the titular Hamlet. We can glean almost nothing about the play's conflicts. The audience is kept, as it were, in the dark. The opening of *Hamlet* is decidedly not, we can say, *Richard III*, which begins with a lengthy expositional monologue delivered by the eponymous Gloucester.[2] Instead, *Hamlet* throws us into the deep end—situating the audience in a confused game of call and response.

And yet, in another sense, these opening lines tell us almost everything we need to know about the play as a whole. Comprised of just over a dozen words, these lines from Bernardo and Francisco get right to the crux of the matter. *Hamlet* is a play defined by uncertainty ("Who's there?"), suspicion ("Nay, answer me! Stand and unfold yourself."), and the murkiness of politics ("Long live the king.") When, in this same opening scene, the play's infamous ghost appears, Bernardo announces: "In the same figure like the king that's dead," but shortly thereafter: "Looks 'a not like the king? Mark it, Horatio!" Once the apparition passes, the sentry Marcellus restates the question: "Is it not like the king?"[3] Why, we must ask, is there any

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[1] William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare Third Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et. al (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 1764.

[2] *Ibid.* 567.

[3] *Ibid.* 1765-1766.

question at all? Surely the ghost either resembles the dead King Hamlet or it doesn't. And yet our sentries waffle, asking each other for confirmation. What are they seeing? Apparently, in the darkness of the midnight watch, nothing is unambiguous. The sentries, squinting into the shadows, cannot be sure of anything. No doubt their uncertainty and paranoia are exacerbated by the uneasy political atmosphere that hangs over Elsinore throughout the play. Something is, after all, rotten in Denmark. Even the new King Claudius admits that the kingdom may appear "to be disjoint and out of frame" to outsiders.[4] How widespread, we may wonder, are the rumors of King Hamlet's suspicious death? How tenuous are the stresses of royal succession? Shakespeare, by beginning in the midnight darkness and by turning us in circles, manages to establish his drama as an uncertain, shadowy, political play from the very outset.

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The Book of Genesis, like *Hamlet*, opens in darkness. And while the sentries of Elsinore may hope for lanterns or torches, the biblical text begins by asking its readers to imagine complete blackness—a darkness that, as far as we know, has never known luminosity. Even following the birth of light in verse three, the narrator's familiar refrain throughout the creation process remains *vayehi erev vayehi boqer*—"and there was evening and there was morning" (Genesis 1:5, 1:8, 1:13, 1:19, 1:23, etc.). Every step of the way, the biblical God is imagined as beginning his creations in darkness before finishing them in light. This is a creation story, one could say, which uses night as its leading dictum.

But what can the opening of Genesis possibly have in common with the shadowy political world of Shakespeare's Elsinore? Does the reader ever get a good look at this creator or is he, like *Hamlet*'s ghost, difficult to parse out through the dark? Does the reader even gain

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[4] *Ibid.* 1769.

access to the creation process in any meaningful way? The reader is given the order of creation, but how are we to imagine the difference between the verbs *asah*—"to do" or "to make" (Genesis 1:7, 1:16, 1:25)—and *bara*—a strange and seemingly supernatural verb meaning something like "to create" (Genesis 1:1, 1:21, 1:27)? Can the reader even hope to understand the biblical God's criteria for which creations are "good"—a word which is just as ambiguous in Hebrew as in English?

The literary sophistication of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not in question. But what of the opening of Genesis? Is the author's constant preoccupation with darkness and light—*ḥoshek* and *or*—merely incidental? Or is the reader to take very seriously the attention paid to what goes seen and unseen? To put it another way, are the authors responsible for the Hebrew Bible, like Shakespeare after them, aware of the literary utilities of darkness?

Studies of and commentaries upon the creation account of Genesis 1-2:4a exist in abundance and we do not currently seek to add to their swollen number. Our focus in this brief study is, instead, on darkness. Over the course of three narrative case studies, we will assess some of the ways that biblical authors employ darkness in their stories. What effects does obscurity have on the narrative? When, where, and why might a biblical author choose to set a scene during the nighttime? To what end might a biblical author eclipse their prose? Throughout these pages, we will be addressing questions of sensory detail. We will be asking ourselves what the reader can discern from the text and, perhaps even more importantly, what the characters in a given narrative see and experience—especially when they are, so to speak, in the dark.

The problem we face, at the root of this study, is one of narrative detail. It hardly needs to be said that biblical prose, as a general rule, makes Hemingway look like Shakespeare's Polonius. The Hebrew Bible's narratives are as sparse as the arid landscape in which those

narratives are set—bare, rudimentary, and more often than not sapped of rich detail. Occasionally the reader may encounter some dry shrub of description or a rare tamarisk of explicit character motivation, but for the most part biblical prose remains spare to the extreme. Biblical prose is not a screenplay where we are given interiors and exteriors. Biblical prose is not an almanac, nor an atlas, nor is it an exhaustive datebook. The biblical authors, generally speaking, do not even seem particularly concerned with the temporal. We do not know, for instance, at what hour David killed Goliath. We are not told whether or not it was winter or spring when the patriarch Abram first set out for Canaan. The narrator of Exodus 3 feels no need to specify at what time of day Moses first encountered the ever-burning bush in the wilderness. So why do certain biblical authors, in certain rare instances, clue us in that a scene is occurring at night? Why, for instance, do YHWH's agents only arrive in Sodom once the sun has already set? Why are Isaac and Rebekah said to first meet at the onset of evening? Why can the final plague of Egypt only come under the cover of darkness, while the other nine received no such temporal stipulation? Why does the narrator of 2 Samuel 11 tell us that before witnessing the beautiful Bathsheba bathing, David doesn't get out of bed until evening (2 Samuel 11:2)? Are these all incidental decisions on the part of the biblical authors—errant flicks of the reed pen, taking up precious page space?

The present brief study should not, by any means, be taken as exhaustive. The biblical authors explicitly employ the common noun form of "night" (*laylah*) over two-hundred times across the breadth of the Hebrew Bible. This is to say nothing of instances in which biblical authors use terms like *erev* (traditionally "evening"), *luwn* (typically indicative of "staying the night"), or simply the more ambiguous *ḥoshek* ("darkness"). For largely pragmatic reasons, we will be limiting ourselves to three narrative case studies—Abram's nighttime military action in

Genesis 14, the violent drama of Judges 19, and the peculiar blind wrestling match of Genesis 32. We will not focus on occurrences of night in poetic contexts, nor will we worry ourselves with appearances of night that are of a more idiomatic flavor—e.g. "forty days and nights" (Genesis 7:12, Exodus 24:18, Deuteronomy 10:10, etc.). We will also avoid scenes which clearly take place within dreams—which are worthy of their own separate and considerable study.

Each of our narrative case studies will reveal, in due course, the beguiling ways in which certain biblical authors employ darkness as a literary tool towards a literary end. In doing so, we seek to better understand the subtleties and complexities of biblical narrative. There will, in all likelihood, be lapses, gaps, and omissions in these pages that may, no doubt, be attributed to the relative youth and capability of their author.

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Genesis is, in many ways, a clear-cut biblical context. Tradition has provided us with the title of *Bereshit*—the first word of the creation account. The Greek tradition has given us the title Genesis—i.e. "Origins." The book is comprised largely of straightforward prose, only occasionally lapsing into heightened poetic language[5] or using especially challenging vocabulary.[6] Biblical scholarship has divided Genesis into two rough narrative sections—the "primeval history" (1-11) and the substantially longer "patriarchal history" (12-50).[7] Our narrative studies from the Book of Genesis—Genesis 14 and Genesis 32—both appear in the so-called "patriarchal history," occurring in the lives of Abram and his grandson Jacob, respectively.

