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GENESIS 19:24 AND THE HERESY OF "TWO POWERS IN HEAVEN" AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN THE PENTATEUCH: AN EXEGETICAL APPRAISAL

Abstract

Alan F. Segal, in his now classic book "Two Powers in Heaven" argues that at its beginning, Christianity was rather more "binitarian" than Trinitarian, emphasizing only Christ and the Father as God. Yet, in order to prove their case, Segal asserts, that, early Christians apologists used those instances in the Hebrew Bible where there were conflicting appearances of God and proposed that "a principal angelic or hypostatic manifestation in heaven was equivalent to God." Therefore they suggested the idea of "two powers in heaven," which was perceived and attacked by rabbinical Judaism as heretical.

However, the question still remains –are Christians exegeting scripture correctly while disagreeing with an essential premise of Judaism by proposing a second divine hypostasis but not two deities?

Genesis 19:24 is an important text mentioned in the rabbinical discussion of the heresy of "two powers in heaven." At the same time it is a text used by early Christian apologists to argue for the pre-incarnate divinity of Christ. This paper explores the exegetical grounds of such proposal and the implications this text could have for the concept of God in the Pentateuch.

Introduction

'Two Powers in Heaven' and Early Christianity

According to Alan F. Segal, "Those heretics whom the rabbis called 'two powers in heaven' present a promising start for uncovering the vexed relationship between Judaism, and developing trinitarian Christianity."¹ Segal also considers that while in the rabbinic designation some form of dualistic doctrine seems inherent, the manner in which the rabbinic texts define 'two powers in heaven' as a binitarian heresy has been perceived by several scholars as a possible background to some of the early Christian proclamations about the divinity of Christ and its rabbinic reaction.²

¹ Alan F. Segal, "'Two Powers in Heaven' and Early Christian Trinitarian Thinking," in *Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*; New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 75. See also Idem, *Two powers in heaven: early Rabbinic reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012).

² Idem, "'Two Powers in Heaven' and Early Christian Trinitarian Thinking," 75.

However, Segal acknowledges that these rabbinic texts were written over a long period of time and could be referring to a variety of different phenomena.³ Nonetheless, Segal's proposal has generally been used to understand the relationship between 'two powers' and Christianity. Therefore, some scholars propose the presence of "binitarian monotheism" in Second Temple period Judaism, which provided the religious backdrop for the advent of New Testament Christology.⁴ Scholars also propose that it originated from earlier concepts such as the 'Divine Council.'⁵ Others perceive this development as part of the impact that Hellenistic syncretism had on controversies within Judaism that influenced the attitudes of rabbinic Judaism. According to Brevard Childs, Segal's study traces the "attempt to set doctrinal parameters for coping with other angelic powers which increasingly were seen as a threat to monotheism".⁶ Two important examples can give us a glimpse of how the concept of God mutated within Judaism prior to the appearance of Christianity. First, we will look at Philo's philosophical reflections on God, then we will review angeology in the writings of Qumran.

Segal observes that the first significant extra-rabbinic evidence of the "two powers" tradition is found in the writings of Philo.⁷ The term Philo uses is "two Gods".⁸

³ Ibid.

⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, T&T Clark Cornerstones (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2015), 12, 13. According to Hurtado that the Jewish background of the earliest Christian communities may have provided precedents and resources for accommodating the exaltation of Jesus.

⁵ M. S. Heiser, "Divine Council," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman, III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 115. According to Heiser for the Israelite, high sovereignty and chief administration of the cosmos was conducted only by Yahweh. Nevertheless, Israel's own divine council had a bureaucratic hierarchy, and that order is consistently described in terms of Yahweh being both the high sovereign and the vicegerent. Orthodox Israelite religion instead had Yahweh as sovereign and a second person who was Yahweh's mediating essence as the vicegerent of the council. This structure reflected Israel's belief in Yahweh's ontological uniqueness as creator of all things, including the other *'ēlōhīm* of the council.

⁶ Brevard S. Childs, "Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible," (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 360. See also

⁷ Segal, *Two powers in heaven: early Rabbinic reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, 159.

⁸ According to Segal the term "two Gods" is a synonym for "two powers" in rabbinic thought. See also Jacob Neusner, *Sanhedrin*, vol. Vol. 16 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 62.

