The Choreography of Cosmology: Angels and Bowing in Genesis 19

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Abstract

This essay uses literary analysis combined with other textual tools to partially analyze Genesis 19, steadfastly applying a choreography metaphor as a useful heuristic device. Essentially, the essay argues that the entire array of textual meanings contained in biblical texts can be viewed in much the same way as a dance choreographer might arrange the sequence of steps and moves for a scheduled dance performance. Here biblical writers and redactors are viewed as artful cosmological choreographers, arranging and rearranging the embedded philosophical, cultural, religious, historical and other meanings contained within biblical texts in order to convey specific messages to ancient biblical audiences, Hebrew and otherwise. The essay suggests that contemporary theologians and biblical scholars cannot adequately understand the subtle meanings of any biblical text without considering that such passages were designed in every way to entertain and elicit the participation of ancient readers and listeners steeped in an oral culture.

Keywords: choreography; Genesis 19; cosmology; angels; bowing; Sodom and Gomorrah; writers and redactors; biblical; literary; metaphor.

Introduction

This essay seeks to analyze Genesis 19 from the critical lenses of Reader Response theory, Rhetorical Analysis, and intimations of Form and Redaction Criticism.[1] Along the way,

[1] There are several excellent original resource materials and historical review articles of these particular types of methodologies for making a literary

we will attempt to apply other theological perspectives to try to understand this biblical text if it is at all possible. As well, an important part of our methodology will be to try to uncover any hidden or implicit meanings, taken for granted assumptions, and even missing information which may be embedded in the text itself.

To the extent possible, we shall employ the orienting metaphor of redactor as 'choreographer'[2] composing all the different parts of Genesis 19 in the same way that a professional might compose the sequence of steps and moves for a dance performance, with the added proviso that the dance performance is live and occurs in a theater with an interested and enthused audience present in their seats. In this case, the 'theater' is the Hebrew culture and society while the 'audience' is everyone in that culture and society listening to the Genesis 19 narrative, pagan and Hebrew alike.

As applied to biblical texts, this means that we should try to view passages in the Bible as a choreographer views movement

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analysis of biblical texts. Here literary analysis is combined with other methodologies to analyze Genesis 19. Robert Alter (1991) is very high on the list of respected biblical scholars who have effectively and successfully employed a literary methodological approach to understanding biblical text, in particular the Old Testament. (For great examples of some of the other methodologies employed here, see Perrin, 1969; McKnight, 1989; McKnight & Malbon, 1994; and Tan, 2001, among many others.)

[2] Basically, choreography is employed here as a metaphorical tool to organize and orient literary analysis of the specific biblical text under examination, Genesis 19. The argument is that biblical writers and redactors are literary artists of sorts, but more like artful assemblers and organizers rather than as artful creators. As choreographers artfully design the types and sequences of human movements in a ballet or other form of dance on a stage (even in figure skating) for an audience, so, too, do writers and redactors literally design the meaning contents of Biblical texts, not just the characters, plot, and so forth. However, the fundamental difference between a professional dance choreographer and a biblical writer or redactor as choreographer is that the latter assembles and arranges various types of meanings contained in biblical texts, not the physical movements of the human body assembled and sequenced to convey 'meaning'. A useful reference for the relationship between choreography and metaphor is Brandt, 2015.

and form in human dance. In other words, we have to view biblical passages (chapters, paragraphs, sentences, and so forth) as steps in the live theatrical dance of Hebrew culture and society. The text is dancing, so to speak, and in the dancing is the cosmological message, not a message scrawled upon papyrus. Like the different parts of a Shakespearian play, if the different parts are arranged one way versus another way, then perhaps this different arrangement will lead to a different meaning.

For the purposes of the present analysis, the 'performance' has to be envisioned as being a 'live' performance because at that time the bulk of biblical listeners were not readers. It was the time of oral culture, not literate culture, so biblical texts had to be composed and designed with this fact in mind. In other words, they had to be choreographed for listeners, particular types of listeners with particular religious values, beliefs, ideas, principles, and traditions, as well as particular views of the universe and the meaning of human existence.

Writers and redactors of biblical texts were faced with the problem of communicating complex theological and ethical issues to predominantly illiterate cultural members who were pretty much ear-dependent, so to speak. Moreover, since these writers and redactors were probably trying to contribute to the continued healthy growth of their culture and to reinforce the safety and security of all cultural members, they were also firmly interested in employing biblical texts in such ways as to establish, maintain, and promote the strength of social cohesion among the different members of that culture. Among other things, this probably means that they were overwhelmingly concerned with appealing to cosmological, religious, and philosophical assumptions and presuppositions contained in the belief system of cultural members as the background canvass of their choreography.

