Seeing the Biblical World of Sodom-Mamre Through Surveillance

Carolyn Alsen
Academic Programs, University of Divinity, Box Hill, VIC, Australia
calsen@divinity.edu.au

Abstract

Genesis depicts a world of tension and collaboration among the groups and families that constitute the stories of the formation of early Israel. The obedience and behaviour of characters within the narrative determine covenantal inclusion or exclusion. The narrative of Sodom-Mamre can be interpreted as a story of surveillance, wherein characters observe each other and act based on their desire for knowledge and control. Though surveillance promises omniscience, knowledge ultimately remains limited. The divine character yearns to witness human experience, while the human characters act as mirrors to this impulse. Lot’s wife highlights the chasm between the desire to see and know and the limits of a gaze. Ultimately, this desire begets violence as the surveillant gaze produces cognitive dissonance and narcissism. This essay references surveillance studies, critical biblical scholarship, psychoanalytic and philosophical traditions concerning desire, particularly the desire of the eyes, the gaze, and ancient imperial surveillance practices.

Keywords

cultural studies – Genesis – surveillance studies – gaze – Sodom-Mamre

Introduction

The Sodom-Mamre narrative in Genesis 18–19 is a story fraught with the phenomena of visual perception, knowledge, justice and theodicy. Scholars regularly ask how we can read violence in the text and how the violence relates to the Israelite story in both Genesis and wider biblical texts. I argue that
Genesis 18–19 can be read as a visual site of interethnic surveillant struggle within the context of the Persian empire. That is, the narrative is a field of surveillant visual investigation between characters, including the divine and the narrator, who watch each other and act according to the desire for knowledge and control. In anticipation of a judgment, the divine character gazes on human behaviour and experience, while also showing an openness to change of judgment. Human characters play a role as mirrors to this impulse in differing reactions to the experience of seeing and being seen. While surveillance promises to provide the ability to see all, knowledge from this is ultimately limited.

The storyworld of Sodom-Mamre is a drama of surveillance carried out by an upper power (the messengers/narrator/Yhwh) and the counter surveillance of different middle powers (Lot and the Sodomite male citizens). Lot uses a surveillant eye as a pretender to Sodomite citizenship, as well as using countersurveillance against the Sodomite male population. This causes an implosion of violence. Lot’s wife employs a sousveillant look, from below, that resists the prohibition, while at the same time she complies with the consequences of the prohibition. Her choice to obey would not result in stopping the destruction, as she is not in the Abrahamic line, but she is nevertheless asked to obey the Abrahamic deity. The characterisation of Lot’s wife illustrates the gap between the desire to see and know and the limitations of the gaze, and the differences in judgment between the Abrahamic line and others. The dilemma faced by Lot’s wife between divine election and emerging universalism is in opposition to the characterisation of the just and obedient servant, resulting both in her destruction and in her re-establishment as an ever-seeing pillar. The story thus demonstrates the ambivalence that contemporary societies might have with respect to surveillance and power.

This essay uses surveillance studies, psychoanalytic concepts and philosophical traditions on desire, critical biblical scholarship and the history of both ancient and contemporary models of political surveillance in the world behind the final form of Genesis, which included the realities of imperial surveillance. The human urge to surveillance is metaphorically described through the development of the self through internal and external gazes. I build on the work of scholars such as Slavoj Žižek’s interpretations of the Lacanian gaze, through the fetishist disavowal and the empty gesture, Scott Morschauser on knowledge and obedience in the world of Genesis, and David Lyon and other scholars of surveillance studies.1 Surveillance studies is a

---

sociological discipline that analyses the methods and motivations authorities use to observe their own populations, using different technologies for visual surveying and data collection, from CCTV cameras to police and military operations. Sociological and psychoanalytic principles are used in surveillance studies to describe surveillant seeing as a two-way psycho-social function, in that members of societies constantly monitor each other.

In many parts of Genesis, covenental recognition and forgetting is illustrated in monitoring through an investigative eye, rather than through strictly legal decisions. Over the course of the book of Genesis, human powers of observation are gradually separated from the divine eye and given a place of power comparable to it. For example, while Abraham and Jacob regularly experience visions and theophanies, the divine presence is less evident in the concluding narratives of the ancestors. Moreover, a contrast can be drawn between Genesis seeing and types of seeing in the more nationalistic narratives in the wider Pentateuch. Surveillance, and who is undertaking it, is of particular interest when reading Genesis narratives that describe the causes of disaster, danger and risk. Does surveillance foster freedom or fear? Does it objectify persons or respect their subjectivity and their stories?

Although all characters in Sodom are ultimately forgotten in favour of Abraham, these characters choose how they will see or not see in relationship to the ambivalence of surveillance. By their use of surveillance, they create their destiny. The destruction of the cities illustrates the neurotic and fetishist instability of surveillance which turns on itself. Law giving and

---


6 Typical features of holiness such as law observance, exogamy that leads away from Yahwism or the divine presence as forbidden do not occur explicitly in Genesis. R. W. L. Moberly, The Theology of the Book of Genesis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 135.
Israelite responsibility (foreshadowing Exodus) is inferred in this narrative by the investigation of transgressors, while universalism, reminiscent of previous Genesis narratives (such as Babelian, Abrahamic and Hagaric visual encounters), is also present via the searching and investigating divine character. Ironically, it is a non-Israelite that questions this scrutinising eye: Lot’s wife. This reading poses a sympathetic treatment of Lot’s wife by opening the possibility of both her agency and inauthenticity in response to violence. As the character of Lot’s wife is never named, and naming is a sign of regard in biblical traditions, I here use the name Ado, observing the Midrashic tradition of Jasher, to lend dignity to the character.\textsuperscript{7} The turn and gaze of Ado is the centrepiece of the narrative. She is not only a woman embedded in gender violence, but a visual reminder of embedded ethnic and social violence. The people of Sodom, and perhaps also Ado and Lot, cry out. Their ‘cry’ is relayed to the deity which opens an investigation in a visual, mechanistic, indirect, and mysterious way. The responses of the characters to the investigation engender dire results.