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[5] See, for example, Genesis 27, when Isaac delivers benedictions to his twins or Genesis 49, when Jacob attempts to prophesy the futures of his sons.

[6] See Genesis 29 and 30, when Leah and Rachel name their children or the later episode of Genesis 30, when the author uses enough hapax legomenon to put the author of Job to shame.

[7] E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), LII-LX.

Abram's night scene, comprised of just one verse and a singular appearance of the noun *laylah*, is by far the briefest of our three case studies. As we shall see, in Judges 19, the sun remains set for eleven whole verses, with the threat of night being a concern throughout the whole chapter. Darkness covers eleven (albeit shorter) verses of Genesis 32. In Genesis 14, by comparison, *laylah*—night—only receives the briefest of mentions before vanishing again. The verse in question is as follows: "[Abram] and his men divided against them [at] night, attacking and pursuing them as far as Ḥobah—"Hiding-Place"—which is north of Damascus" (Genesis 14:15). The preceding verse begins in the south of Canaan, necessitating that events are set at least several days before. Based on their geography, the following verses must take place at least several days after, meaning that verse 15 is temporally offset from the rest of the narrative. In this decisive moment, our author has chosen to depict Abram's military action as occurring decidedly at night. In order to come to an understanding of this choice, we will have to address the chapter in which it appears.

Genesis 14 has, in the hallowed halls of biblical criticism, attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The chapter as a whole is, in a word, strange. This is a relatively early narrative in the story of Abram—before the patriarch has had his name elongated by the biblical God and before Abe has had children with either Hagar or Sarah. Where do we find Abram at this point in his life and at this point in the narrative? Up to this juncture in the story, we have seen Abram leave Ḥaran, directed by a mysterious Deity who will continue to manifest sporadically through much of (if not all of) Abe's lifetime. We have followed Abram and his household as they arrive in the arid land of Canaan before immediately being sent across the border into Egypt by the necessities of a famine. In a rather peculiar episode in Egypt, Abram's wife Sarai proves beautiful enough to attract the lurid attentions of the god king, Pharaoh. Only

through the supernatural intercession of the biblical God does Abram have Sarai returned to him.
At the end of this (mis)adventure, Abram is escorted out of Egypt, burdened by considerable
wealth. In the narrative directly proceeding Genesis 14, Abram's household runs into the
problem of limited resources and infighting. To ameliorate the situation, Abram and his nephew
Lot part ways, with Lot choosing to settle in a verdant area towards the east known as
hakikkar—"the Round" or, at a stretch, "the Plain." By the time of our present narrative, Abram,
still wealthy but with a reduced household, has taken up residence at "Mamre's Oaks, near
Hebron" (Genesis 13:18).

Entire books have been and will be written musing about the curiosities of Genesis 14
itself. Not wanting to add to their number, we will merely summarize the events that transpire in
the biblical text. Genesis 14 begins by immediately dropping the focus away from Abram and
launching into eleven whole verses of a dense geopolitical aside. Four foreign kings have
gathered into a coalition against five rebellious vassal kings whose cities all seem to lie
somewhere in the vicinity of *hakikkar*—"the Round." The foreign coalition, seemingly
spearheaded by the impressively named Chedorlaomer, launches an extensive campaign into
Canaan and its environs. The five vassal kings are defeated and various local populations are
rolled over with seeming ease—presented by the narrator as little more than an exhausting litany
of vanquished enemies. Sodom and Gomorrah—two cities of "the Round"—are sacked, and Lot
is among those hauled off by Chedorlaomer's coalition.

Only now, twelve verses in, does our man Abram come into play. Informed of the
military campaign by an unnamed *paliyt* ("escapee" or "fugitive"), Abram (strangely called,
here, "Abram the Hebrew") musters a force 318 strong and tracks after the foreign coalition. It is
here, fifteen verses in, that the author employs the word *laylah*, removed from any prefix.

Abram, acting as commander, deploys his limited forces upon the enemy in the dark. Abram not only wins a decisive military victory, but he routs the foreign coalition back past Damascus and returns, heavy-laden with the campaign's haul.

E.A. Speiser's view of this narrative (a view which, to be sure, predated Speiser himself) has, with some variations, remained the popular scholarly assessment of Genesis 14.[8] Speiser, an eager proponent of Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis, fully admitted that this chapter baffles all attempts to divvy Genesis up into clean sources. After all, how can Genesis 14 be attributed to hands of Messrs. J, E, P, or D when the chapter reads so starkly different from its bedfellows? Speiser's general conclusion was that Genesis 14 could only be explained as "alone among all the accounts in the Pentateuch, if not indeed in the Bible as a whole."[9] This assessment posits that the bulk of Genesis 14 is a foreign (likely Akkadian) historical chronicle or piece of political propaganda, translated or transliterated into Hebrew and subsequently shanghaied into the biblical text. The litany of decidedly uncommon and un-Hebraic names and locations are explained as elements borrowed from a different account. The inclusion of the gentilic "Abram the Hebrew" in the chapter's latter half has been taken by some as an extrabiblical mention of the patriarch and understood by others as an insertion by the biblical author in order to co-opt an otherwise unrelated historical or pseudo-historical narrative.

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[8] Speiser, 99-109. Compare: Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1961), 170-172; Peter F. Ellis, *The Yahwist: The Bible's First Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1968), 71; J.A. Emerton, "The Riddle of Genesis 14," *Vetus Testamentum* 21, no. 4 (1971): 403-439; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 170-171; Anthony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 195-196; Othniel Margalith, "The Riddle of Genesis 14 and Melchizedek," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 112, no. 4 (2000): 501-508; Cale A. Staley, "The Melkiṣedeq Memoirs: The Social Memory of Melkiṣedeq through the Second Temple Period" (master's thesis, University of Iowa, 2015), 15, 21-34. While recent scholarship has begun to distance itself from the specifics of Speiser's understanding, the underlying flavor remains largely unchanged.
[9] Speiser, 105.

As we have already said, our current concern is not a genre or compositional evaluation of Genesis 14. Our concern is how and why the author of this narrative, whoever they may be, explicitly sets Abe's military action in the dark of the night. In doing so, however, we will regrettably have to voice certain criticisms of the prevailing scholarly view.

Regardless of authorship and origin, Genesis 14 opens with a dense and lengthy military record. If this record was written in cuneiform by Hammurabi's scribes, then it is dense and hard to work through. If this record was written by a cadre of priestly scribes with an eye towards historical fiction, then it is still dense and hard to work through. If this record was written by a single inspired author, then it is dense and hard to work through. If this record was somehow penned by God himself, then it is still dense and hard to work through. The story opens by introducing a whole cast of political entities for whom the reader has no prior context and who will never appear following this narrative. The narrator then makes a point of listing out the specific location of each military encounter—a methodical play-by-play—often feeling the need to further complicate things by clarifying an alternative name for each—e.g. "they returned to Ein-Mishpat—which is Kadesh" (Genesis 14:7). The prose is, quite simply, a slog.