Lastly, since this particular 'choreographic' view of biblical text and textual components being employed here is relatively novel, the analyses of the various parts of Genesis 19 which follow

must necessarily be viewed as partial, tentative and exploratory. Still, a strong argument will be made here that 'modern' readers of ancient biblical texts need at least to attempt a similar sort of 'back-to-the-future' imaginary mental exercise even to approach an understanding of those texts from the point of view of biblical writers, redactors, and cultural audiences of that particular historical time period. With these preliminary introductory statements in mind, let us now move into analysis.

Two Angels Greet Lot in Sodom

The doom and gloom biblical narrative about the utter destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah[3] has been the stuff of legends in ancient literature across a great variety of cultures and the script of many contemporary books and movies across the world. The actual Genesis 19:1 text begins simple enough:

> "Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and ***bowed*** down with his face to the ground"

The first question that comes to mind here is the issue of how Lot knew that these two men were "angels". Were they dressed in long white robes? Did they have yellow glowing halos? Were they flying or floating or otherwise suspended in the air as angels are wont to do? Were they effervescent? Two men approach Lot's house in the evening, we know this much.

[3] There are several excellent scholarly and popular resources on the Genesis story about the divine destruction of the two 'cities on the Plain', as it were, Sodom and Gomorrah. To this day, those two cities have been strongly associated with anal sexual relations between human beings, especially males, and between human beings and animals. Some key scholarly and historical references are: Collins and Scott, 2013; Fields, 1997; Harland, 1943; Howard, 1984; Loader, 1990; van Hatem, 1981. Archaeologists have recently discovered the precise location of these two ancient biblical cities, and scientists have made many important discoveries which tend strongly to confirm the biblical narratives referring to them.

Somehow, Lot knows they are angels, but readers aren't really told how Lot arrived at this conclusion logically. Now, something interesting appears to be happening here, believe it or not.

Why would listeners or readers NOT be told how Lot would just happen to be sitting there "in the gate of Sodom" (whatever that means), glance up, see two men coming towards him in the darkness of evening when no one else in the city is around to see it, and he just happens to know they are angels? In fact, not only does Lot know it, he knows it enough to "bow down with his face to the ground", as Genesis specifies. Now, that reaction is either baldly fictitious or there are fairly obvious and powerful signals coming from the two men that they are "angels"! Yet, listeners and readers are NOT told about any of these signals. Fascinating.

Therefore, right from the beginning of this story biblical writers and redactors appear to be intentionally leaving out important information that is essential for a proper rational and thorough understanding of this biblical text. Why would men smart enough to write and redact spiritually powerful and profound biblical text that is studied culture-wide and employed in every nook and cranny of Hebrew institutions forget to include such essential details to a highly significant piece of biblical text? Even if it wasn't intentional neglect or ignorance, the fact of the matter is that it is a crucial piece of detail that is left absent right at the beginning of the Genesis narrative in the Hebrew Bible.

What's more, it just happens to be a piece of detail that is infused with a great amount of religious meaning. After all, we are talking about "angels" here, not horses. Not only are angels significant from within the Judaic and Christian religious traditions, but they are also essential components of many other religious faiths around the world even at that time. The English word 'angel', for example, comes from the Greek 'angelos', which is the Greek translation of a Hebrew word that means 'messenger'. In the Christian celestial or heavenly

hierarchy (yes, we have a 'hierarchy' or a stratified system of power and authority even in heaven, apparently), 'angels' are considered to be the lowest of the nine orders.

Even then, however, angels also appear in Zoroastrianism and in the Islamic religious traditions as well as in the Judaic tradition after the Hebrew people left Babylon (circa 450 BC), as they were indeed present in the Babylonian religious culture itself. Angels are even often depicted in ancient Asian cultures as being the guardians of humans. And just think, this is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the presence and role of angels in many religious traditions in the world history of humanity. Clearly, then, angels are indeed a significant component of many religious traditions, and they have held this position for a very long time.

The Choreography of Cosmology Within Biblical Text

So, then, again, why would highly intelligent, religiously observant, highly reverent biblical writers and redactors extremely knowledgeable about the history of Hebrew culture and religious traditions fail to provide essential details about angels in the narrative of Genesis 19 to a largely illiterate audience of Jews and pagans especially when the concept of angels plays such a huge role in that religious tradition? Perhaps the answer to that dumbfounding riddle is not so dumbfounding after all.

