

Where Angels Fearlessly Tread Mari Insights on Genesis 19

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Facts may be true, but they are not truths
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Cities of wickedness

There have been many novels, poems, and movies about Sodom and Gomorrah, two of five “cities of the plain” (Gen 13:12; 19:29) that God destroyed. Some of these contributions are very metaphoric, confirming Proust’s thesis that Sodom is part of our own realities. Most essays, however, exploit the more lurid details that are found about them in the Bible.¹ The Bible itself has many allusions to these cities, mostly to cite them as example of deserved destruction;² but it is Sodom that earns the fullest attentions, its sins so manifest as to seldom require explanation. Isaiah (1:9–10; 3:9) says that it was oppression and injustice. Jeremiah (23:14) accuses it of adultery, for him a metaphor for idolatry. Ezekiel indicts its pride and sloth (Ezek 16:49–50). The Book of Genesis has the fullest portrayal of Sodom, yet without a consistent point of view. In Gen 13, Sodom sits in a luxuriant plain, “like the garden of Yahveh or like the land of Egypt” (13:10), so a reasonable place for Lot to choose when separating from Abram. In Gen 14, its king is beholden to Abram for rescuing him from eastern invaders. In Gen 18, God shares with Abraham his intent to punish the town, “its outcry” being so great; but only in Gen 19 is there a thicker context for its sin.³

¹ Fine discussions and decent bibliographies on these issues are gathered in Noort, E.; Tigchelaar, E. (eds.). *Sodom’s Sin. Genesis 18–19 and Its Interpretations*. Leiden, 2004.

² Isa 1:9; 13:19; Jer 23:14; 49:18; Amos 4:11; Zeph 2:9; Matt 10:15; Rom 9:29; Jude 7.

³ In Hebrew lore, the events are set as a prequel to Ammonite and Moabite origins.

Entering Sodom

As is well known, God sends two angels to Sodom to test whether the outcry is justified (Gen 18:21–22). The two are heading toward the public square to overnight when Lot stops them at the city gate, urging them toward his house for food and shelter. While Lot attends to them, the entire population comes to his home, demanding, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us **ונדעה אתם**.” The last expression is widely translated as demanding sexual gratification, “unnatural lust” as Westermann calls it;⁴ and in the Jerusalem Bible we get the full frontal version, “so we can have intercourse with them.” Over the centuries, the debate about the intended crime has shifted from homosexuality (a desire for a person of the same sex), to rape (an abusive and violent act).⁵ Yet, the expected language in Biblical Hebrew for such violent acts should have been **לענות** or **להחלל ב+** rather than **ידע את**, which in Hebrew lore is about the sexual contact that a man has with a woman.⁶ In contrast, there are many innocent passages where men are said to “know others”: thus, when Jacob asks the shepherds of Haran (Gen 29:5) whether they know Laban son of Nahor (**הידעתם את לבן בן נחור**), he is not likely to be prying into their sexual habits.⁷ Perhaps it is for this reason that in the Targumim and rabbinic lore the abuse of hospitality is Sodom’s most blatant failure.⁸

⁴ Gen 12–36. *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, 1985, p. 301. The JPS gives a softer rendering, “that we may be intimate with them.”

⁵ See Vandermerch, P. *Sodomites, Gays, and Biblical Scholars: A Gathering Organized by Peter Damian*. Noort; Tigchelaar (eds.). *Sodom’s Sin*, p. 149–151. When Josephus (Ant I/11, 3) and Philo (de Abrahamo 26, 134–136) blamed Sodom of perversion, they were likely polemicizing against their own social milieu.

⁶ Also instructive is Judg 19:24–25. When men of Gibeah described as idle (**בני-ביעל**) come inquiring after a Levite sheltering with an Ephraimite resident, the host offers them to “abuse” his “virgin” daughter and the Levite’s concubine (**וענו אותם**). However, when either the host or the Levite (the text is ambiguous) brings out his concubine, the men are said to **וידעו אותה ויחללו**, “they molested her sexually,” obviously a circumlocution for **לענות את**. Note, however, that at Judges 19:22 the Hebrew simply has the verb **ידע** without **את**, an idiom that connotes sexuality only in contexts that are obvious.

⁷ He said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” And they said, “Yes, we do.” See also Exod 1:8, “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph”; Exod 5:2, “But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the LORD that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go.’”

⁸ See M. W. Toney’s entry “Sodom and Gomorrah,” pp. 720–721, in Jeffrey, D. L. (ed.). *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Grand Rapids, 1992;

While it would be useless to absolve Sodom of wickedness, nonetheless the exact nature of its offense is extrapolated mostly from Lot's words and actions. We are told that when its citizens demand to know who the men at his place were, Lot comes out of his compound, locking the gate behind him. He addresses them as "brothers" when he, a *gēr*, was not a full citizen. Lot warns them against doing evil (אל-ינא אהי חרעו). He then offers them his two daughters, "who have never known a man," to treat as they pleased but to leave his guest alone. Their reaction is interesting: they do not wait for him to shove his daughters out so they can abuse them (as do the men of Gibeah in Judg 19); rather, they mock him for presuming to judge them and move to force themselves inside his home.⁹ It is at this point that the angels prove their mettle. They magically yank him back through the gate, strike the mob with night blindness, and transport him magically beyond the city walls.¹⁰ The remaining episodes, including Lot's escape to Zoar, the destruction of Sodom, the petrification of his wife, and the incest of his daughters, are too well known to warrant more comments here.

Still, we might ask: what really happened at Lot's gate? Lot is what one might charitably label an "unreliable character," at least because his words or deeds do not match either the point of view or the moral stance of the narrator. To begin with, his guests, angels who must certainly

Florentino García Martínez: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Targumim, pp. 83–96 in Noort; Tigchelaar (eds.), *Sodom's Sin*. Brief and cogent reviews of the issues raised in the Sodom and Gibeah incidents are in Martti Nissinen's *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World. A Historical Perspective*. Minneapolis, 1998, pp. 45–52, and in Frederick E. Greenspahn. Homosexuality and the Bible. *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly* (2002):39–40. For cuneiform evidence, see Jerrold S. Cooper. Buddies in Babylonia: Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Mesopotamian Homosexuality in Tzvi Abusch (ed.). *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen*. Winona Lake, 2002, pp. 73–85. Citing R. A. Wright's 1989 Yale dissertation (*Establishing Hospitality in the Old Testament: Testing the Tool of Linguistic Pragmatics*), Victor Matthews raises the issue whether Lot and the people of Sodom simply misunderstood each other since they were acting from opposite ownership of citizenship; Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19. *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (1992):5–6.

⁹ The narrator dramatically stages v. 19. He has the people of Sodom first address Lot ("Stand back"), then ridicule him among each other ("This fellow came here as an alien, and now imagines he can rule"), before warning him ("we will treat you worse than them (or because of them)").