With this in mind, the destruction of the Cities of the Plain can be read as a bureaucratic decision based on data assembly collected by mediated surveillance. In the narrative, references to looking back at a sight, seeing others, searching public spaces, searching by messengers, the eye of the deity, blindness, recognition, and knowledge abound. The genocide of Sodom and Gemorrah is a by-product of the narcissistic and competitive surveillance activity between two groups, struggling for survival. Ado uses an empty, ‘sousveillant’ activity which both questions and embraces her own destruction. The narrative creates an inner-biblical critique of impersonal and extra-legal surveillant seeing, opening the biblical storyworld to processes of change and hope in response to set judgment and violence. The essay will begin with an explanation of surveillance studies, then outline the philosophical and psychoanalytic underpinnings of surveillance through the metaphor of seeing. A review of biblical literature is then linked to these theories. Finally, I present an exegetical and descriptive reading of the Sodom-Mamre narrative in Genesis using these lenses.

\textsuperscript{7} ‘Ado the wife of Lot looked back to see the destruction of the cities, for her compassion was moved on account of her daughters who remained in Sodom, for they did not go with her.’ \textit{Sefer Ha Yashar: the book of Jasher referred to in Joshua and 1 Samuel}, M.M. Noah and A.S. Gould, Eds, Translated by Moses Samuel (New York: M.M. Noah and A.S. Gould, 1840), 1932.
Surveillance Studies and Visibility

Surveillance studies arose from sociology and political science in order to explore how societies manage both protection and categorisation of people. Many modern surveillance operations are habitual, acting as a kind of ‘insurance policy’ for social order, primarily for the discovery and storage of data, and secondarily, for its use. As it is participatory, and often routine and banal, surveillance is also ethically ambiguous. Surveillance is veillance ‘from above’, and counter-surveillance is an attempt to match this from another equal power that has the same resources and technology available to them. Surveillance and counter-surveillance rely on the participation of the powerful many in mutually surveillant activities. In response to these processes of ‘the gaze’ in surveillance, veillance ‘from below’, often described as ‘the look’, is called sousveillance, a term first coined by Steve Mann in the study of surveillance systems. Sousveillance deconstructs the tendency to seek power from authorised observation alone, but watches through the eyes of the less than powerful. The look is a type of seeing that is responsive, because it is anchored to care or fear, while the gaze has no desire.

Bystander recording carried out by individuals that record police stops of African Americans, and many groups in West Papua who use info-activism to understand their own ongoing nationalistic struggle use sousveillance. Sousveillance is a way of seeing in responsiveness, but it does not generate liberation. For example, in 2011, the Chinese government installed cameras in front the home of Ai WeiWei, a Chinese artist and activist. In response, WeiWei installed web cams in every room of his house, capturing every movement of his day and night, in an attempt to return the gaze. Ultimately, this was short lived, but the purpose of the gesture was to caricature and expose the use of surveillance as inert and useless. This is also evident in his description of being watched by guards in a Chinese prison. WeiWei asks, ‘What can they do except

---

10 Surveillance is often used for dominant power or the discourse about control, whereas sousveillance is more ‘rhizomic and heterogeneous.’ Mann, Steve and Joseph Ferenbok. ‘New Media and the Power Politics of Sousveillance in a Surveillance-Dominated World’, Surveillance & Society 11 1/2 (2013), pp. 18–34, (19).
exile [me] or make me disappear? They have no imagination or creativity'.

Such use of visibility in political discourse simultaneously seeks to maintain separation between individuals while garnering attention. This attention is useful for protection, but only so far as the visibility is maintained.

The discussion of control and behaviour in this essay relies on surveillance as a participatory activity between powers and their citizens or general political subjects (synoptic), rather a terrifying eye of discipline watching the many (panoptic). Cultural theory discussions of power relations in surveillance rely heavily on Michel Foucault's interpretation of Jeremy Bentham and the Panopticon prison system. However, I avoid the discussion of panopticism here, as even Foucault conceded that panoptic visual observation (and visual incarceration) is a fantasy of control. For example, Erin Runions has applied the discussion of panopticism to the idea of God's surveillance in Psalm 139, and how this influences the modern creation of political subjects, through notions of visual omniscience. The Psalm appeals to the omniscience of God as a moral judge against the accusations of enemies. However, a fixed personal identity does not necessarily protect political rights but instead can be grounds for removing them. Runions notes that on first glance, 'the visibility of biological life is a metric for political subjectivity and rights' (in this case ultrasounds, but also via such measures as artificial intelligence.