Perhaps it is to be found in the taken-for-granted cosmological presuppositions and philosophical assumptions contained in the Judaic religious tradition itself. The point is that it is highly likely that these biblical writers and redactors are behaving as good dance choreographers can be expected to behave when they are imagining and then structuring the movements and forms of dancers for a planned performance. They are organizing the various sequences and patterns of those human movements in such a way as to convey specific messages of meaning during that performance.

Of course, NOT moving is a movement, so to speak, and depending where the absence of movement is placed in the sequence and organization of a specific arrangement of movements, even that lack of movement will be designed to convey only a specific range of meanings that fit into THAT particular arrangement. The argument here is that biblical writers and redactors engage in the same type of behavior, but only at a much more sophisticated level.

Why would they be considered more sophisticated? After all biblical writers and redactors (not to mention everybody else living at that time) belonged to 'ancient' or 'primitive' time periods in the history of humanity on Earth, with all the hidden pejorative meanings attached to those labels when intelligent professionals from so-called 'modern' times look back to try to understand that history. As it happens, often times 'modern' religious scholars employ these labels containing implicit pejorative meanings to try to understand biblical passages, effectively projecting contemporary meanings into those passages. Unfortunately, in doing so they tend to gloss over or more likely undervalue any bits of high-level raw intelligence those passages may contain.

If it is true that biblical writers and redactors are highly intelligent composers and arrangers of meanings, then details included and not included in biblical narratives are part and parcel of an artful choreography or arrangement of meanings assembled in particular ways at least partly to directly engage the approval, participation and entertainment of ancient readers and listeners steeped within an oral culture for the purpose of emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and socio-cultural fulfillment and development. What they are doing, arguably, is artfully assembling the concepts, ideas, meanings, cosmological presuppositions, philosophical assumptions, and other important details of biblical narratives in a well-choreographed script, more or less.

For entertainment purposes and to engage the audience's personal and emotional participation with the biblical narrative,

writers and redactors are playing with religious concepts and ideas in the way that choreographers play with the movement and form of human dancers to convey particular meanings. Most importantly for our purposes here, biblical writers and redactors can convey a narrative choosing to include certain components attached with certain meanings of that narrative and NOT to include other components attached with certain meanings of that narrative in a particular arrangement.

Hence the missing details about the angels is not so missing after all. It goes without saying that those details of religious tradition that are chosen to be included and NOT included within a particular narrative by biblical writers and redactors can be related to any part of that religious tradition. There are literally no restrictions upon the selection and arrangement of those details containing particular meanings by those writers and redactors save their own imagination, emotional development, intelligence, spiritual attachments, religious knowledge and experience, and artful capacities.

As long as they stay within the parameters of Hebrew religious traditions, then the imagination is allowed to run as wild and as free as skill and ability allows. However, one overarching, all-important, all-encompassing part of that religious tradition that must be respectfully observed and reinforced is the world view or cosmology which provides its foundational orienting principle. The particular cosmology of the Hebrew culture is what ties all the different narratives in the Bible together into a coherent system of concepts, ideas, beliefs, and values.

Obviously, hidden assumptions and presuppositions about “angels” play a central role in Judaic cosmology or world view. So, here in the very first passage of Genesis 19 we see biblical writers directly engaging the emotional participation of readers and listeners by artfully leaving out important details about the two angels that come to visit Lot because they know that they can be expected to fill in the missing details themselves in ways consistent with Hebrew cosmology. Like choreographers,

biblical writers and redactors find ingenious ways to engage and excite audience participation.

Bowing As Part of Biblical Choreography

Having provided a more extensive exploratory description of what it means to view biblical writing and redacting as 'choreography', let us now move on in our analysis of Genesis 19. In the same first passage, it will be noted that Lot greets those two angels by 'bowing down' with his 'face to the ground'. Why not just say, "Hello, how are you?" Why bow? Why not just salute Roman style? There were many different ways to greet people even in biblical times and even within Hebrew culture. In fact, is bowing the typical Hebrew way to greet angels or anybody else well-respected, reverently respected? If it is bowing out of respect, then there are surely different degrees of bowing to show respect.