Yet there can be no cowering fear for the man who relies on the hope of the divine comradeship, to whom are addressed the words "I am the God who appeared to thee in the place of God" (Gen. 31:13). Surely a right noble cause of vaunting it is for a soul, that God deigns to shew Himself to and converse with it. And do not fail to mark the language used, *but carefully inquire whether there are two Gods*; for we read "I am the God that appeared to thee," not "in my place" but "in the place of God," as though it were another's. What, then, are we to say? He that is truly God is One, but those that are improperly so called are more than one. Accordingly the holy word in the present instance has indicated Him Who is truly God by means of the articles saying "I am the God," while it omits the article when mentioning him who is improperly so called, saying "Who appeared to thee in the place" not "of the God," but simply "of God."⁹ (Italics added)

Also important to this study is the role of the Melchizedek in the writings of Qumran, Segal notices that at Qumran, the principal angel may be called "The Prince of Light" or "The Angel of His Truth," which is probably the same as "The Spirit of His Truth," and may be identified with Melchizedek.¹⁰ According to Stephen Noll this overlap of language applied to Melchizedek seems to suggest another title for Michael, the archangel of Israel and is reminiscent of the 'angel of the Lord' texts of the Old Testament that may anticipate later rabbinic discussions of "two powers in heaven."¹¹

Recently however, Segal's work has received scholarly attention recommending the need for a revision of his conclusions while holding to the same perspective on the influence that early Christian interaction had on the could the "two powers in heaven" heresy¹² or proposing alternative paradigms¹³ or frameworks to understand the "two powers in heaven" heresy in

⁹ Philo, *Philo*, vol. V (London; England; Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann Ltd; Harvard University Press, 1929), 418, 419.

¹⁰ Segal, *Two powers in heaven: early Rabbinic reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, 192-194 Segal observes that the status of Melchizedek in the heavenly economy is not clear and that the translation of 11QMelch 10a of van der Woude in which he identifies one of the theophoric names, "Elohim," with Melchizedek is ambiguous but certainly not impossible.

¹¹ Stephen Noll, "Qumran and Paul," in *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 780.

¹² Daniel Boyarin, "Two Powers in Heaven: or, the Making of a Heresy," in *Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in honor of James L. Kugel*; Boston: Brill, 2004).

¹³ Adiel Schremer, "Midrash, Theology, and History: Two Powers in Heaven Revisited," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39, (2008).

rabbinic texts without assuming any significant involvement of early Christian binitarian or trinitarian claims.¹⁴

The Importance of Genesis 19:24

Earlier connections between the concepts present in the rabbinic texts dealing with "two powers" and the concepts found in Christianity are inferred and therefore for some scholars inconclusive.¹⁵ This possibility even Segal recognizes when he states that "normally, early dating of Talmudic evidence are suspicious because traditions tend to be attributed to earlier rabbis though they do not actually come from that period."¹⁶

However, there is according to Segal, a passage, Gen. 19:24, which to him is a very important piece of proof that provides external evidence for the intersection between three valuable witnesses for his argument: 1) It is a rabbinic text¹⁷ correcting the implications of an assumed "two powers" reading of this biblical passage by a heretic; 2) it is another contemporaneous rabbinic text using this passage to show that two divine figures rule the universe,¹⁸ and 3) it is used by a Christian apologist, Justin Martyr,¹⁹ to prove that Christ, functions as the agent of

¹⁴ Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Jewish-Christian relations and rabbinic literature -- shifting scholarly and relational paradigms: the case of two powers," in *Interactions between Judaism and Christianity in history, religion, art and literature*; Leiden Boston: Brill, 2009).

¹⁵ Boyarin, "Two Powers in Heaven: or, the Making of a Heresy," 334.

¹⁶ Segal, *Two powers in heaven: early Rabbinic reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, 119.

¹⁷ b. Sanh. 4:5, V.11.A–C

A. *A min said to R. Ishmael b. R. Yosé*, "It is written, 'Then the Lord caused to rain upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord' (Gen. 19:24). *It should have said*, 'From him.' "

B. *A certain laundryman said to him*, "Let me answer him. *It is written*, 'And Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, Hear my voice, you wives of Lamech' (Gen. 4:23). *It should have said*, 'my wives.'

C. "But that just is how Scripture says things, and here too, that just is how Scripture says things."

¹⁸ Genesis Rabbah 51.2 Abba Hilfi, the son of Samkai, said in the name of R. Judah: THEN THE LORD CAUSED TO RAIN, etc. refers to Gabriel; FROM THE LORD (OUT OF HEAVEN, to the Holy One, blessed be He). R. Leazar said: Wherever 'And the Lord' occurs, it means, He and His heavenly court. R. Isaac said: Both in the Torah [Pentateuch], in the Prophets, and in the writings we find a commoner mentioning his name twice in one verse. In the Torah: *And Lamech said unto his wives: Adah and Zillah hear my voice*; this is not followed by 'my wives', but by *Ye wives of Lamech* (Gen. IV, 23). In the Prophets: *And the King said unto them: Take with you the servants of your lord, and cause Solomon my son to ride upon my own mule*, etc. (Est. VIII, 8). Yet you wonder that the Holy one, blessed be He, mentions His name twice in one verse.