---

15 Eric Stoddart notes that Moses is taken up into high visibility by this act of his family, through the status of Pharaoh’s daughter. Now that he is highly visible, Moses is fooling the bureaucracy by subverting his otherwise dangerous visibility. E. Stoddart, Theological Perspectives on a Surveillance Society: Watching and Being Watched (Burlington, VT; Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), p. 160. Nicholas Townsend uses a similar strategy to describe the tax discourse in the Markan passion narrative. N. Townsend, ‘Surveillance and Seeing: A New Way of Reading Mark 12:17, “Give Back to Caesar ...” ’, Studies in Christian Ethics 27 1 (2014), pp. 79–90.
biometrics), but using panoptic surveillance to posit a ‘transparent self who will be motivated by surveillance to compliance’ is actually ‘a political fantasy modelled on transcendent knowledge’. I suggest that surveillance studies can balance the panoptic surveillant ‘gaze’ with a synoptic sousveillant ‘look’: as being seen by an omnivident divine eye can carry either a sense of paranoia or relief.

Moreover, while the modern nation state and ancient imperial politics are different, in terms of surveillance, they appear to both use synoptic and participatory surveillance. Contemporary modernist risk societies argue about surveillance in protecting the social order and managing the governmental and economic use of data. In the ancient Persian and Assyrian world, managing risk to others and self in society is primarily in the power of the gods. Nevertheless, ancient surveillance was participatory in maintaining social order via the service of the king, who is the chief spokesperson of the gods. This context can provide for a lens reading Genesis, whether the final formation of the text was after 538 BCE during the Ezraic Restoration or earlier. Surveillance techniques after the Late Bronze Age Collapse shifted from sending investigative columns of military and diplomatic personnel to attack, to the technique of using locals to monitor mass populations on site. Rather than simply keeping enemies away from the homeland, those who lived together in a society were expected to watch each other to detect enemies within. Contemporary Persian visual art encouraged the embrace of control of multicultural populations to give

19 Ulrich Beck notes that the premodern political world differs to the modernist “risk society” which uses surveillance. However, they can be compared through the basic human desire for management of people and ideas. The difference is in the concept of responsibility for the risks. Individualism changed the notion of the causes of disaster from the gods to that of human personal responsibility and choice. Ulrich Beck, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity, trans. Mark Ritter, Theory Culture and Society, (London: Sage, 1992), p. 136.
20 This was a Persian practice, but it was later carried on by Greek powers. E. S. Fried, Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament Series, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), p. 3.
‘earth and water’\textsuperscript{23} (the euphemistic language for Persian taxes), in exchange for legal room for resistance to Persian encroachment on local land, religion and law. Obedience (and local surveillance) is a marker of conformity, but could have functioned as a field of resistance to imperial structures because of this legal freedom.\textsuperscript{24}

The text of Genesis 18–19, if considered in the context of Persian domination, illustrates the divine as a royal ruler with epistemological ambivalence, changeability and responsiveness to surveillance activity. If the editors of Genesis, as sympathetic with Ezraic participation in surveillance for the king, were interested in Persian power to establish their own sovereignty over other ethnic or gendered minorities, surveillance is a perfect tool for this project. However, the populations under Persia could also resist surveillance. If the editors also observed the cognitive dissonance of an imperial expectation to watch each other, then the resistance to surveillance, even from the divine character, is part of this pull away from Persian or other powerful ‘protection’ to a kind of independence. This is a tempered subtext as the desire for independence for Israel is problematic for survival under Persia.

Ocular Desire and Disavowal

Why do human populations conduct surveillance? Psychoanalytic and philosophical traditions are used here to broach this question of the impulse to gaze, not only human but also the divine. We have noted that seeing itself is binary and responsive, depending on the formation of the self. Jacques Lacan also reframed the formation of the self as based on seeing, in terms of the presence or absence of language, distinct from Freudian ideas. The preverbal infant sees themselves as a whole entity unto itself (the Imaginary), then begins to understand separation through gazing in a mirror. Due to the unconscious nature of this necessary, narcissistic developmental stage, the act of seeing oneself under surveillance, is the pleasure of the fantasy of being in control,

using one’s own image. The circularity of this feedback loop is narcissistic. After language acquisition, language itself becomes the means to negotiate desire and self-obsession, with an internalised gaze (the Symbolic). The Imaginary narcissistic stage is simplistic self-referentiality, while the Symbolic order is a data-based urge for surveillance, but accepting there are limits to power and knowledge. The child begins to know their place in the Symbolic order. In order to leave the narcissistic attachment to the mirror, there is a split between the self and other: between the urge to know/see and the limits of knowledge/seeing. Staying in the loop of the mirror into human adulthood causes a neurotic break with reality, because ‘the mirror … it lies’. The two developmental stages use desire and gazing differently, but both are kinds of performances that repress the Lacanian Real: that which is a product only of its own distortions, unknowable and unrecoverable.