¹⁰ See Stol, M. Blindness and Night-blindness in Akkadian. *JNES* 45 (1986): 295–299 and Markham, J. Geller's review of Pablo Herrero, La thérapie mésopotamienne. *BiOr* 43 (1986):741–743.

know what they say, attributed sons among those that belong to Lot's household (Gen 19:12).¹¹ A couple of verses later (19:14) we discover that his daughters were not likely the virgins he claimed to be, since he converses with sons-in-law, who "were married to his daughters" (19:14).¹² When he alerts these sons-in-law of the impending cataclysm, they instantly dismiss his word; perhaps they knew something about his trustworthiness. Nothing in previous or later Biblical narratives about Lot improves the frailty of his judgment.¹³

Entering Zimri-Addu's Qaṭṭunan

All this raises a question about what happens when men of seemingly uncertain background show up unannounced near a town, and this led me to inspect ARM 27, 116, a letter sent to Zimri-Lim of Mari, with contents piquant enough for Jean-Marie Durand to compare them with events at the siege of Jericho and for Sophie (Démare) Lafont to use them in evaluating the status of the outsider in the Old Babylonian period.¹⁴ The author of this letter is Zimri-Addu, a man with proven standing in

¹¹ Had rape of males been at stake, presumably the sons might have been better baits than the daughters Lot offered the crowd at his door.

¹² There is a problem about the daughters and the relations they might have had with the sons-in-law. Rashi (among others) assumes Lot has only two daughters who were engaged to marry. Yet in v. 14 לקחי בנותי (lit., "takers of his daughters") that follows on הנהני "sons-in-law" can only be about marriage, as is the case whenever לקח "to take," is in similar contexts, whether or not it is construed with the word אשה, "woman, wife"; see Gen 34:16, where Jacob proposes tribal confederation with the Shechem upon taking and giving daughters.

Others imagine that the two daughters that Lot offered the posse, and who later bore him Moab and Ben-Ammi (vv. 37–38), were in addition to those who perished in the conflagration with their husbands. The TNK assumed the last was the case and cites the angels as urging Lot to take along his "remaining" daughters, a gratuitous expansion of the text. Everything is possible, of course; but in reading narratives one should refrain from introducing characters not explicitly provided by their authors.

¹³ Lot's lack of judgment is furthered by a paralysis of resolve (v. 16) and by his inability to accept the hazard of his situation or to distance himself from the scene of the cataclysm (vv. 18–20). That this whole incident is played as prequel to the sordid goings on in the cave of Zoar (vv. 30–38) fits the overall characterization of Lot as achieved in chapter 19.

¹⁴ Durand, J.-M. *Réalités amorrites et traditions bibliques*. *RA* 92 (1998):11–14; Sophie (Démare) Lafont. *Le roi, le juge et l'étranger à Mari et dans la Bible*. *RA* 92 (1998):171–181; *Femmes, Droit et Justice dans l'antiquité orientale. Contribution à l'étude du droit pénal au Proche-Orient ancien* (OBO 165). Fribourg, 1998, p. 424.

Qaṭṭunan province if only because he had good access to clay and to scribes. Like many of the principals in the Mari archive, he had many duties, among them leading troops to allies, carrying diplomatic missions, and doing everything to enhance his value to the king.¹⁵ Since he traded on confidence, Zimri-Addu was not beyond snitching on colleagues (ARM 27, 117),¹⁶ and belittling potential competitors (ARM 27, 152). In turn, he is disparaged by them (ARM 27, 151; see ARM 26, 380). His complaints about being denied land or water rights (ARM 27, 137–138) show him combative; but also betray the lack of clout to give him results. He adopts a chummy tone with the king's private secretary (ARM 27, 125; see 137) and fearlessly attacks some of the king's most trusted officers, such as the *merḫûm* Ibal-pi-El (ARM 27, 152) as well as Zakira-Ḫammu (ARM 27, 108–109, 137–138), who may have been his immediate superior at Qaṭṭunan. At one point, however, he complains of being shunned by his colleagues, admitting that he was “moving about like a cursed man” (ARM 27, 151:102). I think we will soon learn why.

¹⁵ On Zimri-Addu, see M. Birot's comments to ARM 27, 99–172 (*Correspondance des gouverneurs de Qaṭṭunân*. Paris, 1993), as well as his introductory remarks in ARM 27, 26–29, 30–36. Additional Qaṭṭunan documents are published by J.-M. Durand. *Administrateurs de Qaṭṭunân*. FM 2 (1994):83–114 and Isabelle Guillot. *Les gouverneurs de Qaṭṭunân: nouveaux textes*. FM 3 (1997):271–290 (FM 3 131–133). A Zimri-Addu makes *sugâgûlum* payment on 14 vi in a year (“Lions of Dagan”) as yet not set securely within Zimri-Lim's year-formulas: FM 10 (2008):65.

Fine overviews of Zimri-Addu and his career are in B. Lion's *Les gouverneurs provinciaux du royaume de Mari à l'époque de Zimri-Lim*. *Amurru* 2 (2001):167–171 and in Nele Ziegler's review of M. Birot's ARMT 27 (*AJO* 46–47 (1999–2000):324–336). It is not yet settled whether our Zimri-Addu is the same as the leader of Mari troops during Hammurabi's Larsa's campaign. Birot argues (ARMT 27, p. 30, n. 153) for them being the same because echoes of the same complaints against a Zakira-Ḫammu are found in both sets of Zimri-Addu's letters (27, 108–109 and 137–138).

¹⁶ Zimri-Addu sends ARM 27, 117 to the king:

‘Yatarum, the son of Larum, conveyed 10 pounds of tin to the land of Idamaraš with which to purchase slaves. He gave half a pound of silver to Šubram. When Yatarum's messenger realized that there were no slaves for purchase, he left this tin, as well as his (Yatarum's) seal, in Der with Bašsum (a few broken lines). I wrote to Bašsum the following, “This being a palace matter, 2 of your colleagues should take the 10 pounds of tin that Yatarum's young servant left with you, as well as his seal, and convey them to my lord.” This is what I wrote, but so far my messenger has not returned (any response), one way or another. I am now writing my lord and he should write me however he wishes it done.’

In the middle years of Zimri-Lim's reign, when Zimri-Addu was carrying out his duties, Qaṭṭunan was apparently no longer the forsaken spot that an earlier governor had whined about.¹⁷ Three major officials (La'um, Zakira-Hammu, and Zimri-Addu) overlapped in their efforts to keep it under Mari's control. One of Zimri-Addu's jobs was chief of human resources for work in the district, and as such it involved him in policing it.¹⁸ In ARM 27, 121, he conveys to Mari a person his guards kidnapped with the proviso that the man must not be allowed to return home.¹⁹ In ARM 27, 118, he finds reason to arrest a man who somewhat stupidly

¹⁷ Akšak-magir sends Zimri-Lim FM 2, 88–89; Heimpel, W. *Letters to the King of Mari* (MC 12). Winona Lake, 2003, p. 516:

'Ever since my lord has selected (lit. "touched") me in Samanum, I continued to listen to my lord's utterances (lips), erring neither by commission or omission. In fact, my lord had shown me benevolence. In an unfortunate way, it is as if I had betrayed my lord's (secret) order and, by holding me responsible, my lord had sent me to this plot of land. But once in Qaṭṭunan, however, I did not complain. My lord must not judge me unreliable. When nothing was there, ever since I arrived here, I have plowed 100 acres of land; moreover, I brought together a scattered palace (staff).