¹⁹ *Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew Justin Martyr*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company,

punishment against Sodom because he is God's messenger to humanity.²⁰ For Segal, this is "remarkably firm proof that even orthodox Christians were seen as 'two powers' heretics."²¹

The Hebrew text of Genesis 19:24

The need to review the content of Genesis 19:24 is evident; therefore some exegetical observations of the Hebrew text are in order.

מְזַהְשְׁמִים יְהוָה מֵאֵת וְאֵשׁ גְּפְרִית וְעַל־עַמֹּרָה עַל־סֹדֹם הִמְטִיר וְיְהוָה
(Genesis 19:24 BHS)

The repetition of the tetragrammaton and the last phrase has been dismissed either as a doublet or a possible gloss.²² However, based on the testimony of ancient translations such as the LXX,²³ Vulgate,²⁴ and rabbinic texts discussing this passage together with scholars like Victor Hamilton²⁵ and Gordon Wenham,²⁶ there is no textual evidence for supposing it is a gloss, as the BHS apparatus suggests. Therefore is it feasible to assume that text as we have it now is correct.

1885), 225. The sun was risen upon the earth; and Lot entered into Segor (Zoar). And the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and He overthrew these cities, and all the neighbourhood.' ” And after another pause I added: “And now have you not perceived, my friends, that one of the three, who is both God and Lord, and ministers to Him who is in the heavens, is Lord of the two angels? For when [the angels] proceeded to Sodom, He remained behind, and communed with Abraham in the words recorded by Moses; and when He departed after the conversation, Abraham went back to his place. And when he came [to Sodom], the two angels no longer conversed with Lot, but Himself, as the Scripture makes evident; and He is the Lord who received commission from the Lord who [remains] in the heavens, i.e., the Maker of all things, to inflict upon Sodom and Gomorrah the [judgments] which the Scripture describes in these terms: ‘The Lord rained down upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven.’”

²⁰ Segal, *Two powers in heaven: early Rabbinic reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, 119.

²¹ Ibid.

²² John Skinner, *A critical and exegetical commentary on Genesis* (New York: Scribner, 1910), 309. Skinner considers that a distinction suggested by Dillman between Yahwe as present in the angels and Yahwe as seated in heaven is improbable and therefore we must either suppose that the original subject was ‘the men’ (cf. v. 13), or that יהוה מֵאֵת is a doublet to מְזַהְשְׁמִים: the latter phrase, however, is generally considered to be a gloss. See also the Critical Apparatus of the BHS that suggests that (מְזַהְשְׁמִים) is “^{b-b} add?”

²³ "Septuaginta: SESB Edition," ed. Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006). Genesis 19:24 καὶ κύριος ἔβρεξεν ἐπὶ Σοδομα καὶ Γομορρα θεῖον καὶ πῦρ παρὰ κυρίου ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ

²⁴ Robertus Weber and R. Gryson, "Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem," (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969). Genesis 19:24 igitur Dominus pluit super Sodomam et Gomorram sulphur et ignem a Domino de caelo

²⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50," (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 46.

²⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 38.

The only clause of this text follows a pattern of subject followed by verb and object (SVO), which does not follow the more common or basic word order in Hebrew (VSO), following the principle that the most important item comes first. A "noun may be preposed in order to specify something about the noun."²⁷

The only verb in this text is ירה־מט (Hifil, perfect, 3ms) from מָטַר, (*māṭār*), which is the most general term for rain²⁸ and is mostly used in the Hifil form²⁹ and expresses a causative type of action.³⁰ A literal translation would be: "And Yahweh caused to rain". Following the verb we have the indirect object, which is composed of two prepositional phrases joined together by a conjunction. First, עַל־סְדֹם (over Sodom) and then וְעַל־עֲמֹרָה (and over Gomorrah). Finally we have the object of the verb, two nouns united by a conjunction: גַּפְרִית (brimstone) and אֵשׁ (and fire). However this last phrase could be understood as two separate nouns "brimstone and fire". Yet, Hamilton argues that the majority of modern commentators see here a hendiadys³¹ that could be translated as "*sulphurous fire*" (NAB), or "burning sulphur" (NIV).³²

The last section of Genesis 19:24 is exegetically complex and the focus of this study. We have a subordinate prepositional phrase,³³ which provides additional information to the primary

²⁷ Adina Moshavi, "Word Order in the Biblical Hebrew Finite Clause: A Syntactic and Pragmatic Analysis of Preposing," (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 10.