These psychoanalytic ideas have subsequently influenced a turn in surveillance studies to what is known as post-surveillance. Terminology in this area includes ‘narcissism’ and ‘scopophilia’: a grandiose obsession with being observed and instrumentalising others to be seen even while still craving approval. This surveillance is more important than privacy or discretion. Scopophilia and narcissism enables the self to be inauthentic while being watched. When this inconsistency is detected, a dissonance occurs around being watched that perceives reality but prefers to embrace a symbolic order (fixating on an object or a piece of content) as perception of the real. This is expressed as a Freudian-Lacanian ‘fetishist disavowal’ by Slavoj Žižek. As we

29 Particularly cultural narcissism; which is the difference between exposure in social media (cultural narcissism) and government or policing surveillance. D. Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance*, p. 117.
shall see, this reading of Freud acknowledges the powerlessness of the subject and simultaneously invests in a fantasy in order to keep a (libidinous) visual feedback loop in operation.\textsuperscript{32}

In ideology, the fetishist disavowal blinds those who, while they see they are in danger, yet believe they are not at risk of being abused because they fully embrace the Symbolic order.\textsuperscript{33} In other words, they believe the dire reality of a situation, yet do not believe it. In his reading of the Lacanian fetishist disavowal, Žižek uses the example of the ecological crisis of Chernobyl in the Soviet era to demonstrate the disavowal of a dire reality. In particular, Žižek argues that obsessive or nonsensical activity while looking into an abyss of disaster is an attempt to reduce the gap between the known and the unknown.\textsuperscript{34} Žižek builds on this fundamental dissonance as a disintegration of the Big Other: the symbolic social order based on trust in divine knowledge.\textsuperscript{35} We shall see that universalist ideas of divine judgement create dissonance for non-Abrahamic covenant characters in the Genesis narrative. Looking into this abyss is an empty gesture, for the person that both believes and does not believe in the symbolic order.\textsuperscript{36}

Using these psychoanalytic functions of the human desire to watch and gather data is described in this essay through the term ‘ocular desire’. This term has been discussed by Daniel Boyarin through Midrashic traditions, in contrast to Augustine,\textsuperscript{37} highlighting the problem of vision as a restlessness, lack or longing for the deity or a divine impulse.\textsuperscript{38} This could be connected

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{viol} Viol, ‘Psychoanalytic reflections on (the Cultural Studies of) CCTV Culture’, p. 289.
\bibitem{zizek2} Žižek, \textit{Looking Awry}, 38.
\bibitem{disavowal} The disavowal is the paralysing state of feeling helplessness before transcendent powers and also feeling that there is no such power at all. S. Žižek, \textit{The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology} (London: Verso, 1992), p. 491, cited in Viol, ‘Psychoanalytic reflections on (the Cultural Studies of) CCTV Culture’, p. 289.
\bibitem{empty} ‘… an empty symbolic gesture, a gesture – an offer – which is meant to be rejected: what the empty gesture offers is the opportunity to choose the impossible, that which inevitably will not happen …” Slavoj Žižek, \textit{The Plague of Fantasies}, Second Edition (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 36.
\bibitem{gaze} As the Hebrew Bible emerged before the more negative connotation of the ‘concupiscence of the eyes’ (Augustine, \textit{Confessions} X:35, 311), gazing is not considered necessarily as morbid curiosity or unwholesome stimulation. D. Boyarin, ‘The Eye in the Torah: Ocular Desire in Midrashic Hermeneutic’, \textit{Critical Inquiry} 16 3 (1993), pp. 532–550 (542). This is with the notable exception of concepts such as the Evil Eye.
\bibitem{physical} Rabbinical traditions believed that God did have a physical body, and that seeing God is both ecstatic and fatal. It would not be surprising, then, to note that this kind of seeing is possible, but prohibited. D. Boyarin, ‘The Eye in the Torah’, pp. 543–544.
\end{thebibliography}
to the Hegelian nature of the work of Lacan who also used this term,\(^3^9\) and so by means of this ocular desire the search for knowledge through seeing pushes forward the biblical narrative or midrash and builds the plot. Seeing God is a possible mediated experience for Israelites (for example, in Exodus 33). Many examples of theophanic vision in Genesis do not fall under Deuteronomistic prohibitions, so there is no need for the physical protection of those who see God.\(^4^0\) But for foreigners, the deity is not available to be seen, even in Genesis. When Hagar sees God, the margins and text in Genesis 16:13 is rendered untranslatable in the tradition, because of the discomfort created by a universalist divine eye and human seeing of the divine.\(^4^1\) Ocular desire as a universal urge is in tension with Israelite responsibility and uniqueness.

The characters in the Sodom Mamre narrative display various responses to fear and ocular desire. Lot, the male citizenry of Sodom and his two daughters stay in the regressive world of the mirror stage and the Lacanian Imaginary. The narcissism involved in this kind of egoless neurotic response is based on seeing others as extensions of themselves. Lot’s wife, Ado, responds within the symbolic Lacanian verbal stage, generating a Žižekian disavowal of the prohibition to look in an empty gesture of looking. That is, a communication event that displays conformity or intent to communicate, but is empty because of the limitations of language and the impossibility of reward from the act. Both responses are illustrations of the limits of knowledge and control through seeing, and the depiction of the unseeable, possibly forms of prosopopoeia.\(^4^2\)

As for the biblical narrator, the messengers and the divine character, the ocular desire of restless seeing, monitoring, and yet not fully comprehending is a narrative impulse and a political force for action. The ultimate fulfilment

---

39 The concept of desire can be associated with two distinct philosophical traditions: one where ‘desire is conceived as a fundamental lack in being, and incompleteness or absence’, and the other as a ‘positive force of production’. Desire, due to its inevitability for all human experience, is always a lack for Lacan. Even when not regression to narcissism, offering love or experiencing desire from out of this lack is offering from a castration, or an emptiness. E. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. xv, xvi.