So what pertinent narrative information can we parse from the opening of Genesis 14? The coalition of foreign kings is, without question, militarily capable. What is clear to us, without going into a lengthy discussion of each of the baffling names of the kings and of their domains, is that just one of these kings would have been a formidable adversary. Just chapters before, Shinar—the kingdom of one of the rulers, Amraphel—was the construction site of the skyscraping Tower of Babel, a humanity-wide building project. Not only does the foreign coalition win an easy victory over their five rebellious vassals, but they also make a point of bulldozing their way over Amalekites, Amorites, and Horites—"cavemen." And this is to say

nothing of the coalition's defeat of the Rephaim, the Zuzim, and the Emim—all names of groups who, elsewhere in biblical narrative, appear as formidable and often gargantuan titans.[10] By the end of their campaign, this military coalition has surely proven itself to be the most formidable army on the face of the earth. The most miraculous feature of this narrative is perhaps not its hapaxes, nor its nonconformity with source criticism, nor its sheer information density, but the fact that Abram and his 318-man squadron are able to defeat such a hyperbolic foe. True, we are not told precisely how many troops are under the coalition's control (though we can safely assume that four whole kingdoms could be expected to amass more than a few hundred warriors). And true, Abram's 318 are referred to by a hapax legomenon—ḥaniyk—that, for all we know, could suggest some extraordinary martial skill. And true, perhaps we are to understand that the coalition's forces were wearied and depleted by their extensive campaign. But the story remains undeniably surprising—a single wealthy sojourner in the arid south of Canaan, with limited forces at his disposal, manages to rout an imperial coalition back north of Damascus to Ḥobah—"Hiding-Place."

In order to understand Abram's decisive victory (and, by extension, this author's use of night), we must first address Abram's gentilic—"the Hebrew." Readers of Genesis 14 have been right to take note of the strangeness of this gentilic. Abram-later-Abraham has never been called "the Hebrew" before—not even in his introduction in Genesis 11. Following this context, Abe will never be called "the Hebrew" again. No other patriarch is called "the Hebrew." Indeed, the biblical narrator only ever applies "Hebrew" in four other instances—twice in reference to Israelites living under Egyptian rule in the beginning of Exodus and twice in reference to Israelites who are fleeing from or have aligned themselves with the Philistines in the Book of

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[10] Herbert Chanan Brichto, *The Names of God: Poetic Readings in Biblical Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 190.

Samuel. All other occurrences of "Hebrew" in the biblical text appear in the mouths or minds of

specific characters. So why is the narrator applying a gentilic to Abram as if he is being

introduced to us for the first time? Wouldn't Abram's proper gentilic be 'Abram the Kasdimite,'

seeing as he hails from "Ur of the Kasdim" (Genesis 11:31)?

The gentilic's root is innocuous enough—*avar* suggests little more than prepositional

movement. To *avar* is to pass over, to move onwards, or to cross (perhaps in reference to the

River Jordan itself). The root appears with relative frequency in the biblical text—and the

gentilic has taken on a life of its own in postbiblical spheres, used by Jews and gentiles alike.

Our present concern, however, is how the gentilic functions in the Hebrew Bible itself.

The term, in short, is a slur. Of the gentilic's 34 uses in the biblical text, up to fifteen

occurrences come from the perspective of Egyptians, or in reference to Israelites living in Egypt

(e.g. Genesis 39:17, Exodus 1:16, 2:11). Up to another eight usages come from the perspective of

enemy Philistines, or in reference to Israelites who live under Philistia's thumb (e.g. 1 Samuel

4:3, 4:9, 13:7, 14:21, 29:3). In the Book of Jeremiah, "Hebrew" only appears in reference to

indentured servants (Jeremiah 34:9, 34:14). In another handful of occurrences, "Hebrew" is used

by Israelites who find themselves in the presence of more powerful foreigners (e.g. Genesis

40:15, Exodus 5:3, Jonah 1:9). The term, whatever its true etymology may be, is used time and

time again by biblical authors as a term of powerlessness. An Israelite warehoused in Egypt is a

Hebrew. An Israelite who turncoats to the Philistines is a Hebrew. Jonah, when surrounded by

goyish sailors on a capsizing boat, is a Hebrew. An Israelite gathers to fight—a Hebrew is forced

to flee across the Jordan.

Why, if every biblical usage of Hebrew is derogatory, does the narrator of Genesis 14 call

the patriarch Abram, the progenitor of biblical Israel, "the Hebrew?" Surely no pious biblical

author would commit the blasphemy of knocking Abraham down a peg. Were Speiser and his predecessors right to declare the author of Genesis 14 a foreign chronicler? Was this narrative composed by the one scribe in Judea who didn't understand "Hebrew" as a slur? Are all other usages of this gentilic coincidentally negative?

Let us consider again where Abram is situated when this story begins. He is not Father Abraham, the Founder, the *nasi elohim*. Instead, this Abram is still merely a sojourner in Canaan. He is childless, property-less, materially wealthy but lacking in protection and infastructure. This is the Abram who, when entering Egypt, was unable to defend his Sarai from the attention of Pharaoh's officials. By the time of Genesis 14, Abram is certainly wealthy—but where has his wealth gotten him?

As we have already noted, Genesis 13 ends with Abram paying rent in Mamre's Oaks. Who, we must ask, is Mamre? Mamre the Amorite, along with his mysterious brothers Eshkol and Aner, are said to be *ba'alay berit-avram* (Genesis 14:13). *Ba'alay berit-avram*? *Ba'al* can mean a number of things in biblical Hebrew—but the word unquestionably denotes authority. A *ba'al* is a master or an owner. And while the construction *ba'alay berit* is unique to Genesis 14, the words themselves are unambiguous. Mamre, Eshkol, and Aner are "masters of a contract" with Abram. The narrator stays mute on what this entails, but we can certainly assume that Abe is the weaker of the parties involved in this *berit*. We may even go so far as to characterize Mamre, Eshkol, and Aner as Abram's Amorite landlords. Abram is not said to *yashev*—"to settle" or "to put down roots"—in Mamre's Oaks. Instead, he is merely said to *shokeyn*—"to abide." Abram is a stranger in a strange land—a territory which the narrator has repeatedly stressed is full of Canaanites and Perizzites (Genesis 12:6, 13:7). Not yet having the means to defend his household or his wealth, the patriarch now finds himself caught in a contract with

Mamre the Amorite and his brothers. The biblical author, ever economic with words, clues the reader in on Abram's powerless political situation by referring to him as "Abram the Hebrew."

The story of Genesis 14, then, becomes a story of transition and transformation. In the introductory episode, the author introduces us to a formidable military coalition, the combined might of four kingdoms. In verse 13, we encounter Abram at a low point in his Canaan experience, living as the weaker party in a contract with three Amorite brothers. Abram, apparently motivated by the abduction of Lot (who, until recently, was a member of Abram's household), is able to assemble a force of 318 fighters. Who are these soldiers? As we've already noted, the term used for the 318—*ḥaniyk*—is used only once in biblical narrative and is, as such, untranslatable. Abe, however, makes it clear by the end of the chapter, that Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre contributed to his force—themselves perhaps motivated by the foreign coalition's devastation of their fellow Amorites (see Genesis 14:7, 14:24). Abram, however, is their commanding officer.