²⁸ Hans-Jürgen Zobel, "מָטַר," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), vol. 8: 250, 251.

²⁹ "מָטַר," *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ludwig Koehler et al. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 574.

³⁰ Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), 148.

³¹ William David Reayburn and Euan McG Fry, "A handbook on Genesis," (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 1131. Hendiadys is a figure in which a single complex idea is expressed by two words or structures, usually connected by a conjunction. For example, "weary and worn" may mean "very tired."

³² Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50," 47. See also E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 1 (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 141. Speiser notices that while sentiment favors the traditional "brimstone and fire," the context points plainly to hendiadys '*sulphurous fire*.'; Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, "Genesis: a commentary," (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 279. The narrator frames the immediate cause, "burning sulfur," with the ultimate cause, the Lord.

³³ Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and Sir Arthur Ernest Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 377. Gesenius observes that as is the case with regard to the looser subordination

clause. The text is *מֵאֵת יְהוָה מִקְדֵּשׁ שָׁמַיִם* and could be translated (from Yahweh in heaven/the heavens). The first preposition *מֵאֵת* is a compound preposition.³⁴ Here we find a good example where the "value of *אֵת* is a weakened and where *מִן* alone would have sufficed."³⁵ Therefore all translations have only "from" and not "from with." It is interesting that the phrase *יְהוָה אֵת מ* is only used in the Pentateuch in two other instances (Num. 11:31; Num. 16:35). In the latter example, there is also a judgment scene in which fire is coming from *יְהוָה אֵת מ*, but there is no mention of any particular location for Yahweh because in Num. 16:19 the presence of the Lord *כְּבוֹד יְהוָה* appeared to the whole congregation who was gathered in the *אֶתְפֹּלֶתֶיךָ אֶלְפֶתֶח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד* (all the congregation at the door of the tabernacle of meeting).

Now in Genesis 19:24 there is the addition of *מִקְדֵּשׁ שָׁמַיִם* that provides further information pertaining to the location of Yahweh. The last known location of Yahweh is in the previous narrative in Gen. 18:33³⁶ where after the scene of Abraham's intercession for Sodom the text states that *יְהוָה כִּאֲשֶׁר פָּלָה לְדַבֵּר אֶל־אַבְרָהָם בְּיָמָיו* which the NKJV translates it as follows: So the LORD went His way³⁷ as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place". However the text does not say explicitly here where he went, it only mentions that he "left or departed." No details are mentioned in connection with his departing to any particular destination³⁸ or if he has a fixed destination.³⁹ Nonetheless, it is important to notice that Gen.

of nouns to the verbal idea, so also their subordination by means of prepositions is used to represent the more immediate circumstances (of place, time, cause, purpose, measure, association, or separation) under which an action or event is accomplished. In the case of most prepositions some idea of a relation of *space* underlies the construction, which then, in a wider sense, is extended to the ideas of time, motive, or other relations conceived by the mind.

³⁴ Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 462. Compound prepositions are formed mainly with *מִן* and *אֵת* as the first element. With *מֵאֵת* *from near, from with*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

³⁶ Waltke and Fredricks, "Genesis: a commentary," 271. This commentary observes that the Lord himself will not appear again in this act; in the next scene he will rain down the judgment from heaven in Genesis 19:24.

³⁷ Reyburn and Fry, "A handbook on Genesis," 411. **Went his way** translates the verb "left, departed."

³⁸ See also Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 148. Jehovah "went His way," that is to say, vanished; Herbert E. Ryle, *The Book of Genesis in the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 211. Ryle notices

18:21 explicitly states the intention of Yahweh to personally go down to Sodom,⁴⁰ and to see and know for himself the condition of Sodom (the verbs referring to Yahweh are in Qal imperfect 1cs, אָרָדָה , וְאָרָאָה and אֶדְעָה). Still, the pinpointing the location from where Yahweh will execute his judgment could not be the only reason for this addition.