41 Being visible is risky for Hagar, but it is also the key to her status renegotiation using “spring” or “eye” דוע (possibly a Janus parallelism) in Gen 16:7. Thijs Booij concludes from the verbal perfect form in ניחב “to see”, that the translation of ניחב is “Would I have gone here indeed looking for him that looks after me?” Thijs Booij, ‘Hagar’s Words in Genesis 16:13b’, *Vetus Testamentum* 30, 1 (1980), pp. 1–7 (5: 7).

of ocular desire is through gazing on the divine, rather than the mere comprehension of data.

This activity evokes problematic nature of ‘omnividence’ (the ability to see all), particularly via the narrator or divine character. Biblical scholars can attribute omniscience to the biblical narrator because of perceived narratorial omnividence. Robert Alter uses narratorial omniscience as authority to position the characters at differing degrees away from a kind of divine knowledge of the narrator:

> The narrators of the biblical stories are of course “omniscient”, and that theological term transferred to narrative technique has special justification in their case, for the biblical narrator is presumed to know, quite literally, what God knows …

Such a controlling narrator assumes that it is possible to gain absolute knowledge from vision. However, as the biblical narrator and the deity are separate characters, omniscience of the narrator through sight perception is limited in the logic of the storyworld. The narratorial control over the story through the silence of certain characters or profiling attests to the limits of vision in contrast to the desire for control over the storytelling. As the narrator is a character, like a messenger, can this mean that the narrator and the messengers share all knowledge with the divine? In the Sodom-Mamre storyworld, seeing all does not provide a full basis for legal judgments. The narrator must interpret collected information through a set of assumptions and relay them to the reader, either directly or through the actions of characters. Therefore, an omniscient narrator, rather than dismissed as an unreliable narrator, is here reassessed as an omnivident narrator. The divine character (and the narrator) in Genesis have limited gazes – seeing but not able to know all – and that this is mirrored by the human characters in the text. Their gaze can be questioned by an attentive reader.

---

44 In fact, prophetic and wisdom traditions use concepts such as Sheol and the exilic experience as ways of hiding or cutting off the divine vision. Yhwh seems to be unable to see into or hear from out of Sheol in Jon 2:4 and Ps 6 and 88. However, texts such as Ps 139:8 and Job 26:6 consider Sheol no obstacle to the presence of Yhwh. K. Madigan and J. D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 65–66.
A Surveillance Reading of Genesis 18–19

As we turn now to this story of Abraham, Lot and the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 18:16–19:38, we see features of divine and narratorial knowledge, characters struggling with the task of responding to reported surveillance data, and the results of the binary of surveillant and sousveillant seeing. The story is heavy with the subtexts of universalism, particularity, control, desire, fear and rumination. The actions of Yhwh in Genesis 18 and 19 illustrate limited knowledge via seeing, and also limited information on which to render judgment. This limitation is not only through the use of a locative divine character and a narrator that does not reveal key knowledge, but also to serve as a statement on investigation and judgment upon the non-Abrahamic line.

In chapter 18, In chapter 18 and 19 of Genesis, the limitation of Yhwh as all-seeing relates to the question of universalism. Three messengers announce the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. These three visitors then pack up to go to Sodom, and Yhwh inwardly ruminates, in a soliloquy in 18:17, that there is something to reveal about an investigation into the future destiny of Sodom. A plan of this investigation seems to be set in motion. A literary type-scene in which a character ‘stands’ (18:22) before a deity and potentially a plurality of divine figures (because of the interchange here between the words for ‘men’ (הָאֲנָשִׁים) and the divine name) is invoked, engendering the sense of a divine council or meeting to decide on an issue.45 However, the divine and human gaze in carrying out the narrative conclusion is far from clear and unanimous. These same ‘men’ are also named חָלַקֵּי ‘messengers’ that act as investigators (19:15). Even before they arrive at Sodom, Abraham and Yhwh begin to question the operation through negotiation. The sin of Sodom is not clear because this is not a legal matter, but rather a social exercise in the power of seeing. The city, being a diverse and mass population, is complex to the point where Yhwh seems to adhere to the wider conventional formula in observing a spectrum of information before judging. An example of this formula is in Deuteronomy 13, where priestly language is used to describe an apostate city, but before the city may be put to the ban (13:17), there is first to be a thorough investigation.46

There is a similarity here in the text to Neo-Assyrian treaties, illustrating the process of investigation through the general population and special intelligence

46 ‘… and when you will enquire, search, and ask thoroughly, and then see (יתן) that it is true and certain that an abominable thing such as this is done among you …’ Deuteronomy 13:15.
services. The accusations must be reported to higher authorities by the vassal, as in a local colonial administration. The eye serves as a means of public investigation, judgment, or mercy, relying on the proximity of data gathered about the individual(s) and a precise interpretation by suitable members of the Yahwist community, in an attempt at a preservation of the community.