Now then, I keep hearing about the voyage of my lord to Kaḫat. I fear that my lord might rely on the Qaṭṭuna(n) palace and not have provisions for travel and lodging brought here. There is no brewer here and there are no millers ... My lord must not transfer me for no fault and replace me with Maprakum. My lord should send an answer to my tablet, whatever the decision, so that I could get to leave.'

¹⁸ During the last days of Zimri-Lim, policing movement in and out of Mari was the job of Manatan, who left us a small dossier; see Ozan, G. *Les lettres de Manatân*. FM 3 (1997):291–305 and earlier Ziegler, N. *Deux esclaves en fuite à Mari*. FM 2 (1994):11–21. Manatan reports on people passing through and forwards news he gathers on interviews. Ambassadors and messengers who lack proper documentation or who show up unexpectedly create the most problem for him, as is clear from the series of documents FM 3, 147–149. It is interesting that the Mari front office kept track of where its messengers were at any one time, as suggested by A.3889 (Lafont, B. *Le fonctionnement de la poste et le métier de facteur d'après les textes de Mari*. Young, G. D. et al. (eds.). *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday*. Bethesda, 1997, p. 327).

¹⁹ "... I am sending along to my lord this man along with Bali-Addu, chief for the squad I have dispatched to seize him; my lord should question this man. This man should be guarded and must not post a notice to his land (*naš[partam] ana mātišu lā ušešši*). I am writing to my lord as servant."

admits to have kidnapped people for a foreign ruler.²⁰ Zimri-Addu was by no means unique in displaying strong-arm tactics, for there is a fair amount of exchanges in the archives in which either the king or his administrators speak of ridding themselves of particular individuals, the notion being that a certain degree of lawless behavior was acceptable, especially when perpetrated by the state.²¹ Officials working in the boonies may even make a business of it as long as they were discreet so as not to harm the king's political standing.²²

Occasionally, such undertakings take unexpected turns and in our letter we find Zimri-Addu trying to deflect potential reproach because he

²⁰ The story is picked up following lines 1':

'(Ibal-pi-El) wrote to Sammetar (likely the king of Ašnakkum), saying "(Išḫi-Lim) kidnapped in Ḥamiqatum, a land under treaty with us. Now if you expect my satisfaction (lit: satiety), look after the welfare of those young men and release them. In a land under treaty ..." This is the note that Ibal-pi-El wrote to Sammetar and Sammetar released them. When these young men saw Išḫi-Lim on the road, they led him to me, saying "This man kidnapped us from Ḥamiqatum." But he denied (knowing) these young men, saying, "I have not kidnapped you." But in an aside he told me, "We are three men and Sammetar sent us to kidnap these young men." I had this man thrown in jail. I am now writing my lord; my lord should write me as he pleases (rest fragmentary).'

²¹ See the two articles: Bonnetterre, D. The Structure of Violence in the Kingdom of Mari. *The Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies Bulletin* 30 (1995):11–22 and idem. Surveiller, punir et se venger: la violence d'état à Mari. *MARI* 8 (1997): 537–561. Sophie Lafont studies a number of OB documents with the theme: Enlèvement et séquestration à l'époque paléo-babylonienne. *FM* 6 (2002):69–88.

²² Governors can confess to having murderous thoughts. Kibri-Dagan writes his king (ARM 3, 36 = LAPO 17, 704, pp. 451–452):

'Šura-Ḥammu stopped me just at the city gate and told me the following, "As of now, you are in control of my estate in my own town. You seized my servant; but just now my lord supported me to return my servant. So give me back my servant; turn him back for him to serve me."

This is what this man said to slight me. Now I was just about to take hold of this man and send him to hell but had respect for my lord. For this reason, I did not touch this man, and said nothing hurtful to his face. Yet this man did slight me, and said incredible things to my face. Now, I am writing to my lord so that he can do what suits him.'

Šura-Ḥammu is the Yaminite leader of the Amnanum tribe; see Bardet, G. Textes No 1 à 90, pp. 18–20 in ARM 23 as well as Durand, J.-M. Peuplement et sociétés à l'époque amorrite (I): Les clans bensim'alites. *Amurru* 3 (2004):168.

blundered badly when he detained two men moving into Qaṭṭunan. His letter is remarkably assertive, given the error to which he readily admits. Yet because letter writing is also a form of storytelling, Zimri-Addu needed to give structure and causality to the events that were mishandled, intimating that their occurrence was inevitable and therefore excusable. To gain praise rather than blame, he must also suggest to the king corrective acts that will seem undemanding but also prudent.

The arrival of Numḥâ tribesmen

ARM 27, 116 opens, as do so many others, with assurance that everything is under control, with Qaṭṭunan safe and sound. (See Appendix for a translation of the letter.) Two Numḥâ tribesmen reached the city gate and were moving toward the town's center (Qaṭṭunan *rebūtim*). Zimri-Addu had them picked up and when they were brought to him in the dead of the night, he had them thrown in the *nepārum*. Let us call this *nepārum*, "jail"; but especially when it is in the singular, the word in the Mari records evokes a Guantanamo Bay where people can be made to disappear.²³ Nothing is particularly striking here since local authorities

²³ References to *nepārum* in the singular gravitate to the meaning "prison," a transitional place in which to process undesirables or keep them out of circulation while matters are pending. In the plural (*nepārātum*), it refers to workplaces. (Unfortunately, there are exceptions both ways.) On the *nepārum* see the comments of Durand in LAPO 18 (pp. 250–258) and those of Heimpel (*Letters*, p. 208), as well as the articles of M.-F. Scoufflaire: *Quelques cas de détentions abusives à l'époque du royaume de Mari. Akkadica* 53 (1987):25–35 and *Premières réflexions sur l'organisation des "prisons" dans le royaume de Mari*. Lebeau, M.; Talon, P. (eds.). *Reflets des Deux Fleuves. Volume de Mélanges Offerts à André Finet* (Akkadica Sup. 6). Leuven, 1989, pp. 157–160. Add now FM 9, 3:27 and 28:17. Whether or not these *nepārātum* need to be differentiated from the *šibītum* / *bī šibīti* is difficult to assess.