Hamilton suggests that these words were added for location and for emphasis. He states:

"The twofold use of the tetragrammaton reinforces the fact that the disaster that struck Sodom and its environs was not a freak of nature. Rather, it was sent deliberately by Yahweh himself. The verse adds further that the disaster was sent from Yahweh *in heaven*."⁴¹

Scholars like Calvin,⁴² Nahum Sarna,⁴³ Kenneth Mathews,⁴⁴ Wilburn Williams⁴⁵ and Gordon

Wenham⁴⁶ follow this 'repetition for emphasis' approach.⁴⁷ The majority of rabbinic texts also

that in the expression "the Lord went his way" (Heb. "went") the writer leaves us uninformed as to the manner of Jehovah's separation from Abraham. There is no mention of "Sodom," as the place to which he "went," is in v. 22; Skinner, *A critical and exegetical commentary on Genesis*, 306. Skinner observes that the text says 'went' and adds not to Sodom, but simply 'departed.'

³⁹ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1942), 552. Leupold interestingly suggests the scene closes abruptly: Yahweh goes away (*wayyélekh*), and Abraham returns home. There is no need of saying where Yahweh went. Everyone knows that.

⁴⁰ Gershon Hepner, *Legal Friction: Law, Narrative, and Identity Politics in Biblical Israel*, Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 78 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 174. Gershon observes that when the spokesman for the angels says I will go down (Gen. 18:21), indicating his intention to descend from Hebron, high in the Judean mountains, to Sodom, the lowest place on earth, being a steep descent from Hebron. According to Gershon, YHWH's descent is performed physically by His proxies, in contrast to the actual descent of YHWH to earth at the beginning of the Tower of Babel narrative (Gen. 11: 5).

⁴¹ Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50," 46. Hamilton observes that throughout chs. 18–19 Yahweh has been pictured as moving to and fro on the earth. He rests under a tree near Mamre and has a meal. He engages in conversation with Abraham. His angelic entourage are overnight guests of Lot. Now suddenly Yahweh, from his heavenly position, unleashes a catastrophe on Sodom.

⁴² John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 512. Calvin suggest that it was not the will of God that those cities should be simply swallowed up by an earthquake; but in order to render the example of his judgment the more conspicuous, he hurled fire and brimstone upon them out of heaven. To this point belongs what Moses says, "that the Lord rained fire from the Lord." The repetition is emphatical, because the Lord did not then cause it to rain, in the ordinary course of nature; but, as if with a stretched out hand, he openly fulminated in a manner to which he was not accustomed, for the purpose of making it sufficiently plain, that this rain of fire and brimstone was produced by no natural causes.

⁴³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 138. Sarna observes that the repetition (*the Lord ... the Lord*), like the phrase "out of heaven," dramatizes the conviction that what occurred was not a meaningless accident of nature but a purposeful event, the expression of God's direct intervention in human affairs in order to redress the balance of justice.

⁴⁴ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 241. Mathews notices that twice v. 24 attributes the fiery destruction to the Lord's initiative. This heaven's rain cannot be explained solely as a natural phenomenon, such as earthquake; it was exceptional, never again repeated, providing the parade illustration of the fiery eschatological judgment against the wicked.

follow this position. However, Claus Westermann offers another perspective to this feature and considers that the phrase "from Yahweh in the heavens" does not match well with the beginning and introduces an awkward repetition of Yahweh as the cause in the same sentence. For Westermann the only explanation for this feature is that two different descriptions of God's judgment have merged.⁴⁸

Finally, there is a last group that has also recognized the awkwardness of this passage and considers its features as an indication of the possibility of a principal angelic⁴⁹ manifestation that was subordinate (predominantly a Jewish interpretation) or equivalent (mainly a Christian interpretation) to Yahweh or a hypostatic manifestation that was equivalent to Yahweh (mainly a Christian interpretation).⁵⁰ A composite example of the last proposal is August Dillmann's

⁴⁵ Wilbur Glenn Williams, *Genesis: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1999), 157, 158. Williams argues that While explanations have been suggested for the catastrophe, such as an earthquake's putting pressure on underground oil deposits, causing them to spew up through the fault lines on both sides of the Dead Sea, the author makes clear that it all was **from the Lord out of the heavens**.

⁴⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 59. Wenham states: "The narrator stresses that 'it was from the Lord.'"

⁴⁷ *Andrews Study Bible Notes*, ed. Jon L. Dybdahl (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2010). Comments on Gen. 19:24 By its focused emphasis on the Lord's action ("Lord rained" and "from the Lord"), the text portrays Him using deliberate and extraordinary measures to bring about the cataclysmic destruction of the region, which before had been as lush as Egypt (Gen.13: 10)

⁴⁸ Claus Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 306. See also Ryle, *The Book of Genesis in the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes*, 218. Ryle observes that the words "from the Lord" come in very strangely after "the Lord rained."