The case of Sodom is different. While there is an investigation, clear legal decisions are never made; only the use of a continual surveillant feedback loop is evident. Not only is the surveillance operation immediately destabilised by uncertainty, but the narrator indicates some problems with the data gathering and interpretation. The narrator characterises the Cities of the Plain through an 'outcry' (זַעֲֲקַ֛ת) in 18:20, a term that indicates a voice emanating from suffering. However, unlike other instances of the term, it is not directed to Yhwh, though picked up on Yhwh’s universalist radar. The reported ‘cry’ (18:21) (צְעָקָה) is mediated information yet to be investigated and assessed by Yhwh, a strange situation where a sound is described in visual terms (prosopopoeia). Rather than possessing a singular, omniscient eye from above, Yhwh must go down (ירד) to see (ראה) if this is legitimate or not, in order to know (18:20) (אֵדָעָה) both for Babel (Gen 11:5) and Sodom (Gen 18:21). This is also the action on the cusp of lawgiving (Exodus 19:18). In Genesis it is also the action to investigate matters and ‘behold’ (הֵן) the truth of a situation (Gen 11:6a; 19:34). This mirative particle of newness can indicate unforeseen information. However, it is a mystery as to why the surveillant investigation of Sodom by Yhwh and the messengers of Yhwh use the cry as visible, mediated data to investigate non-Israelite populations. In this narrative of Genesis, this is not straightforward omniscience or omnividence.

The investigation is not reserved for Israelite suffering, but targeted to the suffering of foreigners. In the midst of this is Abraham’s rhetorical question, ‘Shall not the judge of all the earth do justly?’ (18:25). The investigation and Abraham’s petition illustrates an ambiguous shift back and forth from local to universal control via the use of surveillance. The narrator is pointing to the universal power of Yhwh, while not conforming to the typical imperial

51 Jewish Publication Society Version (JPS).
impersonal gaze. Yhwh promises to detect all those who are ‘righteous’ and spare the city, even if only ten are found (18:32), without qualification as to these righteous as Israelite or foreign. It is important to note again that at this stage, Yhwh has not started looking directly and is merely gathering data, discussing the sweep of the sample size with Abraham. Despite the source-critical claim that the destructive incident in chapter 19 existed prior to the insertion of the petition of Abraham in chapter 18, the investigation or judgment does not appear to be a corrective of a fated, set decision by Yhwh.52

Seeing in Sodom

After Abraham and Yhwh are finished speaking in the closing lines of chapter 18, Yhwh becomes less visible, suggesting a more hidden divine seeing is in progress over the next part of the narrative. Yhwh is not invisible but chooses to be unseen. The messengers are the triggers for both surveillance and countersurveillance in the human characters. Their relationship to the divine can only be described as potentially unstable, due to the universalist and transcendent characterisation of the divine which also must facilitate these messengers as somehow omnivident. This is not unlike the conundrum of the omnivident narrator. The narrator does not reveal when Yhwh sees or does not see, but the seeing characters in the storyworld – such as messenger watchers, Sodomite citizens, and Lot – make use of a similar visual process. At this point, however, the narrative moves, and these characters, many of whom are frustrated and increasingly unsure about the project, begin to return the surveillant gaze started by the soliloquy of Yhwh.

The behaviour of Lot is reminiscent of a narcissistic gaze in the assumption of authority, although a regression to a preverbal Imaginary order in Lot’s self-identification with the bureaucracy. The reluctance of the messengers to stay with Lot may not be only a customary gesture, but an intention to oppose his self-appointment as citizen. After all, the messengers could more efficiently carry out their mission by staying in an outside space, as they can set up their oppositional surveillance to the city. But Lot sees (ראה) them in 19:1 and begins a series of changes to their plan. This in character with the history of Lot, who uses ocular desire to part from Abraham (although at Abraham’s suggestion),

'lifting up his eyes' in ownership over Sodom and the watered Plain in Gen. 13:10. When the three messengers arrive at Sodom in 19:1, they encounter Lot from his position at the gate, before they reluctantly respond to his insistence to stay at his home (19:1–2). They seem to recognise Lot's spatial position as having political and social status, not a citizen, but the honour of a male ֶגר.53 However, Lot lives up to his name: 'to envelope-wrap'54 in abusing this recognition and pretension to the abundance that comes with full citizenship. Lot hides dangerous others in his home and indicates a narcissistic performance of the kind of authority that can watch others but not reveal themselves. This persona backfires, since the Sodomites do not recognise this authority, however well-intentioned or lacking in conscious awareness Lot may be.

The men of the city then surround the house and threaten violence to the visitors inside and eventually Lot. They wish to 'know' (יַדָע) the visitors inside (19:5). The Sodomites will certainly abuse their power, yet Lot usurps the power of the Sodomites first by inviting the messengers into his home.55 Having previously been at war, the ancient nation-state carefully examines any newcomers. Scott Morschauser notes that Lot offers in panic that they ‘see’ his daughters (הֵּנה with ָני, as in Gen 16:2), in the vain hope they will act ethically within the conventions of hostage-taking.56

Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you and do to them what is good in your eyes; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shadow of my roof. Gen 19:8

This is a performance in surveillance. The surveillant gaze of the deity diminishes and the visitors take up the surveillant activity, along with the narrator and the characters in Sodom. This shifts focus from the involvement of the deity, and causes slippage into circularity. All characters continually investigate, but remain in a closed circuit of surveillance and countersurveillance, without landing on a specific judgement. Sodom has been set up by the

55 As a ger, he does not have the right to show hospitality without the sanction of the authorities of the city. R. Christopher Heard, The Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12–36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), p. 49.
narrator as unreliable (Gen. 13:13; 14:10 18:20), literally as evil sinners who fall into tar pits. They are נָכְר ‘foreigners’ in the simple sense of existing outside the Abrahamic covenant, although pointed accusations from this position are problematic. For example, if the Sodomites are resisting ethical behaviour as investigated by Yhwh, they are doing this while identifying not themselves, but Lot, as the foreigner (גר) in 19:9. To complicate this, Lot is equally disparaged and shut out of the covenant, for the inhospitable nature of this insider gesture of control.