This, at long last, brings us to the utility of night in this narrative. On the one hand, the author's use of darkness is simple and, one could even say, literal. The 318 *ḥaniyk* have followed the four kings coalition north to Dan—"Judgement"—which biblical archaeology tells us is somewhere near the Golan Heights. Abram, according to the narrator, then waits until nightfall to strike. He divides his limited troops and, under the cover of darkness, makes his move against a more powerful foe. Is the detail that the strike occurs at night merely incidental—or does every detail carry weight? The narrator certainly does not give us an intricate play-by-play of the battle itself. Indeed, the action is limited to just three verbs. Abe is said to *ḥalaq*—"divvy up"—his forces in darkness, to *nakah*—"strike"—and to *radaf*—"pursue." All other details of the combat are left up to the reader's imagination. And yet the author asks us are to imagine the time of day.

And while we are not told how the fight pans out, the proof is ultimately in the pudding. The coalition, taken by surprise, is pushed at least one hundred miles further north past Damascus. Not only do the 318 *ḥaniyk* repel the coalition, but they return with the material assets and human souls acquired over the course of the campaign. Night, our narrator has led us to believe, has played a crucial role in this unlikely victory. The author, in short, knows full well that darkness can be used to an advantage.

After the nighttime episode of Genesis 14, a powerful change is facilitated in our protagonist. The sun sets on "Abram the Hebrew." The sun rises, however, on Abram the warlord, transformed by his experience in the Golan Heights. As the reader can see for themselves in the final episode of chapter 14, when Abram rolls back into Canaan, it is he, not Sarai, who is suddenly attracting the attention of kings.

We would do well to note that Genesis 15—a narrative directly following the geopolitical intrigue of Genesis 14—also proves to be a nighttime transformation for Abram. In Genesis 15, the reader is let in on an extended dream sequence wherein Abram and his God make their first official contract—the first formal covenant between the biblical God and biblical Israel. Readers of the Hebrew Bible have, perhaps understandably, given more attention to this second transformation. The dream covenant (of which respectable studies, commentaries, and analyses may be found elsewhere) is perhaps the more resonant and, shall we say, flashier change in Abe's life. But what of the transformation in the darkness of Genesis 14? News of Abe's dramatic actions in the Golan must, one would imagine, spread like wildfire through the land. Surely, to Abram's neighbors, the change that he undergoes in Genesis 14 is the more profound transformation—the movement from wealthy resident alien to warlord. True, the foreign coalition can always come a-calling with reinforcements. And true, Abram is still property-less,

childless, operating in a dangerous world, his assets promised away to the mysterious "Eliezer of Damascus" (Genesis 15:2). But following the darkness of Genesis 14, Abram will certainly never again be called "Abram the Hebrew."

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We will forgo proper chronology by turning our attention to a narrative context in the Book of Judges. In doing so, we will better observe the ways in which the biblical authors can use darkness to their own narrative advantage. Our current context, Judges 19, is overshadowed by night from its opening to its grisly close, though the sun is only set for eleven of the chapter's thirty verses. The noun *laylah* occurs only once in the narrative itself (and once more in a retelling of the chapter's events in Judges 20). *Erev*—evening—also occurs just once. However, the verbal root *luwn* ("lodging," indicative of "staying the night"), appears a staggering eleven times[11]—a frequency and density of occurrence which dwarfs *luwn*'s appearance in any other biblical context. In the entirety of Job, *luwn* occurs a total of eight times. In the whole Book of Psalms, the root appears six times. But this single chapter amounts for over ten percent of the root's total biblical usage. Why does the author of this narrative display such a keen fondness for this verb? Would it be fair to say that having somewhere to "stay the night" is, in a meaningful way, the central concern of this story? And what of this narrator's repeated and fastidious focus on the passage of time? Only with extreme rarity does the reader encounter a biblical narrator who tracks the sun's position in the sky, or who informs the reader how much time is passing over the course of the narrative. The narrator of Genesis 14, after all, was perfectly comfortable with leaving unspoken gaps of whole days between verses. But what of Judges 19?

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[11] The root occurs a twelfth time when the story is retold in Judges 20.

Perhaps we should take a step back and review the story as a whole. The narrative serves as a prologue to the final drama of its book—the civil war between Benjamin and the other tribes of biblical Israel. The prevailing scholarly view of Judges 19-21 is that the story has been positioned at the end of Judges by a late editor(s).[12] The validity and usefulness of this textual analysis is of little concern to our current treatment. Suffice it to say that Judges 19 is perhaps the most violent of the narratives in Judges—a book which is defined, in many ways, by violent narratives. We are dealing with a turbulent time in biblical Israel's narrative history. The rule of law is reactionary. Sporadic local warlords—among them Deborah, Gideon, and Jephthah— dominate the political sphere. The law of the land could be best described as "might is right."

The story opens with three preliminary verses. In these verses we are introduced to an unnamed Levite man, living as an alien in the backwaters of the Ephraimite Hills (*gar beyarketay har-ephrayim*). We are also introduced to this unnamed Levite's unnamed concubine (*pilegesh*). Why, any attentive reader must ask, is the unnamed protagonist in the backwaters of the Ephraimite Hills, apparently with no permanent residence? Is it because, as a Levite, he has no formal tribal allotment? Why is he said to acquire a concubine but not a "wife" (*ishah*)? What keeps her from achieving a higher status? From whom, the reader may go on to wonder, did the Levite get his concubine? Does this unnamed Levite have other women in his household? As we will learn, the man has at least one attendant (*na'ar*) and at least two donkeys. Later on, he will also claim to be traveling towards a "house of YHWH" (Judges 19:18)—but is this claim trustworthy? The concubine's father refers to the Levite's "tent" (Judges 19:9)—but is this assessment of the Levite's living situation any more or less accurate? Does the author intend for this Levite to be the same "young Levite" who played a role in Judges 17 and 18?

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[12] Robert G. Boling, *The Anchor Bible: Judges* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 279, 288.

The narrator does not see fit to bring these details to light. Immediately after being informed of the concubine, we are told that she has fled back to her father's household in Bethlehem. The Levite, we are then told, waits four whole months before pursuing after her. What is the author asking us to imagine? Why wait so long? Is the Levite apathetic? Is he ashamed of something? Does he spend these four months tracking his concubine down?[13] Why give us the curious detail of how long the Levite waits, but not how long the woman was with the Levite before running off? At the end of verse three, the Levite arrives at his concubine's father's household. Her father, by all accounts, appears happy to meet his daughter's owner (*vayireyhu avi hana'arah vayismaḥ liqratow*). Have the two met before? Did the Levite buy the young woman from her father or from another party? The Hebrew term *liqrat* ("to meet") is ambiguous—for all the reader knows, this may or may not be the first encounter between the two. Why does our narrator not specify?

The middle section of the narrative, set in the house in Bethlehem, hinges on an unspoken struggle between the Levite and the young woman's father. The Levite, as the narrator tells us, fully intends to return home with his concubine. We are not told what the father intends—but given his behavior, can there really be any question? When the two men meet, we are immediately told, "His in-law, the young woman's father, strong-armed[14] him into staying with him for three days" (Judges 19:4). Is the father being hospitable, or is something else afoot? Whenever the Levite attempts to leave, the young woman's father lures him back in with food and drink—"Treat yourself! Have a bit of bread, and then go on your way" (Judges 19:5).

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[13] The Rabbinic tradition has attempted to provide us with explanations for the young woman's departure and the Levite's behavior, ranging from the young woman's questionable cooking to her poor personal hygiene (*Gittin* 6b). These explanations, however temptingly mundane, are ultimately speculative. See Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Prophets: The Early Prophets with a Commentary Anthologized from Rabbinic Writings* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 2007), 225.