⁴⁹ Hepner, *Legal Friction: Law, Narrative, and Identity Politics in Biblical Israel*, 174, 175. See Hepner footnote 15 and 16, He sustains that his interpretation partly follows Rashbam, who explicitly states that is the chief angel who is speaking to Abraham in Gen. 18:17, 20 and 22. He also declares, the Rashbam explains that the subject of the first words of Gen. 19:24 is the angel Gabriel (Rashi on the other hand, commenting on the first words of the text argues that "wherever it is written "And the Lord," it refers to God and His tribunal") while the subject of the last words of the passage is YHWH Himself.

⁵⁰ Here we find early Christian apologist and Church Fathers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius. See also *Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew Justin Martyr*, 225.; *Irenaeus: Against Heresies*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 418,419. "Since, therefore, the Father is truly Lord, and the Son truly Lord, the Holy Spirit has fitly designated them by the title of Lord. And again, referring to the destruction of the Sodomites, the Scripture says, "Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah fire and brimstone from the Lord out of heaven." For it here points out that the Son, who had also been talking with Abraham, had received power to judge the Sodomites for their wickedness."; *Against Praxeas Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 608. "A much more ancient testimony we have also in Genesis: "Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven." Now, either deny that this is Scripture; or else (let me ask) what sort of man you are, that you do not think words ought to be taken and understood in the sense in which they are written, especially when they are not expressed in allegories and parables,

comments where he states, "*Jahve*, who is present in the angels, according to ver. 17 ff., *caused it to rain down from Jahve, from the sky.*"⁵¹

Exegetical Solutions, Theological Problems, Philosophical Innovations

The majority of modern commentaries seem to side themselves with the explanation that this awkward repetition exist for emphatic reasons and that, as the rabbis had pointed out, "*that just is how Scripture says things.*"⁵² Essentially it is a Scriptural idiom, that easily explain the absence of the personal pronoun "from Him" in this passage.⁵³ Therefore any 'binitarian' or 'trinitarian' speculation of this passage is unwarranted.

but in determinate and simple declarations?"; *Four Discourses against the Arians Athanasius of Alexandria*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, vol. 4 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 355. "If then they suppose that the Saviour was not Lord and King, even before He became man and endured the Cross, but then began to be Lord, let them know that they are openly reviving the statements of the Samosatene. But if, as we have quoted and declared above, He is Lord and King everlasting, seeing that Abraham worships Him as Lord, and Moses says, 'Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.'"

⁵¹ A. Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 108. Dillman however also notices that the author lays stress on the fact that it was really from the sky that the rain came down. See also Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 150. In the words "Jehovah caused it to rain from Jehovah" there is no distinction implied between the hidden and the manifested God, between the Jehovah present upon earth in His angels who called down the judgment, and the Jehovah enthroned in heaven who sent it down. John Peter Lange and others, *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 438. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 570. While recognizing the emphatic function of the repetition Leupold considers that in this instance Yahweh was present in and with His angels whom He had delegated to this task and who acted under specific divine mandate. He who had the day before been visibly present with them, was now invisibly with them. When His agents acted, He acted. Consequently we believe that the view which the church held on this problem from days of old is still the simplest and the best: *Pluit Deus filius a Deo patre* = "God the Son brought down the rain from God the Father," as the Council of Sirmium worded the statement.

⁵² Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), Vol. 16, 192.

⁵³ The rabbis quote the following example to answer: It is written, "And Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, Hear my voice, ye wives of Lamech"; but he should have said, "my wives". But such is the Scriptural idiom—so here too, it is the Scriptural idiom. See also Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 46. Poole offers additional examples for the repetition of the noun instead of pronouns dealing with God. However, he observes that the noun put for the pronoun, appears also in Gen. 1:27; 2 Chron. 7:2. But here it is emphatically so expressed, either, 1. To signify that it proceeded not from natural causes, but from the immediate hand of God. Or, 2. To note the plurality of persons in the Godhead, God the Son, who now appeared upon the earth, rained from God his Father in heaven, both concurring in this act, as indeed all outward actions are common to all the persons of the Trinity.

However, as the proverb goes 'don't undress a saint to dress another.' The exegetical solution proposed to understand Gen. 19:24 and disregard any Trinitarian reading as valid does not eliminate the exegetical and theological conundrum that this whole narrative offers.

How are we to understand the appearance of Yahweh in chapter 18 as one of the three strangers coming by Abraham's place? It is interesting to see how the Masoretes point *Adōnāi* in Gen. 18:3, which according to Driver "is the form used when Jehovah is intended, implying thereby that Abraham recognizes Him from the beginning"⁵⁴ as in vv. 27, 30-32 where the actual presence of the Yahweh is acknowledged (see Gen 18:22).