While all sorts of people can be thrown in a *nepārum* (for example, two songstresses, for unknown reasons, ARM 27, 47; a man with tax issues, FM 2, 52; a loose tongue, FM 9, 28), some dangerous people are dumped there: a parricide (ARM 27, 115 = LAPO 18, 1063, pp. 237–238), a blabbermouth (A.2801 = LAPO 16, 268, pp. 418–420), a potential regicide (ARM 28, 52), and an aggressive murderer (ARM 27, 57). The unpleasantness that occurred there includes starvation (A. 1401 see F. Joannès. *Nouveaux Mémoires*. Durand, J.-M.; Kupper, J.-R. (eds.). *Miscellanea Babylonica. Mélanges offerts à Maurice Birot*. Paris, 1985, pp. 102–103. According to a fuller version of ARM 14, 17 = LAPO 17, 829, pp. 640–642, an imprisoned man was being forced to sell family and property to escape execution.

Horror stories about those in a *nepārum* are also preserved in such texts as ARM 14, 77–78 (LAPO 18, 928–929, pp. 64–68). In a Shemshara document, Samsi-Addu tells Kuwari: "Concerning Hazip-Tešub about whose execution you

can pick up people on a whim or suspicion, especially when they do not carry credentials, are not part of a group, or simply carry valuable information.²⁴

wrote to me, I have this notion: since you have talked about his execution, let him die. Why should he live? Let him die in jail (*nepārum*). He is always writing to his city wishing to turn your land against you. If his kinfolk who are with me ask, I will act like he remains alive, saying, 'he lives, he lives!' ... They will keep imagining him as living and stuck in jail"; see ShT.883 = ShL I, 16:16–31 = Eidem, J.; Læssøe, J. *The Shemshara Archives*. I. The letters. Copenhagen, 2001. An earlier (?) letter (ShT.906+ = ShL I, 17) has Kuwari worried that Samsi-Addu is treating his nemesis too well. See also ShT.873 = ShL I, 46, a man jailed for being (falsely) accused of deserting. A nice study on prisons in the NB period is: Kleber, K.; Frahm, E. A Not-So-Great Escape: Crime and Punishment according to a Document from Neo-Babylonian Uruk. *JCS* 58 (2006):123–135.

Two documents refer to the consequence of travelling without proper permits. In A.2776 Samsi-Addu direct his son to throw into a *nepārum* messengers and merchants who travel without permission (*balum šālim*). For travelling without a visa, Asqur-Addu of Karana could put people to death; see A.285:24'–25'. Both these texts are published on pp. 383–387 of Charpin, D.; Durand, J.-M. *Aššur avant l'Assyrie*. *MARI* 8 (1997).

²⁴ See the interesting article of Ziegler, N. Samsi-Addu et la combine sutéenne. *Amurru* 3 (2004), especially pp. 107–108. The "classic" Mari letter about making people disappear is ARM 13, 107 (= LAPO 18, 1069, p. 244). Kibri-Dagan writes the king:

'My lord wrote me the following about Yarim-Dagan who formerly lived in Dunnum, but who has now gone to Ilum-muluk, "(Locate) this man. If there is a secret pit, in the open field or within town, get rid of that man. No one must find him whether climbing heaven or sinking to hell." This is what my lord wrote me.

Now, (while) this man is dwelling in Ilum-muluk, I have looked into the matter: There is no secret pit in the open field or in town in which to get rid of him. I have looked for the opportunity to get rid of him but have not yet found it (a few lines missing). My lord should reflect in accordance with his majesty, for me to fulfill my lord's order.'

It would be too far-fetched to think that the Yarim-Dagan who carried news of Princess Kirum's woes (see ARM 10, 33 and 35) was to be silenced for his knowledge of a sordid matter. There is a similar situation in ARM 1, 57 (= LAPO 18, 1076, p. 251), in which Samsi-Addu writes his son, "I am sending Simti-Eraḷḷ to you. He should be kept in jail. Nothing about him must be let out, whether he dies or lives ..." Two documents refer to the consequence of travelling without proper permits. In A.2776, Samsi-Addu directs his son to throw into a *nepārum* messengers and merchants who travel without permission (*balum šālim*). For travelling without a visa, Asqur-Addu of Karana could put people to death; see A.285:

Whether the matter was political or not is difficult to say because we cannot date accurately most of the letters; still, that they are attributed to the Numḥâs may suggest that the matter was indeed political. Numḥâ was a major tribe with important settlements by Kurda and Karana south of the Sindjar. With little cohesion among its elements and between it and its tribal congeners, Sim'al and Yamutbal, the Numḥâs no less than Kurda played political yo-yo with Mari (pro ARM 27, 14; contra ARM 26, 358), even during Zimri-Lim's relatively brief reign and possibly also during the handful of years Zimri-Addu was in Qaṭṭunan.²⁵ Were these two men taken for spies that needed arrest, as Durand implies (*RA* 92 (1998):

24'–25'; these two texts are cited in Charpin D.; Durand, J.-M. Aššur avant l'Assyrie. *MARI* 8 (1997):383–387.

The Mari records also contain a fair amount of information on people detained in limited space or in relatively attractive place, for example, in a *bīt naṭṭarim*. They might be kept against their will so as to prevent them from revealing sensitive troop movements (preparation for war) or from relaying what they hear. In some cases, important people are kept against their will to force them to do something they would rather not. Their situation can deteriorate by receiving inadequate ration or (worse?) by being denied the normal courtesies due their ranks. See for example, ARM 26, 368 (= LAPO 17, 584):36–38, concerning an Elamite diplomat; somewhat similar is ARM 26, 361 (= LAPO 17, 558):16–17. Something similar was likely occurring to Belšunu, despite his jeremiads, when confined in an É AGRIG (AbB 2, 83). On the *bīt naṭṭarim*, see the comments of Veenhof, K. R. Assyrian Commercial Activities in Old Babylonian Sippar—Some New Evidence, pp. 294–295 in Charpin, D.; Joannès, F. (eds.). *Marchands, diplomates et empereurs: études sur la civilisation mésopotamienne, offertes à Paul Garelli*. Paris, 1991. See also Lafont, S. Le roi, le juge et l'étranger à Mari et dans la Bible. *RA* 92 (1998):173–175.

²⁵ On Numḥâ (according to ARM 26, 412, around Kurda and Karana) and Yamutbal (around Andarig), see Joannès, F. Routes et voies de communication dans les archives de Mari. *Amurru* 1 (1996):349–354. These tribal groups shared generic identity and even join in combat, according to A.3274; see Guichard, M. Les relations diplomatiques entre Ibal-pi-El et Zimri-Lim: Deux étapes vers la discorde. *RA* 96 (2002):131–132. More often they were in perpetual tension with each other. We have a nice letter in which combative Numḥâ declares its lust for battling Yamutbal (ARM 27, 68). Hammurabi of Babylon presumes (incorrectly) perpetual enmity between Zimri-Lim's Mari and Numḥâ; see A.3577, cited in Durand, J.-M. Espionnage et guerre froide: la fin de Mari. *FM* 1 (1992):45–46.

Yamutbal and Numḥâ could circulate en masse (includes "little boys and girls" and male and female slaves) near Terqa and Ḥiṣamta, creating havoc and food shortage in the region; see ARM 2, 99 (= ARM 26, 62 and LAPO 17, 735, pp. 492–494). These groups also moved toward Kurda from Sagaratum (ARM 26, 302).