[14] Our translation stems from the author's use of the verb *ḥazaq*—indicative of physical strength or force.

However, after eating and drinking together, the day is late. The father uses the threat of looming night to his advantage—"Take a look, the day is slumping to a close. Please, stay the night. Look, the day is setting up camp. Stay the night here and enjoy yourself!" (Judges 19:9). The dialogue, we should note, is curiously repetitive and insistent. The allure of food and drink wastes the day away. Then, the young woman's father holds the threat of traveling at night over the Levite's head. Far from simply being a hospitable host, one begins to get the impression that the father is manipulating his guests to keep his daughter under his own roof. Is he wary of this uncouth Levite wayfarer? Surely he knows more about the unnamed Levite than we. What does he know that the reader does not? How did his daughter end up sold off into such an unfavorable situation in the first place? The father is apparently affluent enough for the household to spend over four days in a nonstop bender of eating and drinking. If the father's household contains such material comforts, why was his daughter sold off to a Levite with no permanent residence, a sojourner in the backwaters of Ephraim?

On the fifth day, the man succeeds in shrugging off his concubine's father. The Levite, his attendant, and the young woman leave Bethlehem towards the end of the day (*ḥanot hayom*), presumably to return to Ephraim. The narrator then fast forwards to when the travelers are in the Jerusalem Hills, with night fast approaching (*vahayom rad*). The Levite's attendant is understandably nervous. Traveling at night is dangerous at the best of times—exponentially more so in a time of warlords and anarchy. "Please," the attendant says to his employer, "let's go and turn in toward this Jebusite city [Jerusalem] and spend the night there" (Judges 19:11). The Levite, apparently motivated by a xenophobic zeal, balks at the suggestion, preferring to lodge in Gibeah or Ramah ("Hill-Place" and "High-Place," respectively). Upon making landfall in Gibeah, the narrator paints a vivid image—*vatavo lahem hashemesh eytzel hagivah*—"and the

sun backlit them at Gibeah" (Judges 19:14). Our nameless travelers, the narrator tells us, have

made it just in time to find safety (or so they think) behind the walls of a city.

In Gibeah, the travelers come across more good fortune. An unnamed homeowner insists

on taking the trio into his household. Who, we must ask, is this homeowner? Why does the

narrator describe him as *zaqayn* (a term that often indicates advanced age, but which can also

denote seniority or even sagacity), but also as a fieldworker who works until the sun goes down

(*min-ma'asehu min-hasadeh baerev*)? We are told that he too is from the Ephraimite Hills—is

this his motivation for taking the travelers out of the town agora and into his home?

The last eight verses of Judges 19 are when the brutal violence rears its ugly head. In the

dark of the night, a frenzied mob surrounds the *zaqayn* man's home. Motivated, in all likelihood,

by an attempt to save his own skin, the Levite tosses his concubine out to the "scum of the earth"

crowd (*anshay benay-beliya'al*). From here, the author does not need to go into extraneous detail

in order to chill our blood. The utter depravity of the young woman's fate is abundantly clear

when the narrator tells us, "They knew her inside and out and brutalized her all night, until the

morning" (Judges 19:25). As the darkness finally lifts, the woman collapses on the front stoop.

The Levite leaves to travel onward, discovers his concubine, straps her to a donkey, rides the

remaining distance to his residency, butchers the woman into twelve pieces, and sends a piece to

each of the tribes of Israel.

The story closes with the narrator giving us a peak at the Israelites who receive the

respective pieces of human cadaver, all of whom seem to understand what has occurred. How,

we may also ask, does the Levite send the cadaver across Israel? Are they hand delivered or is

the Levite affluent enough to employ messengers? To whom does he address the pieces? Does

the author invite us to ask such questions? The chapter closes with the crime in Gibeah being

declared as the worst atrocity that has occurred since the Israelites left Egypt. The context, in both Christendom's chapter delineations and in the parashot, breaks here.

Readers of Judges 19 have long noted the parallels between this narrative and the narrative in Genesis 19—the story of Lot on the eve of Sodom's destruction. These parallels are unmistakable. Both stories involve sexualized mob violence, directed around a house which contains visitors. Both stories include a host who offer up their own children to defend their houseguests. Both stories, on the face of things, appear designed to criticize the cities in which they are set. Both stories, we may also note, occur in the dark of the night. We may even tentatively assume that both of these narratives are aware of the other's existence. But the two stories are far from mirrors of each other. The episode in Sodom, for one, features supernatural characters. The episode in Gibeah, it would seem, does not. For another, the narrator of Genesis 19 leaves no question about the size of Sodom's mob; they are unambiguously "the male denizens, the men of Sodom… from the young to the old, everyone from each neighborhood" (Genesis 19:4). But what of Gibeah's mob? Does the narrator of Judges 19 tell us how many of Gibeah's citizenry participate in the crime?

Gibeah's mob is said to consist of *anshay ha-ir*—"the male denizens"—but also as only *anshay benay-beliya'al*—"worst of the worst." The prose leaves it unclear if "worst of the worst" serves as an adjective or as a clarification. Given the darkness over Gibeah, is the size of the mob even determinable from the perspective of our characters? Is the narrator able to see them? Has this mob been a nightly terror in the streets of Gibeah or do they only prey upon outsiders? Is this violent sexual behavior normative in Gibeah, as it was in Sodom? Did the unnamed homeowner know that this mob might come calling once the lights were out?

In the next chapter, the unnamed Levite will reappear and refer to the mob as the *ba'alay* of Gibeah. We encountered this term in the context of Genesis 14, where it was a signifier of authoritative status. We could perhaps translate the Levite's term as the "leaders of Gibeah" or at least the "established homeowners of Gibeah." But how, we must ask, does he know this? The Levite is certainly never said to get a good look at the mob in the darkness. Has his host given the Levite information that we, the readers, are not privy to? And why, if the Levite knows, does the narrator chose to leave the reader in the dark?

Perhaps most unsettlingly of all, the narrator, who never gifts the Levite's concubine with the power of speech, even leaves ambiguous *when* the young woman dies. Does she expire on the threshold of the house as a result of her abuse? The narrator never indicates as much, and the reader is left with the stomach churning possibility that the woman remains alive and badly injured until the Levite butchers her in the chapter's final verses. In the next chapter, the same Levite indicates that she was killed by the mob. But responsible readers must note that this claim comes from the mouth of the Levite, giving a public testimony, and is necessarily less trustworthy than the word of the narrator, who keeps the time of death ambiguous.

Certain other overarching questions trouble this narrative as well. Readers will no doubt have noted that *none* of the five primary characters in this chapter (the Levite, his attendant, the young woman, her father, or the Ephraimite homeowner in Gibeah) are given names. Unnamed characters are certainly not unheard of in biblical narrative, but to leave *all* of the players in a given narrative unnamed begins to look like an intentional choice on the part of the author. Why are we told the number of months the Levite waits before pursuing his concubine, the number of donkeys he takes with him, and the sun's position in the sky, but never what these people call themselves? Does the author provide us with any clues as to the identities of this unnamed cast?

Have we met these characters before, under different names? Will we ever meet these characters again, down the line? If the reader pays close enough attention can some (if not all) of the names be uncovered?