There is also the change of pronouns between the singular in vs. 19 and the plural⁵⁵ "said to them" in Gen. 19:18, which is understood by Spicer,⁵⁶ Westermann⁵⁷ and BHS (which proposes an emendation from plural to singular in the apparatus) as an error or perhaps a correction with the intention to harmonize. It is interesting to notice that a similar change of pronouns also occurs from plural in Gen. 18:9 to singular in Gen. 18:10, which later in Gen. 18:13, 14 is Yahweh.

Who is Lot speaking to in Gen 19:19 then? And who is responding to Lot in vss. 21 and 22? The two visitors are called "angels" in vs.15 and "men" in vs. 16, then in vs. 17, when someone in particular gives the command the verb is in singular with an indefinite subject⁵⁸ and the only antecedent nouns that could possibly be the subject are Yahweh or one of the angels/men acting

⁵⁴ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis, with Introduction and Notes* (New York; London: Edwin S. Gorham; Methuen & Co., 1904), 192.

⁵⁵ This is the last place where the plural pronouns in this will be use.

⁵⁶ Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 141. Speiser observes that the text reads "said to them," which cannot be right, since immediately afterward Lot is addressing himself to a single companion. The error is probably traceable to the ambiguous *ʾdny*, which must have been read as plural. The context, however, favors *ʾdōnī*.

⁵⁷ Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12–36*, 304. Westermann asserts that Lot is not in dialog with the men, but with an individual whom he addresses as *ʾnny* (the plural in v. 18 is perhaps a correction with intent to harmonize).

⁵⁸ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 565.

as a spokesman for Yahweh. Most scholars promptly dismiss Yahweh as the person to whom Lot could be speaking to in vs. 19.⁵⁹

However, Wenham makes an important observation about the dialogue between Lot and the visitors in vs. 18 ff. He states, "as pointed, אֲדֹנָי is the proper way to address God (cf. 18:3), and Lot's subsequent intercession is directed to God. Whether the narrative is suggesting that the Lord has now rejoined the angels outside the city, or whether Lot is just being very polite, is obscure."⁶⁰ The possibility that Yahweh could have rejoined the angels outside the city is not a wild guess by Wenham. Earlier, I noticed, in Gen. 18:21 that Yahweh clearly stated His intentions to Abraham to go down to Sodom and see for himself the state of affairs there. Nonetheless, as mentioned, most scholars consider that one of the angels is now acting as a spokesman.⁶¹ Driver observes that "Jehovah is not so distinctly present in either of the two angels in ch. 19 as He is in at least one of the three in ch. 18"⁶² But, Keil proposes another perspective on the role that the angels have in the dialogue with Lot and says:

In v. 17 we are struck by the change from the plural to the singular: "when *they* brought them forth, *he* said." To think of one of the two angels—the one, for example, who led the conversation—seems out of place, not only because Lot addressed him by the name of God, "*Adonai*" (v. 18), but also because the speaker attributed to himself the judgment upon the cities (vv. 21, 22), which is described in v. 24 as executed by Jehovah. Yet there is nothing to indicate that Jehovah suddenly joined the angels. The only supposition that remains, therefore, is that Lot recognized in the two angels a manifestation of God, and so addressed *them* (v. 18) as *Adonai* (my Lord), and that the angel who spoke addressed

⁵⁹ Ibid. Leupold asserts that the singular is no indication that the Lord is speaking through the angel.

⁶⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 58. Wenham raises the question: Could he really know who he was talking to in the gloom before sunrise? The mystery is probably deliberate.

⁶¹ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 239. Mathews states 'of the two angels, one functions as the spokesman.' See also Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 567. Leupold notices that the angel speaks with a measure of authority which has been granted as Yahweh's agent.; Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 141. Speiser argues that Lot is addressed one of the two angels and immediately afterwards Lot is addressing himself to a single companion.