13)?²⁶ Were they transients who failed to register locally, as Sophie Lafont suggests (*RA* 92 (1998):172–173)? Or were they merely riffraff, the kind of Numḥâs known from other documents to attack people in transit (*ARM* 27, 168) and to deceive women into leaving their homes?²⁷

Zimri-Addu does not explain what plans he had for the men he had arrested. He only says that that nobody witnessed what happened, conveniently ignoring the part played by those arresting them. This is the first of many instances in which he doles out facts that may be true, but are they certainly are not truths, and we will soon realize that Zimri-Addu is no more reliable a narrator than is Lot as a character. Typical for such literature, however, he will leave the evidence for us to question his credibility.

The inquiry

Three men, Zimri-Addu continues, came to ask about the two Numḥâs because they knew them to have crossed just ahead of them. We have their names: Zimri-Eraḥ, Saggaran, and Yakun-Addu; but as Zimri-Addu says nothing at this stage about their identity or their destination, we must presume that he expects the king to be aware of them and their mission.²⁸ The few words they are quoted to say may betray Canaanism; but this could be the scribe's contribution.²⁹ Zimri-Addu answers them in

²⁶ On spies and spying in the documents, see J.-M. Durand's LAPO 17, pp. 304–310.

²⁷ A.582 (Durand, J.-M. *Réalités amorrites*. *RA* 92 (1998):10):

‘Two Numḥâ men and a man from Nuruggum, having come from Dumatum, had seduced two women, telling them, “Come along and be our wives.” They had brought with them two mares and were going to the river. 3 Sim'al, one from Ḥišamta and two from Ḥimmaran, saw them at the edge of the Ḥabur. They began to pasture animals with them. That same night, these abominations of God killed them below the field area. They kidnapped the two women and the mares, planning to sell them ...’

²⁸ Zimri-Addu does not say where the party of Zimri-Eraḥ was going. Heimpel (*Letters*, p. 451 note 2 comments: “If they went to Mari, and if the king was in Mari at the time, the timing ‘on their return’ makes no apparent sense. Possibly they were headed for Babylon and Zimri-Lim was not in Mari at the time”). Yakun-Addu may have been from Kurda (*ARM* 14, 110:10) or from Andariq (*ARM* 7, 211:3). If the name is any indication, Saggaran may also be from Kurda, as it god was Šaggar.

²⁹ LÚ.MEŠ *a-li-na* (l. 12), or so conjectures Birot, p. 203 note e. The form is found in a letter from Urgiš, *ARM* 28, 44:7, where Zimri-Lim is quoted to say,

half-truths. They did not reach Qaṭṭunan's square, he declares; which is technically correct.³⁰ He promises that his patrols will monitor any movement which, given the circumstance, is beside the point if not also crass. Rather abruptly, Zimri-Addu takes the offensive: dozens from Numḥâ and Yamutbal, he says, have come to Qaṭṭunan in recent days, likely as migrant workers; but none among them has ever complained of being guarded or oppressed; in fact they once testified to exactly this benevolence on his part.³¹

We could ask why Zimri-Addu needed to tell Zimri-Lim such tidbit about his hospitality. The king has already been alerted about the arrested Numḥâs, so Zimri-Addu risked appearing too clever. Perhaps this grandstanding about his managerial probity is simply to reassure the king that this matter is isolated and should not compromise his record of accomplishment or his future effectiveness.

Alerting the king

When the visitors leave without offering gratitude, Zimri-Addu must have sensed that the matter is far from ended. As a mid-level careerist, a cantankerous one at that, he certainly could expect his authority to be challenged by his equals and so he acts with the certainty that a complaint will be lodged. Writing the king, he claims that he had not been aware of the connection between the Numḥâs and his visitors; but he never makes it clear how long he was in the dark about it. I am supposing that by the time he wrote, the Numḥâ affair had become irreversible and I would not be surprised if Zimri-Addu had already disposed of the men, perhaps having sold them to the Sutu nomads, experts at trafficking flesh.³²

alinama dummuqātum ša ana Terru attaddinu, “where are just now the good deeds I showered on Terru?”

³⁰ Does Zimri-Addu expect Zimri-Lim to approve of such cleverness? For such casuistry see A.2995+ (LAPO 16, 310, pp. 490–493), with more juicy examples in Gichard, M. *Violation du serment et casuistique à Mari*. Lafont, S. (ed.). *Jurer et maudire: pratiques politiques et usages juridiques du serment dans le Proche-Orient ancien (Méditerranées)* (1997):10–11). Pp. 71–84.

³¹ “I LÚ *ina libbišunu ša ukaddušu uluma ebēšū* LÚ *šū liqbi*.” For *kuddum*, see A.1401 (cited above):25–27, “*annûm ša IGI Itur-mer Ištar-kabar ina nepārîm ukiddu*.”

³² The reputation of Sutu as kidnappers and slave traders haunted Zimri-Lim who once dreamt they were kidnapping his spouse (ARM 26, 225). Sutus had no compunction to enslave their own (ARM 8, 9), and could be relied upon to carry on the trade even within among territories in alliance (*salmātum*). This is nicely il-

So Zimri-Addu suddenly becomes positively garrulous, with details about the Numḥâs that were likely extracted from his victims.³³ The Numḥâs were no messengers, he claims; one was shiftless, moving from Saggartum to Kurda, and the other attended Saggaran, one of the three men who had visited him. Zimri-Addu is betting that, though they left in silence, the visitors likely knew what had happened in Qaṭṭunan and feels certain that in justifying their plaint before the king (*awātni i niškun*), they will likely demand the testimony of “their” *ma(p)palū* (l. 34; but also 42 and 49) as well that of a Numḥâ woman in whose house the two men were seized. The woman, who is never named, was apparently the wife of a Sim’al man, so basically of the same stock as the Numḥâs; but whether or not she was their kin or hosting them for romantic or commercial reasons is not easy to tell.³⁴ That she will be a major personality in this drama will soon become clear. The mystery is who are these *ma(p)palū* whose presence is demanded at the expected inquest? Birot and Durand give philological reasons why they are “translators,” and so does Heimpel, but with much less enthusiasm.³⁵ Durand relies on this de-

illustrated by ARM 14, 79 (= LAPO 18, 1056, pp. 229–230), a letter Yaqqim-Addu of Saggartum sent the king:

“The nomad Ḥalākumu has sold a slave to the Sutus in Idamarāṣ [Durand: Hit] and was leading here 2 donkeys and 3 sheep, his payment. Those on patrol did not notice it when he shuttled the slave from here to Idamarāṣ [Durand: Hit]. On his return, however, those on patrol seized and led to me the 2 donkeys. I interrogated Ḥalākumu, who had sold the slave to the Sutus, and he said, “I bought this slave in another land and sold him in another land. Why are you questioning me?” So I told him, “This whole area is under my own lord’s peace. One day they might come and meet my lord; what would I respond?” I am now conveying Ḥalākumu and the 2 donkeys, (used as) payment for the slave. The 3 sheep were indeed slaughtered ...”