What we have is a narrative which is, on the one hand, straightforward. The Levite acquires a concubine. The concubine, in time, returns to her father's household. After a period of four months, the Levite sets out after his concubine with an attendant and two donkeys in tow. The young woman's father tries his best to keep the Levite (and, by extension, his daughter) in Bethlehem. Eventually, the Levite departs north for Ephraim. As night approaches, the Levite avoids a foreign city in favor of an Israelite city. Despite arriving safely in Benjamite Gibeah and finding a sympathetic Ephraimite to lodge with, the Levite and his companions are still faced with the threat of violence. The Levite saves his own skin by sacrificing the young woman. The Levite sets out to leave in the morning but comes across his concubine on the threshold. When she proves unresponsive, he straps her to a donkey and later dices her into twelve pieces. He then sends these pieces across Israel. In the next chapter the Levite reappears briefly to tell his version of events—beginning with his arrival in Gibeah and ending with the authorities of the city being responsible for his concubine's death. The Levite's testimony is taken as evidence to jumpstart a civil war against Benjamin.

On the other hand, as we have seen, Judges 19 is burdened by a seeming endless array of questions. Our narrator is undeniably vague. The story's characters all go unnamed. The curious details, no matter how titillating, never seem to be enumerated upon. The prose goes to great lengths to imply that the constantly reused verb *luwn*—lodging for the night—is the key to safety. The author even has their characters arriving in Gibeah *just* in time, as the sun sets. But in

the final eight verses, this promise of safety turns out to be patently false. The killer, it could be said, is already inside the house. In the end, the only protection proves to be a cruel sacrifice.

The scholarly consensus surrounding this story tells us that Judges 19 is designed to serve as a polemic against the tribe of Benjamin.[15] And true enough, the author (or, at the very least, the narrator) certainly goes out of their way to stress that Gibeah is a Benjamite settlement (Judges 19:14, Judges 19:16). But is this narrative also a takedown of Levites—represented by the dubious unnamed protagonist who throws an innocent woman to a horrific fate? If this is simply an anti-Benjamite polemic, we may also ask why the author includes all of the extraneous business between the Levite and his runaway concubine's father. And why, if the author sought to criticize Benjamin, does the whole narrative sequence end with the mournful refrain of the Book of Judges—"In those days there was no king in Israel—everyone did what they saw fit" (Judges 21:5)?

Having examined the narrative inside and out, let us pivot back to our specific concern and address the question of how the author of Judges 19 utilizes darkness. How does night complicate and compliment the prose of the chapter? As we have seen, the narrator of this story is concerned with the passage of time in a way that biblical narrative typically is not. This narrator chronicles the passage of months in Ephraim and the passage of days in Bethlehem. For the latter portion of the narrative, the sun's position of the sky is tracked from late afternoon to sundown, back to dawn. Each of the characters, in their own way, show a keen awareness of the dangers which darkness brings. The unnamed woman's father tries to use the threat of night to his advantage. The Levite's attendant is abundantly aware of the importance of the verb *luwn*.

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[15] Boling, 275; Andrew D.H. Mayes, "Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology in Judges 17-21," *Biblical Interpretation* 9, no. 3 (2001): 244; Sarah J. Milstein, "Saul the Levite and His Concubine: The 'Allusive' Quality of Judges 19," *Vetus Testamentum* 66 (2016): 95-116; Geoffrey P. Miller, "Verbal Feud in the Hebrew Bible: Judges 3:12-20 and 19-21," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 55, no. 2 (1996): 105-117.

The homeowner in Gibeah is resolute that the travelers should not stay in the town's agora overnight. Night is at the center of this narrative in the sense that the threat of darkness heightens danger and motivates the actions of the story's major players.

Darkness is, however, both a literal and figurative literary device. Judges 19 is unquestionably touched by literal and tonal darkness—but what of darkness in the sense of obscurity? When the Psalmist writes, "You light my lamp—YHWH, my God—to brighten my darkness" (Psalm 18:28), we can be fairly certain that the poet is not referring to a literal *ḥoshek*. When Job alludes to "walking through darkness" (Job 29:3), one imagines that the darkness in question is more poetic than it is actual. Our ancestors, it would seem, were abundantly aware of the potentials of metaphor. Surely darkness, in this sense, is reflected in how Judges 19 unfolds from the outset. The reader can see the story moving at every moment, but the details are opaque, like shadowy objects behind a veil. The narrator doesn't even bring the names of the characters to light. In the opening of this study, we mused that the author of the first creation account imagines the biblical God as leading with darkness—*vayehi erev vayehi boqer*. Couldn't we say the same of the narrator of Judges 19? Darkness obscures. The author opens the door a crack and readers are left to peak through. Ultimately, however, we are left in a shadowy narrative, combing through the dark for clues.

Perhaps the reader may find such a literary style frustrating. After all, isn't the intrinsic goal of narrative, in its most basic sense, communication? By concealing certain details in darkness, isn't the author is communicating ineffectually? Wouldn't the story be better served by giving us every possible detail? Wouldn't the reader learn more and benefit more if the moral, so to speak, was clearer?

<div align="center">פ</div>

The past two narratives have, at the risk of oversimplification, provided us with two similar but differing authorial uses of night. In Genesis 14, we see night employed to Abram's advantage as a sign of his martial sagacity. In the Egyptian episode of Genesis 12, only supernatural intercession could reunite Abram with Sarai. But now, Abram has reclaimed his nephew Lot through his own strength and planning. But this darkness also proves to be transformative. We are, after Abram's night attack, beginning to see the man who will someday be the lager-than-life Abraham. His character, we could say, is developing. The narrator never indicates that God had a hand in the fighting in the Golan Heights. In Judges 19, meanwhile, night is utilized in the service of danger and of secrecy. The narrator simultaneously primes us for danger while also keeping the reader in the dark—we can understand the attendant's anxiousness to find a place to stay the night, but we are never told what is going through the unnamed Levite's mind when he tosses the concubine to her fate. Having explored these two usages of narrative darkness, we are now better equipped to address our final narrative case study—that of Genesis 32. This chapter will prove, in many ways, the most challenging of our narratives—an episode where night not only conceals events from view, but also fundamentally changes how the reader views a biblical character.

We begin by asking a familiar question—where do we find ourselves in the context of Genesis 32? Where do our characters find themselves? Our protagonist is Jacob, first introduced in Genesis 25 and brought into the foreground as a major player in Genesis 27. Jacob will continue to be the narrator's primary focus until Genesis 37,[16] when he will retreat into the shadows in favor of Joseph and his brothers. But here, in Genesis 32, the reader finds Jacob at the height of his powers and his prowess, returning from over two decades spent in the north,

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[16] With the exception of Genesis 36, which contains Esau's rich genealogical information and the possible exception of Genesis 34, where Jacob is already falling into the background of his sons.

working in the household of his uncle Laban. In Ḥaran, "the Crossroads," Jacob amassed a substantial household, complete with women, children, male and female slaves, and an impressive assortment of animals. According to the narrator in Genesis 30, Jacob is *vayifrotz haish maod maod*—a Hebrew emphatic so forceful that, if taken literally, Jacob's riches must surely be on par with most royalty. Abram's Egyptian haul surely would have looked modest in comparison.

Despite his affluence, Jacob now finds himself between, as the saying goes, the devil and the deep blue sea. In the previous chapter, Jacob parted with his uncle Laban on rather dubious terms. Now, finally out from the shadow of Laban's household, Jacob hears that his dizygotic twin Esau is headed his way, ominously accompanied by 400 men. The reader has every reason to believe that Esau, twice fooled and slighted by Jacob, may have a bone to pick with his brother. Jacob too, according to the narrator, is *vayiyra maod*—"quaking in his boots" (Genesis 32:8). The majority of Genesis 32 is given over to Jacob's attempts to placate his brother by sending messengers and substantial gifts of livestock on ahead and by splitting up his camp in order to prevent the kind of midnight attack orchestrated by Abram many chapters before.