⁶² Driver, *The Book of Genesis, with Introduction and Notes*, 200. See also Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 566. Leupold takes another view but observes The '*adonay*' of v. 18 is a pausal form with *qamets* instead of *pathach* and is not to be read as "Lord," for nothing indicates that Lot had recognized the Lord in these angels. In fact, the Lord had not come down with them to Sodom.

him as the messenger of Jehovah in the name of God, without its following from this, that Jehovah was present in the two angels.⁶³

It seems the role of one of the angels as spokesman for Yahweh is perceived, due to the features of this narrative, as more than a mere representation but as a manifestation of God.⁶⁴

According to Daniel Abrams, one of the central aspects of Jewish theology and Jewish mysticism in particular "is the conception of the nature of God's being and the appearance of the divine before humanity."⁶⁵ However, Abrams recognizes that as part of this philosophical consideration "at issue is whether the one God depicted in the Hebrew Bible is manifest to humans directly or through the agency of a divine, semidivine, or created power."⁶⁶ Abrams also observes that is not only the nature of God's being that is part of this puzzle, "even the nature of angelic figures in the Bible remains a matter of debate, both in its original context and through later interpretations."⁶⁷

Abrams's article raises an important and pertinent question about the possible role that one of the angels plays as spokesman for Yahweh in Gen. 19: Is the the angelic figure a literary device that metaphorically describes God's presence or does he physically represent God's form? Here, both Jewish and Christian interpreters would entertain several philosophical perspectives.

Last but not least, does the New Testament, offers any insights about who is responsible for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, especially with reference to early Christianity? According to Jarl Fossum, Jude 5-7 conceives Jesus as the Angel of the Lord. While Jude does not

⁶³ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 150.

⁶⁴ Ryle, *The Book of Genesis in the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes*, 216. Ryle notices that certainly in this chapter Jehovah is not so directly identified with one of "the men" as in chap. 18. The rendering "my lord" is, perhaps, to be preferred, as in 18:3. On the other hand, the mention of "Jehovah" in v. 16, and the words in vv. 22 and 24, "I cannot do anything till thou be come thither," and "Then the Lord rained upon Sodom," would sufficiently justify the other rendering. Jehovah and His Angel are one, cf. 16:7 ff. His Presence is in "the two" as in "the three men."

⁶⁵ Daniel Abrams, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead," *Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 3 (1994): 291.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

explicitly state the identity of the destroyer of Sodom and Gomorrah, Fossum argues that, it is assumed that he reckons that this executioner was the same as the one who punished Israel in the desert and imprisoned the fallen angels.⁶⁸

Conclusions

Therefore, whether or no one accepts the exegetical explanation for the emphatic repetition found in Gen. 19:24 as valid, which would dismiss any 'binitarian' or 'trinitarian' Christian speculation from this passage, the grammatical and thematical details of the surrounding passage creates a theological problem concerning the identity and role of at least one of the angels acting as spokesman/representative or as the manifestation of Yahweh. Also, this adds to the complexity of the conflicting appearance of God in Gen. 18, especially if it's not understood as some form of 'binitarian monotheism' or explained as a theory where ontological boundaries between angel and God are blurred. This blurred boundary would in some way compel Jewish philosophical speculation to try to harmonize with this theory with 'monotheism'.

There is also the possibility to consider that the 'binitarian' speculation of Gen. 19:24, both Jewish and Christian, is not a wild guess after all, though it is not conclusive by itself, but it can be supported by its immediate context. Also, this incident seems to complement other instances in the Pentateuch where conflicting appearances of God occur and could help us to understand

⁶⁸ Jarl Fossum, "Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in Jude 5-7," *New Testament Studies* 33, no. 2 (1987): 221-229. In order to make his case Fossum first acknowledges that whereas Gen. 19:24 ascribes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to YHWH/Kyrios, that is, God. Then, he entertains Justin's arguments from Gen. 19:24 to support the existence of a second Lord, a Lord next to the one in heaven and that the former appeared on earth and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah as the agent of the latter. Thus the second Kyrios was the special Angel of God, the first Kyrios. Also Fossum observes how one of the angels bears the same name as God himself by noticing how the Hebrew text reads *'dny*, the consonants of the Qere of the Tetragrammaton, and the LXX has 'Kyrios', the same word as that used to translate the proper Name of God, suggesting Justin's fundamental opinion that an angelic 'Lord' was the executioner of Sodom and Gomorrah. Finally, Fossum presents what he considers definite evidence that Jews could hold this view by presenting the testimony from Abba Hilfi ben Samkai, a Palestinian amora of the second generation, which is reported to have spoken as follows in the name of R. Judah: "'And the Lord caused to rain," refers to Gabriel; "from the Lord out of heaven" to the Holy One, blessed be He.' Fossum concludes observing that this rabbinic interpretation is similar to Justin, though the name of the angelic 'Lord' is, of course, different.

the complexity of the concept of God in the Pentateuch, which was first explored by Jewish readers of the text and later used by early Christian apologists to argue the pre-incarnate divinity of Christ.

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