In the Western world bowing the head takes on a variety of meanings, with men bowing waist up straight hands at the side while women bow similarly but with clasp hands held in the front. It can take the form of a greeting pure and simple, a sign of respect, an expression of deference, a showing of sincerity and humility, an apology, a thankfulness, even an expression of remorse. In European countries, it is a gesture quite typical of nobility and the aristocracy.

However, in Japanese culture bowing means getting on hands and knees with face to the ground, essentially expressing a plea for one's life or begging for one's life**.** It is very prominent in Korea, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Nepal, and India, where it can be done standing or kneeling. A simple nod of the head is the most minimal form of bowing. But when the hands or entire body touch the ground such as in kneeling, genuflection, or prostration, this reflects deeper levels of meaning with important personal and especially social consequences.

Generally, in religious situational contexts bowing tends to be a form of worship or veneration. In Sikhism, adherents are only allowed to bow to messengers of god, the Gurus, because the

word of god is believed to have been written by past living. This means that Sikhs are not allowed to bow to any living person. In Shintoism, it is done when visiting a shrine that is believed to contain a deity. Upon entering the Shinto shrine, a person will clap loudly or ring a bell intended to attract the attention of the enshrined deity, then clasp their hands and bow.

In Buddhism, bowing is viewed as a common form of worship where casual practitioners and lay people bow fully prostrated 108 times daily, while fervent Zen Buddhist bow fully prostrated 1,080 times daily! In Hinduism, bowing and kneeling down to touch the feet (especially of an elder or respected person) is an expression of deference. In traditional Hinduism, a child is culturally pressured to bow down to their parents, teachers and elders during formal ceremonies and even casual settings.

Interestingly enough, in Islam there are basically only two types of bowing: the Sujud and the Ruku. The Sujud involves full prostration to the ground during daily prayers (salat) in which the Moslem god, Allah, is praised and glorified, meaning both hands, knees, all toes, forehead, and nose all touching the ground. The Ruku is simply bowing down in the standing position during daily prayers. But the bowing down means bending over completely and putting hands on the knees, making sure to remain in that posture during the entire time that the Moslem god, Allah, is praised and gloried. It is important to note that, like for the Sikhs, Moslems are not allowed to bow to a living human being with the intention to worship. It is only permitted to bow in worship to Allah. Even bowing as a form of greeting or expression of thanks or respect without intent to worship is not permitted. In fact, bowing performed under conditions not permitted is considered as a punishable shirk or major sin in the Islamic religious tradition!

In Christianity, on the other hand, the act of bowing takes on entirely new, independent meanings although dimly related in some aspects to some of the previous religious traditions. Members of many different Christian denominations are taught to bow at the very mention of the name of “Jesus” both inside

or outside of a church in deference to a passage in the Bible which states:

> "For this reason, also God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2: 9-11).

Here the apostle Paul is quoting from a passage about bowing in the Old Testament, Isaiah 45: 23: "That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance". Notice it is the knee that is bowing, not some part of the upper torso as in modern times.

It also states in Romans 14:11 in simple reference to bowing (as it does at many other places throughout both the Old and New Testament): "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God". Bowing the head at the name of Jesus was mandated by the Second Council of Lyon especially during the sacred mysteries of the Mass as well as the eighteenth canon of the Church of England (mother Church of the Anglican Communion), the Lutheran Churches, the Methodist Church, and the Roman Catholic Church.

In Christian liturgy, bowing is a definite expression of respect and deference, when bowing is usually done when passing in front of an altar or at particular times during the service when the name of Jesus Christ is mentioned, sometimes as a substitution for genuflection. In the Eastern Orthodox religious tradition, there are several different degrees of bowing each with a separate meaning and occurring according to very strict rules as to when and at what time they should be used during the liturgy. As well, in the Roman Catholic Mass, almost all the different degrees of bowing are prescribed at different points such as profound bow, full prostration, slight bow of the head during the Creed, genuflection, and kneeling.

Finally, in Judaism as in Christianity, bowing is done as an expression of respect only at certain points in Jewish services. Although it is not part of modern Jewish service, kneeling was part of the regular service in the Temple of Jerusalem in traditional Judaic liturgy. There are different degrees of bowing at different points in modern Jewish liturgy, from simple bows from the waist to bending the knees to bowing the waist to straightening up when the name 'Adonai' (God) is uttered. At the conclusion of certain parts of the services, all members bow together to acknowledge thanks. Kneeling is retained in modern services, but only during the High Holy Days such as Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. Total prostration bowing was only very common among many Jewish communities until the Middle Ages, after which the practice halted.