The primary drama of chapter 32 is divided, it would seem, over the course of two days and two nights. On the first day, Jacob learns of Esau's approach. On the first night, Jacob divides his camp—waking in the morning unharmed. On the second day, Jacob sends his offering to Esau. The second night, however, is when darkness settles upon on the narrative. The text is masterful, even in translation:

> He got up that night, taking his two women, his two slave girls, and his eleven children and crossing at the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the wadi and

crossed over his material assets. Jacob stayed back, alone, and a man grappled with him until the darkness lifted up. When he saw he couldn't win, he touched his inner thigh and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he grappled with him. He said, "It's time you send me off—dawn is rising." But he said, "I'm not letting you off unless you bless me." He said, "What is your name?" And he said, "It's Jacob." He said, "No, you're not called Jacob anymore—your name is Israel—because you've tussled with *elohim* and with men and you've come out on top." Jacob asked and said, "Please, tell me your name." He said, "Why ask my name?" And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the place 'Peniel'—as in 'I've seen *elohim* face to face and I'm still standing.' The red sun rose on him as he crossed over Penuel, limping on his thigh. And that's why Israelites don't eat hip sinews in the inner thigh to this day—because he touched Jacob's inner thigh—the innermost sinew.

<div align="right">Genesis 32:23-33</div>

When we read this story, we find ourselves fighting an uphill battle against tradition. Traditional readings tell us that this episode depicts Jacob in a wrestling match with an emissary of God, or even with God himself. Even the author of Hosea seems to have understood this story as a meeting between Jacob and a *malak*—a divine agent (Hosea 12:3-5). Commentators have, generally, agreed with this assessment. Ibn Ezra, for all of his more heterodox opinions among the medieval commentators, also clarified the "man" of this story as *hamalak*.[17] The rabbis responsible for the Genesis Rabbah voiced their opinion that the "man" was Esau's personal

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[17] *Biblia Rabbinica*, 81.

angel.[18] We, however, will confront this story as it presents itself, doing our best to remain unburdened by the thousands of years of admirable commentary on the episode.

To better understand how and why the author of this story utilizes night, we will note some of the curiosities of the text. First, we would do well to admit that the narrator never goes out of their way to indicate that Jacob encounters God or one of God's agents. The prose never calls the character a *malak*, nor an *elohim*, nor YHWH. The narrator only refers to this mysterious stranger as *ish*—"a man" (Genesis 32:24). A man? Just a man? If the author intended to tell us about an encounter between Jacob and a divine character, then we must admit that the narrator does a rather slapdash job. Is the stranger a man from Jacob's perspective? From the narrator's? From our own? Why, if this is a divine entity, does the narrator bury the lead?

By the end of the chapter, Jacob seems to have come to the conclusion that he has spent the night with God himself. After all, he names the place *Peniel*—"face of God," not *Peni-Ish*— "face of a man." The name change, of course, from Jacob to Israel also points to the "man" being more than just a man. The biblical God has already shown a certain predilection for changing names in the cases of Abram and Sarai (Genesis 17:5, 17:15)—and the name "Israel" is, of course, theophoric. And all of this is to say nothing of the man's mysterious sudden entrance on the narrative, followed by his equally rapid departure. Doesn't his tendency to pop into existence before evaporating again smack of the supernatural? Or is our author merely skimping out on the details?

It's not as if the narrator is usually so cagey about supernatural encounters. Why be ambiguous here when, immediately preceding this context, the text included a brief and curious encounter between Jacob and some explicitly divine beings?

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[18] Jacob Neusner, trans., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New Translation, Volume III* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), 119.

Jacob went on his way and ran across some *malakay elohim* [divine agents]. When Jacob

saw them, he said, "So this is *maḥaneh elohim* [where *elohim* camp(s)]." So he named

that place *Maḥamayim*.

Genesis 32:2-3

Why, in one instance, is the biblical narrator willing to have Jacob bump into some divine

characters when, in an episode mere verses later, the apparently divine "man" is never

specifically called as such?

Consider, as well, Jacob's name change. The attentive reader may notice that neither

Jacob nor the narrator adopts the name "Israel" with any particular enthusiasm—at least not

initially. In the following chapter, Jacob is not called Israel even once.[19] In chapter 34, the name

"Israel" is used by Jacob's sons, but only to refer to the household as a whole (Genesis 34:7). In

fact, the new name only seems to stick after chapter 35, when Jacob's name is changed to Israel

for a second time. In chapter 35, the change comes explicitly from a divine source—"El

Shaddai" (Genesis 35:11). "Jacob is your name," says God, "but you won't be called Jacob

anymore—because your name will be Israel" (Genesis 35:10). Following this second name

change, both Jacob and the narrator will begin to periodically use "Israel." Should we pay

particular attention to the fact that the name change only seems to stick when it comes from an

explicitly divine source? And why is this character so clearly supernatural when the *ish* of

Genesis 32 is left so ambiguous?

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[19] Though the patriarch does use the name as a part of an altar that he erects in the final verse.

The curious verb choice in this episode is also instructive. We are told that the two characters *abaq* in the darkness. Unfortunately, *abaq* only appears as a verb in this biblical context and, as such, is nigh impossible to translate. Elsewhere, the same tri-consonantal root—אבק—is used as a noun for dry dust. Is *abaq* biblical Hebrew's equivalent of the English idiom "a dust-up?" Or, as Rashi contended, is *abaq* based off an unrelated Aramaic loan word suggesting physical proximity?[20] For lack of a clear understanding, we have rather lamely translated the verb as "grappled." Why, we must ask, did the author see fit to use such an uncertain term? We can assume that the verb (אבק) plays upon the story's setting (the wadi יבק)—or vice versa. The verb may even play upon a rearranging of the consonants in Jacob's name—יעקב. But was the verb common in the parlance of archaic Hebrew? Apparently not common enough if it was already in need of explanation by the time of the rabbis. Perhaps the best we can say is that *abaq* is a shadowy verb—peculiar and difficult to translate cleanly—but one which quite clearly suggests visceral and physical activity.

Even more instructive is the narrator's use (or, as the case may be, overuse) of pronouns. Our translation of Genesis 32:23-33 remains faithful to the original Hebrew in this respect. Beginning in verse 25, all efforts towards clarity seem to vanish from the prose. Towards dawn, "he" concludes that *lo yakol lo*—that he cannot win out against "him." Who, we must ask, is who? Jacob's name will only reappear again at the end of the verse, forcing the reader to go back and piece together which he is which. After this verse finishes, the pronouns slip back into nonspecificity. Even the chapter's final verse teases the reader in this way—"because *he* touched Jacob's inner thigh" (Genesis 32:33). Who is he? Why, even here, does our narrator falter? Biblical prose may be sparse and evasive, but the befuddling pronoun game on display in

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[20] Avrohom Davis and Avrohom Kleinkaufman, trans., *The Metsudah Chumash/Rashi: Bereishis* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1991), 374.