The plot is now reaching its climax, as the watchers (the visitors to Lot) are now being watched and the overweening bureaucratic feedback loop is only self-referential. Lot has offered one night to stay with him before he expects them to move on (v. 2), indicating that Lot does not yet understand the reality of the surveillance. When the Sodomites arrive outside, Lot does not let them in by standing outside the door, the men outside the house use the ambiguous spatial and visual feedback loop terms in verse 9 (גֶשֶׁת לָא), asking Lot to ‘come closer’, so to scrutinise him, rather than the often translated ‘stand back/get out of the way!’ The ambiguity can stand either way as a statement on circular visibility. Lot makes grandiose claims about his virtue to make a legal judgment on the Sodomites. The citizens of Sodom know, however, that it is a surveillance operation rather than legitimate legal procedure.

Ultimate power in knowing and interpreting information is the fuel for the growing tension of the story. The narcissistic construction in Lot’s actions of seeing link with the divine gaze using ocular desire. Lot uses language that seems deferential to an honour code, but this does not make sense to the Sodomites, who scoff at this non-citizen. All the men of the city surround the house, conducting, no doubt, their own type of intelligence services. The visitors seem to the Sodomites to be the famous known unknowns that perpetuate mass surveillance. The immediate reaction of Lot is to try to block the surveillance response of Sodom which leads to fear and the threat of violence. Lot does not explain who the messengers are and why they are here, so the citizens consider this a covert danger to the city. It is therefore not surprising that the Sodomites are enraged by this inauthentic bureaucracy constructed by Lot and thereby threaten them all. Overall, the righteousness or hospitality of Lot and Abraham are not the main point of comparison; rather it

57 Christopher Heard argues linguistically for “come closer.” Christopher Heard, ‘What Does the Mob Want Lot to Do in Genesis 199?’, Hebrew Studies 51 (2010), pp. 98–104 (103).
is the seeing activity of the messengers in each location of Mamre and Sodom, and the way in which it plays out very differently. The Sodomites attempt counter-surveillance by asking for a closer look, which leads to them being struck blind: a metaphor of the stupefying nature of continual surveillance. The demand through ocular desire is denied, and the city begins to implode on itself visually. Things start to disappear, through blindness, closing doors and destruction. The messengers reveal their plan by naming themselves as the mediating power bringing destruction rather than the destruction coming directly from Yhwh. The narrator insists on prosopopoeia as the messengers describe Yhwh ‘seeing’ a cry ‘before the face’ (19:13): a possible foreshadowing of the Deuteronomist view of Ammon/Moab. The visitors are quite comfortable to identify themselves as interpreters of this visual data as judgment. In turn, Lot reports their actions differently: “Get out of this place, as Yhwh will ‘destroy’ (שחת rather than ‘overthrow’ (הפק) as reported later) the city” Gen 19:14; also Gen 4:17; 11:5,8), to soften his participation in aiding the messengers. Lot then turns to his family and reports that Yhwh is directly judging and destroying the city, a deliberate redaction of the messengers’ words. The narrative illustrates two competing modes of surveillance, where the one watched looks into the face of another gaze. The return of the surveillant gaze upon itself is an artistic mode of questioning expectations of others. For example, those that are breaking laws under cameras can display their actions and gaze back into the camera while committing a crime, to illustrate that this inert device does not stop them.

---

59 e.g., Exodus 20:18: ‘All of the people saw … the sound …’ Yairah Amit argues that the speech of the narrator in Deuteronomy reminds the contemporary audience that they themselves hear and see the Sinai theophany. Amit suggests the multiple voices of the two generations from the Exodus converge in Deut 5:3–4. The eyewitnesses of events at Horeb and the later audience of Moses at Moab are joined by using the immediacy of a rhetorical language of seeing. Yairah Amit, ‘Who Is Afraid of Multiple Voices?’, in Yairah Amit and Betty Sigler Rozen (eds.), *In Praise of Editing in the Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays in Retrospect* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), pp. 85–92.
Lot and the Sodomites are conducting a gaze, rather than a look. The gaze represents surveillance or countersurveillance, the ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ of power, whereas sousveillance is a look that critiques the use of surveillance. Lot seems to be operating on a level where the visual and circumstantial data presented is continually misrepresented, perhaps following the narrator in the insatiable need for information as power.61 Indeed, the sons in law who hear that a god will destroy the city are incredulous at Lot’s continued grandiose drama (naming him with a piel participle כִּמְצַחֵ֖ק ‘one who jests/mocks’ in v. 14). The surveillance data is ultimately not correctly interpreted on either side, and genocide (and later family death and incest) ensue.

**Sousveillance as Disavowal and Empty Response**

While the family is still in the city, the messengers address Lot, warning not to ‘look’ back at the city of Sodom in 19:17 תַבּיט (masculine singular of נבט). In contrast to the word ‘to see’ (ָרָאה), נבט is used in Gen. 19:17 to prohibit looking and in 15:5 for Yhwh’s command to Abram to look with awe at the stars.62 It emanates from a looking subject, as a dialectic: to see with fascination or look with consideration.63 The text is ambiguous as to the inclusion or presence of Ado in hearing this prohibition.64 The messengers grasp hold of all their hands but use masculine singular pronominals.