The Meaning of Bowing in Babylon

Even in the Babylonian[4] religious tradition, a tradition which Hebrews were well familiar with historically speaking, bowing to god (or the gods, as the case may be) was not just a simple voluntary form of physiological subservience. Quite to the contrary, it was often a matter of life and death. The Bible in The Book of Daniel (3: 1-25) makes very clear what bowing was like in the Babylonian Empire. When Nebuchadnezzar became king, he gave orders to construct a monumental image of the Babylonian God, Marduk, that he set up on the plain of Dura so that all members of the Empire could have access. He sent word to all the governors, prefects, treasurers, counselors, magistrates, and all the other rulers of his provinces, and their peoples, to assemble at the image.

[4] Most religious scholars agree that Babylon played an especially crucial role in Hebrew history, culture, and cosmology, to such an extent that it can be asserted with confidence that basic understanding of the religious dimension of the Hebraic people is hardly possible without having first achieved a comprehensive and comparative understanding of Babylonian history. Excellent resources abound on Babylonian history and the role of religious worship in Babylonian culture. (See especially Kriwaczek, 2012; Mark, 2018; and, of course, the Hebrew Bible.)

Then where everyone was assembled at the image, a herald proclaimed loudly to them: "To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire". Clearly, even back in Babylonian times, not bowing could have devastating consequences.

Back to Lot's Bowing: So, What Kind of Bow Was It?

So, then, as can be clearly surmised from this rudimentary descriptive sketch of the human act of 'bowing' in several different religious and cultural traditions, Lot's simple act of bowing to the two angels approaching his dwelling is not so simple at all. Why did he bow the way it was described in Genesis 19:1 that he bowed? It is simply not known and not recorded. What kind of bow was it? That's not known either because we don't know if he got on his knees or not, or if he simply nodded his head slightly, or if he bowed from the waist up, or if his hands stayed at his side or touched the ground or even touched the two angels in any way, or…. The only details we are provided with is that he "bowed down …. with his face down to the ground".

What exactly does "face down to the ground" mean? Does it mean a slight nod of the head downwards face looking at the ground? Does it mean a full bending down from the waist up with the face only looking at the ground? Does it mean, as it does in the Islamic religious tradition, fully prostrate on the knees with hands on the ground stretched out in front of the head with the nose of the face actually touching the ground? From the above sketchy history of bowing, we know that there are several different degrees and types of 'bowing' in several different religious traditions for several different reasons.

Further, it is not known exactly what is meant by the word "ground" because ostensibly Lot was sitting on the porch or "gate" of his dwelling, not the ground per se because we know from later in the same chapter the door was directly behind him. This brings up the important issue of exactly where Lot was "sitting" when the two "angels" approached him "in the evening" (what time it was exactly, however, we don't know at all, but the implication is that it was dark outside).

There are so many obvious details about this first passage in Genesis 19 that are left out or ignored or unspecified that it could easily lead a skeptical reader to the conclusion that it was either imagined or done intentionally to elicit the active emotional and religious participation of the biblical audience readership and listenership by encouraging them to fill in the missing pieces to the detail puzzle constructed by biblical writers and redactors.

Treating Biblical Details Like Puzzle Pieces

Now, it is probably safe to say at this point in the essay that enough puzzles have been identified in Genesis 19 just from a cold rational disinterested point of view without a priori theoretical or methodological modeling to illustrate the veracity and applicability of a choreography metaphor to biblical passages in general, let alone the particular passage in question. Nevertheless, the above analyses and commentaries forcefully demonstrate just how artfully sophisticated biblical writers and redactors really were. They were ingeniously capable of assembling details of events, characters, human activities, concepts, ideas, beliefs, values, and literally anything capable of transporting meaning including components of profound cosmologies and philosophies in the same way that Mozart might use musical notes to construct a symphony or Shakespeare use character dialogues to create theatrical plays. This would be the thrust of the theological argument presented here.

Theologians need to keep in the forefront of their minds that Hebrew literature is designed in every way to use and not use Scriptural details to entertain and to elicit ancient readers and listeners steeped in the entrails of an oral culture. Biblical writers and redactors were writing text puzzles assuming that ancient Hebrew readers and listeners could fill in the missing pieces to those puzzles. Contemporary theologians using literary theoretical models to understand Scriptural text need to bear in mind that biblical writers and redactors themselves were doing a much more sophisticated version of such a theoretical approach more than 2,000 years ago!

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