Genesis 32:23-33 is nevertheless uncommon. The only similarly opaque usage of pronouns in

biblical narrative (of which we are aware) comes in an infamously strange episode following the

first encounter between Moses and the biblical God:

> And so, en route [to Egypt], in an inn, they came across YHWH, and he was looking to
>
> kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched it to his feet.
>
> She said, "Yes, you are a bridegroom of blood to me." He fell back from him then. She
>
> said, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."
>
> <div align="right">Exodus 3:24-26</div>

Who is he? How many of "him" are there? Which is the biblical God, which is apparently

Moses, and which is apparently Moses's son? Who seeks to kill who? Whose foreskin is being

held to whose feet? Who is *vayiref*—"shrinking back from" or, alternatively, "healing"—who?

The above narrative, seemingly slapped at random in the middle of Moses's story, has often been

accused of being an exceptionally archaic text inserted into the narrative, or perhaps is a longer

story that has been redacted to the point of unrecognizability.[21] Is the same true of our nighttime

episode of Genesis 32? Could it be that Genesis 32 has been redacted by sanctimonious scribes

as a way to limit God's anthropomorphism? Is the author being coy out of a sense of piety?

Apparently not, considering that even confessional traditions show no apparent qualms with

labeling the "man" of Genesis 32 as divine.

As we read through this episode, the prose itself begins to reflect the darkness in which

the story is set. Consider the rare verb *abaq*—to say nothing of other peculiar verbs like the

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[21] William H.C. Propp, *The Anchor Bible: Exodus 1-18* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

highly ambiguous *naga*—"to touch"—or the curious *yaqa* or *taqa*—one of which means

something like "dislocated" while the other means "to blow" into a trumpet. Consider that even

sarah—the verb contained within the name Israel is a rare and troublesome term. Consider, too,

the narrator's apparent inability to specify the pronouns of Jacob and the "man" as they grapple

together in the dark—as if their limbs are confused and indistinguishable through the inky

blackness. And consider, of course, that the narrator never clarifies the mysterious stranger's true

identity.

Once again, we find ourselves rolling around in the dust with a narrative pregnant with

ambiguity—a story whose text seems to raise more enticing questions than satisfactory answers.

We could, of course, compliment the author on their use of darkness as ambiguity and leave it at

that. The focus of this brief study is, after all, to point out some of the ways that biblical narrative

utilizes darkness to its literary advantage; not to shed light on all of the shadows that our author

has gone to great lengths to cast. By setting the very creation of Israel in the uncertain darkness

of night, the author has already crafted a compelling narrative. However, we would be negligent

if we did not note one final peculiar aspect of this narrative.

The narrator of Genesis 32 asks us to imagine Jacob entangled with his mysterious

companion "until the darkness lifted up" (Genesis 32:23). This is not, the reader realizes, some

minor sparring match. We must also realize, if he is grappling with him until dawn, Jacob must

know with whom he is entangled. The narrator never reports to the reader exactly who the "man"

is, but Jacob has had ample to time to shed light on the mystery. Jacob has been in prolonged

close contact with this stranger. If Jacob is entangled with God, or with his uncle Laban, or Esau,

or one of his sons, and if our author has a head on their shoulders, then surely Jacob must know,

even if we do not. Esau, we have been told, is red as clay, covered in a thick mantle of hair since

birth, cloaked in the aroma of the steppe (Genesis 25:25, 27:27). One imagines such an opponent would be rather distinctive. If the mysterious man is Laban—pursuing Jacob as he did in Genesis 31—then Jacob must realize with whom he is entangled, considering the two spent decades as members of the same household. And even if the "man" is God himself, wouldn't Jacob still recognize the voice? And, if all that weren't enough, doesn't the name that Jacob gives the place—*Peniel*—imply that Jacob's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and that he really did see his companion "face to face?"

At the end of Genesis 32, all signs point to the patriarch recognizing his encounter as divine. And yet in Genesis 33, when Jacob and Esau meet in the light of the day, Jacob implies that the "man" was his brother Esau—"Seeing your face," he tells Esau, "is like seeing the face of *elohim*" (Genesis 33:10). Isn't Jacob hinting that he knows that his midnight visitor was, in fact, his hairy twin brother? It is as if Jacob is somehow still indecisive—or as if Jacob has come to the startling conclusion that his gruff, red, hairy, huntsman of a brother is somehow indistinguishable from the biblical God. Could it be that the *ish* of Genesis 32 really is just some unnamed stranger, wandering through the darkness on the banks of the wadi? After all, in Genesis 37, mere chapters later, Joseph-ben-Israel will encounter just such a stranger (also simply called *ish*) as he travels north, searching for his brothers. The *ish* in Genesis 37 provides a wayward Joseph with directions towards his murderous brothers. Or, perhaps, the "man" of Genesis 32 is simply Jacob himself—grappling with his own fears in the lonely darkness by the wadi Jabbok. Who among us hasn't wrestled with ourselves when we cannot sleep?

What we can say for certain is that Jacob comes away from his midnight episode limping. For the rest of his narrative life, Jacob will never be the same. Day returns to the narrative and the reader now views a biblical character in, so to speak, a new light.

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In each of our narrative case studies, the sun has risen on a starkly different scene. In Genesis 14, by sunrise, Abram emerges victorious in his audacious military counterstrike, routing a formidable foe. In Judges 19, the sun comes up only to illuminate the horrors of the night before. In our final episode of Genesis 32, the dawn invites us to imagine Jacob—now called Israel—limping alone away from where he wrestled with God in the darkness. Each of our chosen contexts have illuminated certain aspects of biblical narrative. In Genesis 14, Abram uses darkness as a tool, while the author uses darkness to transform the reader's perception of Abram as a character. The author of Judges 19 holds night over the heads of the unnamed cast of characters—a looming threat highlighted by the author's repetitive use of the verb *luwn*. In the end, this threat of darkness finally expresses itself in unexpected and senseless violence. In Genesis 32, we see the fullest expression of how darkness can impact a narrative. Night dominates the prose itself, concealing and confusing not only the two characters but also the full details of their interaction.

Having mused about these narrative case studies, we reiterate a question that has operated as our quiet guide throughout these pages—namely, what do we gain by operating under the cover of darkness? What, to be more specific, does a narrative gain when the reader is left in the dark? What becomes of Abram the Hebrew when he finds himself in the darkness? Apparently, the night—the tool of Abram's military sagacity—shakes loose the pejorative "Hebrew" moniker and raises his status within the land of Canaan. Would we be so overly imaginative to suggest that the biblical authors might employ the same sagacity in their shadowy narratives? Are the contexts of Judges 19 and Genesis 32 particularly worthy of our close attention—to say nothing of night scenes that we have mentioned but not covered in detail?

Perhaps a fitting question to close with is not what we gain by night, but rather what we gain by the light of day. How wouldthe reader benefit from having a thorough light shed on the curious encounter in Genesis 32? What benefit would come from getting a good look at Jacob's companion? Would the reader like what they see? Would certainty prove appealing or even palatable? To stretch the metaphor even further, we may ask what might be gained by brightening the narrative of Judges 19. What do we gain by realizing the Levite's name? What could we gain by knowing the names of the full cast, or by knowing detailed descriptions of their appearances, backstories, and motivations? Is it the narrator's responsibility to tell us everything up front? Or, as in the case of the opening moments of *Hamlet*, do we learn more, gain more, by not knowing the identity of the ghost? Perhaps the reader is better off left in ambiguity. What, after all, does the light of day ask us to imagine if not the unnamed young woman, the victim of horrific violence, sprawled out on the threshold?

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