In this regard AbB 3, 1, a letter from Samsu-iluna, shows that these sentiments prevailed beyond Mari, “No one must purchase from the Sutus men or women from Idamarāṣ or Arrapḥa. Any merchant who purchases from Sutus a person from Idamarāṣ or Arrapḥa will forfeit his money.” On the Sutus, see Joannès, F. Palmyre et les routes du désert as début du deuxième millénaire av. J.-C. *MARI* 8 (1997):408–411.

³³ We note that the visitors told him nothing like that.

³⁴ Whether or not she was a prostitute, I would not play her as a Rahab from Jericho, at least because there is no reason to imagine that spying was at issue.

³⁵ The word seems to be derived from *apālum*, but in which way or in what sense is difficult to say, given the broad range of the verb; see Heimpel, *Letters*, pp. 450–451, n. 153 for diverse suggestions.

tail to question our notion of Amorite unity when Kurda and Mari needed dragomen to communicate.³⁶ But why would such a small party need two such translators, especially when one of them worked for Saggaran who presumably shared the same language skills? Birot suggests that the word in fact may actually mean “witnesses” or “guarantors.”

What is clear is that Zimri-Addu senses a scandal brewing because he expects the Numḥâ woman to accuse these *ma(p)palū* (*qaqqassunu imahḥaṣ*).³⁷ I speculate therefore that they are the guards who arrested the men, but cannot explain why they would be attributed to the visitors. In truth, none of the suggestions about who were these *ma(p)palū* inspires confidence. Luckily, the thread of the story is not fully compromised and we might now focus on multiple ways by which Zimri-Addu tries to neutralize his error by ostensibly saving his king embarrassment.

The advice

Zimri-Addu’s first tack is to advise the king to avoid at all costs holding an inquest in Mari. The king should claim that the matter has gotten too entangled and must therefore be resolved where it originated, at Qaṭṭunan or perhaps Kurda. There, the *ma(p)palū* can be made to take oaths, pre-

³⁶ Durand. *Amurru* 3:113–114.

³⁷ The idiom *qaqqadam maḥāṣum*, “to strike the head” can have many meanings, some of which are covered also by *pūtam maḥāṣum*, for which see the CAD M₁ 80 and Q 112. It applies to persons and objects. In Old Assyrian it seems to mean, “to claim” or even “to guarantee” see Veenhof, K. R. *Aspects of Old Assyrian Trade and Its Terminology*. Leiden, 1972, pp. 161–162 and n. 274. Durand suggests “confirmer les dires de quelqu’un”; see *RA* 92 (1998):8, n. 39. I take my cue from its occurrence in A.88 (LAPO 16, 252, with commentary), where it has to do with accusations. Yatar-Ammi, just becoming ruler at Carchemish writes “his father” Zimri-Lim:

‘Before you now are the two men I have dispatched with Napsuna-Addu. About this matter being reported regarding the city of Irrid, these men were cited in this way, “They have talked with Mebisa, a servant of Bunuma-Addu and, therefore, are aware of the affair.” Now therefore, I have had these men taken to the god River (= Hit?). But their accuser (LÚ *māḥiṣ qaqqadišunu*) is being kept in jail under guard. Together with Napsuna-Addu, one of your trustworthy servants ought to lead these men to the god River. If these men survive the ordeal, I shall burn their accusers; but if these men die, right here I shall give their house(hold) and their servants to their accusers. My father should report their matter (i. e., how they fared) back to me.’

sumably under the aegis of local gods. Qaṭṭunan, of course, is where Zimri-Addu has standing; but Kurda, with its temple to Šaggar, is another matter, because the land came in and out of Mari's orbit as often as it changed kings.³⁸ Should they refuse the offer, requesting instead an inquest in Mari before the god Itur-Mer, the king was to insist on another avenue, justifying this course because Itur-Mer and the king were both preoccupied with the harvest.

Giving advice to the king is fairly standard among Mari officialdom. Generally the people making them are cautious, ending with such platitudes as "My lord should ponder the matter" and/or "My Lord should decide one way or another."³⁹ While coaching the king toward slanted truths is fairly documented in Mari documents, administrators normally plant in them seeds of plausibility, for Mari was full of messengers, diplomats, even spies (in the form of wives and concubines), who might ferret out reality. Thus, Sammetar, among the *crème de la crème* at Mari until

³⁸ On Kurda, see Kupper, ARM 28, 235–242; Charpin and Ziegler, FM 5, pp. 207–208. Zimri-Eraḥ was in charge of shuttling the symbols of vassalage from Zimri-Lim to Kurda's new king Hammurabi; see ARM 28, 166, and ARM 26, 40 where he is acting as a roving ambassador.

³⁹ Rare are the examples in which an official openly ignores his king's order because "I have done what must be done." This is how Lanasum (defiantly?) ends his letter to Zimri-Lim (A.402 = FM 6, 89–92):

'My lord had previously written me as follows about Yaḥurrûs who raided a caravan, "A council should convene. Bind these men and have them brought to me." Now I had heard (about it) the same day these men raided the caravans. The next day (people) came here to tell me about the caravan raid, "The raiders as well as their possessions were seized." I myself on day three convened the council and informed them about this matter. The citizens gave me 30 men and I went in aid against the raiders. In the middle of the journey, Sabinum, the tribal commander of Yariḥû—and with him were the Yaḥurrû raiders—was heading to Šuri-Ḥammu.

Because of this matter, I faced these men in the middle of the journey; there was no rope at their waist. I seized nothing in their hand. They had no witnesses. I had these men strangled so that from now into the future, anyone would fear and not lay hand on anything. I gave 51 shekels to the robbed merchants. I thus settled their case right there and then. When the money of the merchant is entered into the temple of Dagan, it is deposited before Dagan. I have done what must be done.'

In l. 27 read *mu-ki-in-su-nu*; a reading opposed by Lafont (pp. 97–98) and J.-M. Durand, "diānum D," *NABU* 2005/85; they suggest that some kind of judge is at stake.

his posthumous disgrace, fed his king three different excuses to use when seeking grain from Yamhad.⁴⁰

The excuse Zimri-Addu is suggesting, however, seems odd; for it depends on the unlikelihood that his adversaries were ignorant of Mari customs during the harvest season. Did everyone forget that neither the king nor Itur-Mer would have had time for inquests when managing the yield of their properties? Still, the pretext raises questions on what is it that troubled Zimri-Addu? Did he want to avoid an oath before Itur-Mer (reputed to be the “Lord of Oaths”) because this god was less likely to tolerate shaded excuses? If so, why would oaths before gods that travel with the king be more effective in masking the truth?⁴¹

Or is that Zimri-Addu simply did not want his nemeses to be in Mari as they seek to unravel events? If so, his next suggestion is revealing even if couched in difficult language. Here we learn that Zimri-Eraḥ, a member of the party investigating Zimri-Addu’s behavior, was in fact a Mari official. Despite homonyms, this particular Zimri-Eraḥ is likely to be the very high official to whom Zimri-Lim entrusted, late in the year ZL 4’, the delivery of the symbols of vassalage (throne, clothing, and a gift) to the newly enthroned Hammurabi of Kurda (ARM 28, 166).⁴² Zimri-Addu is obvious in wanting his king to influence Zimri-Eraḥ’s testimony. This much is clear even if the vocabulary he attaches to Zimri-Eraḥ is not. In Mari, *kaltum/keltum* refers to a person coveting another’s throne; but it is hard to see how it fits here.⁴³ There is, in fact, some disorder in this par-

⁴⁰ A.1101 = LAPO 16, 230 (pp. 362–364). On Sammetar, see Frans van Koppen’s excellent study on the fall of the elite: *Seized by Royal Order: The Households of Sammêtar and Other Magnates at Mari*. FM 6 (2002):289–372; see also Lion, B. *Les gouverneurs provinciaux du royaume de Mari à l’époque de Zimri-Lim*. *Amuru* 2 (2001):188–195.

⁴¹ We know that the emblem of Itur-mer could travel far on ceremonial occasions. A.7258, cited in translation only, has Itur-mer’s emblem join with that of Šaggar of Kurda when affirming a treaty; see Durand, J.-M. *Itûr-Mêr, dieu des serments in Jurer et maudire*, p. 61.

In the same article (p. 64), Durand cites an unpublished letter that deals with the reluctance to take an oath in Mari. Ibal-El writes that the king had asked him to send two witnesses in a dispute so that they take an oath on Itur-mer. Ibal-El reminds Zimri-Lim of his (the king’s) suggestion that nomads should be able to take oaths by the gods of their area. Because of cold weather, Ibal-El suggests that the oath be taken at Der or wait until Zimri-Lim comes with his god to the Upper Country.

⁴² ARM 28, 166; see Charpin and Ziegler, FM 5, p. 207, n. 334 and n. 336.

⁴³ Birot gingerly connects with *qiltum*, “silence,” but comes up with awkward rendering. Heimpel prudently leaves the sentence be.

ticular passage that could be attributed to the scribe (a few words are missing); but they might also indicate discomfort in such a suggestion.

Having urged his king toward avoidance of oath-taking and subornation of perjury, Zimri-Addu could not be certain about the reaction; the king might simply go ahead and hold the dreaded inquest in Mari itself. So, even as he professes his loyalty, Zimri-Addu has one more suggestion: this time it is to neutralize the testimony of the chief witness to his act, the Numḥâ woman. What if she is kept in a *būt išparātim*, a workshop for female weavers for a few weeks? Now this could be a bribe, because such women do receive ration and oil. But it could also be a distancing mechanism, because this is where captured women are first settled before they are assigned elsewhere. Where she would be confined is not clear. It makes sense that Zimri-Addu is speaking of a local workshop where he has control; but so far we know of such workshops only at Mari and Der. It might thus mean that Zimri-Addu is offering to ship her far away from Qaṭṭunan, while letting others decide for how long.⁴⁴

A good servant, Zimri-Addu leaves the final decision to the king. Unfortunately we do not know how the matter was settled. As far as Zimri-Addu is concerned, much depends on whether or not we identify him with the Zimri-Addu who was entrusted with Mari troops at the siege of Larsa around the year ZL 9'. The matter of identity of two homonyms is always ticklish; but while I favor differentiating between them, I cannot insist on it. But if they were, then Zimri-Addu would obviously not have lost favor with his king. This would not at all be surprising since Zimri-Lim, unlike Samsi-Addu for example, has proven to be fairly tolerant of his officers' gaffs and impudence.⁴⁵

Conclusions

I have two conclusions. First: As regards our *Rencontre* theme, this letter shows that in difficult environments administrators enjoyed such broad discretion that they might undertake unsavory activities provided they do not compromise their king.⁴⁶ They could do so for private gains, of

⁴⁴ See Ziegler, FM 4, p. 42, n. 25. See ARM 5, 67 (= LAPO 17, 852, pp. 671–674) in which weavers of both sexes were said to be without work in Razama, Burullum and Ḥaburtum.

⁴⁵ See my study *The Burden of Scribes*, pp. 211–228 in Abusch (ed.). *Riches Hidden*.

⁴⁶ This entrepreneurship can extend even to guards, as indicated by ARM 14, 51 (= LAPO 18, 1054, pp. 226–228).

course; but the Mari records also indicate major competition among officials and the temptation to humiliate others or to settle scores could not always be resisted.⁴⁷ While Zimri-Lim himself was not beyond ordering the secret elimination of individuals, in our context, however, everything indicates that the kidnapping of the Numḥās was Zimri-Addu's own inspiration. What is striking is his expectation the king would endorse fairly anarchic, if not unethical, practices just to help extract him from a mess. In this, Zimri-Addu was not unique. We have a spectacular example in the splendid dossier Durand published in FM 7 about Zimri-Lim's purchase of Alaḥtum. There Nūr-Sin, a courtier of incomparable incompetence, created messes when representing the king at the Aleppo palace; yet he had no qualms to demand his king's support. In this particular case, however, Zimri-Lim was wise enough to dispatch a more experienced official to salvage the operation.⁴⁸

Of more consequence is what this letter tells us about the disjunction between ideal and reality when underlings dispense justice, a topic nicely

⁴⁷ Provincial administrators can put up with a lot; occasionally, they confess to wanting to kill someone for insulting them; see ARM 3, 36 (= LAPO 17, 704, p. 451). This is a letter from Yaqqim-Addu, governor of Saggartum:

‘Yaṣīb-Dagan of Ba... [Durand: qui fait partie des commandos d'intervention] lives in my district. He went to Idamarāṣ and stole 8 slaves and 2 donkeys and sold them separately. I heard it from my own sources. Yaṣīb-Dagan was summoned before me and I interrogated him, “Why did you steal slaves and donkeys in Idamarāṣ, a land under my lord's peace?” He said, “I actually did not steal; there might be men who sold slaves and donkeys for cash.” Zuḥatni, my lord's servant, right away said. “You sold 4 slaves to Napsiya of Ḥarruwatum. You sold 2 donkeys to me and 4 slaves in Uta'um, in the Upper Country.” But Yaṣīb-Dagan (said), “Convey me to the king and I shall reveal before the king those who stole the slaves and the donkeys.”

I am therefore now conveying Yaṣīb-Dagan to my lord. My lord can question him and ... the men who stole and sold separately the slaves and the donkeys in Idamarāṣ, selling them one after the other. Regarding strengthening my lord's edict, I said, “I fear that [broken section, see Durand's restoration] ...” This is what I feared and have written my lord. My lord should interrogate him.’

⁴⁸ See Sasson, J. M. The Trouble with Nūr-Sin: Zimri-Lim's Purchase of Alaḥtum. Barreyra Fracaroli, D. A.; del Olmo Lete, G. (eds.). *Reconstruyendo el pasado remoto. Estudios sobre el Próximo Oriente antiguo en homenaje a Jorge R. Silva Castillo* (AuOr Sup 25). Sabadell, 2009. Pp. 193–203.

raised in recent literature.⁴⁹ While I would not automatically assume that Zimri-Lim was receptive to Zimri-Addu's elaborate scheme to bury a problem, nonetheless the letter does proceed from the assumption that the king might be persuaded to do so. There is in the Mari records a wonderful exhortation in which Addu of Aleppo tells Zimri-Lim, "I rubbed on you oil from my numinous glow so that no one could stand up to you. Now listen to my only wish: Whenever anyone appeals to you for judgment, saying, 'I am aggrieved,' be there to decide his case and to give him satisfaction. This is what I desire of you."⁵⁰ In reflecting on the diverse stratagems Zimri-Addu was bold enough to propose, it is legitimate to inquire whether the vaunted royal attachment to *kittum* and *mīša-rum* was felt to apply only to the king's own flock, perhaps even limited to the confines of safely controlled borders.

The second conclusion takes me back to Gen 19. With the events at Qaṭṭunan as a lens for what could happen when unescorted people move distantly from familiar territory, let me reframe what was happening outside Lot's door by filtering out the unreliable testimony of Abram's nephew.

Night was falling when two strangers who were headed to Sodom's square disappeared. The people of Sodom come to inquire about the travelers' welfare from Lot, a *gēr*, an outsider, hence not a person to interfere with movement in and out of the city.⁵¹ They obtain no explanation from him; rather, he makes them a baroque proposal. Were they likely to be distracted by an offer to abuse his daughters when, it must have been known in town, these women were wedded to people from Sodom? To the crowd milling outside his home, as to his sons-in-law later, Lot seemed a fool, perhaps more sinister than entertaining. Had these all these personalities been recovered from Mari documents rather than from the Bible, we might have read about the people of Sodom trying to ferret out the truth by subjecting Lot to an oath.

But this is a Hebraic story, so it takes another turn: The people of Sodom storm Lot's compound and they meet with disaster. What they could not know is that Lot's guests were angels and that in aggressively

⁴⁹ See for example Démare-Lafont, S. *Droit comparé dans les sociétés du Proche-Orient Ancien* (Conférence d'Ouverture. École Pratique des Hautes Études, 20 novembre 2000). Paris. Pp. 60–61.

⁵⁰ The text (A.1968) is now re-edited as FM 7, p. 38. It has had many translations.

⁵¹ My student Chris Paris points out that in Judges 19 the man who helps the Levite is originally from the "hill country of Ephraim," just like his guest (19:1, 16).

seeking to know their whereabouts, the men of Sodom had become characters rehearsing a theme that is nicely documented in biblical lore: God indulges the weaknesses of people he wishes to destroy, turning their behavior as a תַּזְנֵה, a pretext, by which they can earn a harder fall. So for example, we read about God hardening the heart of Pharaoh before his troops are sunk in the sea. Or about bringing Samson to the banqueting tables of the Philistines (Judg 14:4) to better arrange their destruction. In fact, the many recipients (such as Saul and false prophets) of divinely sent “evil, lying, or distorting spirits” were never candidates for redemption.⁵² Rather, they were mere instruments for teaching Israel lessons about a god whose motivations are not always transparent.

The men of Sodom may have had good intentions when they milled around Lot’s gate; but their fate was sealed in Heaven long before they gathered there. With this thought in mind, Scriptural vagueness on the reason(s) for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah contributes to making these “cities on the plain” the paradigm for wickedness that they are today. I expect their notoriety will remain unchanged long after this paper is featured in this *Rencontre* volume.

Appendix: ARM 27, 116 (A.403)

Zimri-Addu to “my lord” (Zimri-Lim):

3) The city Qaṭṭunan and the district are well. 2 Numḥâ men arrived at the “Fences” but did not move into Qaṭṭunan Square. I gave orders and they were brought to me in the dead of night, and I had them put in jail. Nobody saw them.

9) But the next day Zimri-Eraḥ, Saggaran and Yakun-Addu came to tell me: “Two men were transiting just ahead of us. Where are those men?” I answered them, “They did not yet move into Qaṭṭunan Square. I will set guards (to check) on transit and entrance. Right now, there are from 1 to 200 Numḥâ and Yamutbal people troops living in this district since last year. Now then, (if) there is one man among them whom I might oppress or dominate, that man should just speak out. Had they summoned before me all Numḥâ folks that have lived here for a long time, they would have admitted, ‘We are living here for a long time, and not one man has disappeared.’”

⁵² For evil spirit (רוח רעה), all hounding Saul, see 1 Sam 16:14 (and following); 18:10, 19:9 and Judges 9:23 (Abimelech and the Shechemites). For spirit of deceit (רוח שקר), see 1 Kgs 22:22f. and 2 Chr 18:21f. For רוח שׁוּמִים, “spirit for distortions,” see Isa 19:14.

24) When I answered them in this way, they rose and left. Yet, I simply did not know that these (jailed) men were traveling with them. Now then, on their return they will make a case before my lord. I fear they could tell my lord, “Those men were messengers, traveling with us.” These men were in no way messengers. One man was from Numḥâ: he once lived in Saggaratum but emigrated (*ihburam*) to Kurda and one man reports to Saggaran. So I fear they could tell my lord, “Our guards² (*ma(p)palum*) and a Numḥâ woman, who is married to a Sim'al and in whose house those men were seized, must be led here so we could affirm our words.”

37) I also fear that my lord might not evade the matter. My lord could give orders for these men and the woman to be led here; but once they gather before my lord and the woman *accuses them* (*qaqqas-sānu imahḥas*), in consequence, the matter is bound to blow up.

40) May my lord reflect (on this) and answer them so, “As the matter has gotten muddled, go ahead and have your guards² to take an oath either in Qaṭṭunan or Kurda.” But I fear that they might say, “They must be led toward here and here take an oath before (the god) Itur-Mer.” (If so), my lord should answer them, “It is harvest time; so neither his (Itur-Mer's) harvest nor the palace's must be neglected. I plan to go upland myself; have your guards² swear by the gods that are traveling with me.” This is how my lord should answer them.

51) Now more than/over the *bēl qaltim*, Zimri-Eraḥ, has sided with my *qaltum* (*ana qaltīya izzizam*). Now then, before these men as one group (*ina pulḥišunu*) <reach my lord>, my lord must summon Zimri-Eraḥ and instruct him. I have herewith written as part of my duty to my lord; but my lord can give these men whatever answer he wishes. In any case, beside the Numḥâ woman who got involved in the matter, nobody has heard of that matter.

59) Now then, my lord should reflect on it; until the matter dampens, I could for a month or two detain the woman in the house of female weavers. My lord should instruct me, one way or another.