And when they had brought them out to the street, they said, ‘Flee for your life; do not look (טבנ) behind you or stand still in the valley; flee to the hills, or you will be swept away’.  
Gen. 19:17

---

61 When a character looks at something and this is described by the narrator, it is not certain that this description is the authentic vision of that character. Therefore it is necessary to ‘... make a distinction between those who see and those who speak.’ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 143.

62 e.g., Exod 3:6, 33:8; Num 21:9.

63 The difference between looking and seeing is here pertinent in the use of sousveillance.

64 Despite this, Lina Sjöberg sees the parental surveillance of the deity as an ethic of care towards the foreigner, taking the family firmly by the hand and listening to the petition of Abraham. The deity is open to change. Lina Sjöberg, ‘The Empathetic Pillar of Salt: Bible, Literature and Scholar in Conversation,’ in David J.A. Clines and J. Cheryl Exum (eds.), *Biblical Reception* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), pp. 267–280 (275–276).

65 *JPS ‘look behind’, p. 34.*
Lot continues to assert knowledge through seeing narcissistically. He asks the messengers to ‘Behold’ הִנֵּה a safe place for him to allow his life to be saved in verse 20. The pragmatic use of his new knowledge understands the fear of separation and the search for control. The characters eventually travel to a higher place for them to see the disaster fully.

In contrast, looking from above but without top-down seeing or full knowledge, Ado returns the gaze of Yhwh, the messengers and the city. Ado also does not know key information about the judgment, and yet looks into the destruction, critiquing the ideology that seeks to establish the fantasy of knowing all.

But his wife looked (נבט) from behind him (מאחוריו) (masculine singular) and she became a pillar of salt.

Gen. 19:26

The text poses an ethical question regarding the gaze that is concerned with control and mastery, and an alternative to this gaze. Ado acts in response to the destruction with this resistant ‘look’ taking up this agency in verse 26, thereby catapulting herself into high visibility. The messengers use נבט to declare, “do not look and examine this investigation”. Ado fixates on the object of the burning city, declaring surveillance as unconscious desire which, when uncovered consciously, can be exposed as meaningless through the resistance of sousveillance. The prohibition is exposed as a warning not to look behind the ideological symbolic order into the endless recurring ideologies within.

In looking, she illustrates both the ocular desire to know and the internalised gaze of the prohibitive injunction not to look. With this gesture, she questions the gaze but remains a participant in a veillant field. She is aware of her action but uses a look of complete surrender and defiance in the face of any consequences. This look is employed by Ado as a sousveillant response to the essentialism, perpetuated by her own Sodomite citizens and the counter-surveillance of Lot. This look is an invitation to the reader who identifies with Ado in this challenge to surveillance. She is not blinded for abusing surveillance in the particularism of national defence, as the male citizens of Sodom. Ado is annihilated for the fetishist disavowal that both embraces the symbolic order of universalism behind the disaster and yet does not believe in it. Her presence and high visibility are immanent and become a permanent part of the landscape. Ado parallels and contrasts with Genesis themes of obedience.

---

66 For example, David Lyon has suggested a use of this ‘look’ by describing a surveillant ethic of care. D. Lyon, ‘Surveillance and the Eye of God’, p. 31.
and care. The ocular desire of Ado compels her to look into the phantasm of a prohibition and accept disaster while still questioning its veracity; this is Žižek’s fetishist disavowal, rupturing the surveillant symbolic order. Ado questions the surveillant gaze through observation as resistance, in the act of the Lacanian empty gesture, representative of a resistance to the internalised gaze.

Scott Morschauser notes the characterisation in Genesis 22 in relation to obedience and the covenant that suggest examples of needless suffering as a test that is passed. This is traced to various Late Bronze Age diplomatic correspondences showing the servant’s willingness to be annihilated, sacrifice their life, or family members to a royal suzerain. Abraham’s test on Moriah is a hyperbolic show of loyalty due to a language of sovereignty and political and social performance. This obedience to annihilation is social theatre rather than an expectation of reality. It is preferable to remain faithful to the true suzerain rather than inadequate ones (Egypt, or in Genesis the אָרֶץ הָעַם). But the loyalty showed by Ado is in only maintaining the gesture itself, but the reversal of this, knowing that the test of obedience will never be passed. Both Abraham and Ado are ushered to a location by a divine command where they are asked to ascend mountains (הַר). While Abraham is led to the place of seeing (מוֹרִיָה), perhaps to see God (Gen 22:2), Ado is prohibited to ‘look’ (Gen 19:17). The test is meaningless in the case of Ado, as there is no reward from the suzerain, as there is no suzerain covenant, and so no reason to look or not look, only to turn and acknowledge certain perdition. The ideological reasons for acting as an obedient servant does not work in the context of a non-Israelite woman, in the face of universalist claims to obedience.

Ado is a cultural hybrid standing in between the categorisation of righteous and wicked, taking on the consequences of exposing the counter-surveillance
occurring between two antagonistic groups (Israel/Ammon-Moab). The look-gesture of Ado draws attention to the layers of posturing social agreements that result in violence. The reader is confronted with the choice to identify Ado either with transgressive seeing or with a comment on the limits of surveillance. Her decision, in uncovering herself to devastating trauma, is in contrast to the passive, covert, narcissistic behaviour of Lot that condemns him to be forgotten by Yhwh and the Sodomites. Both are destroyed but remembered differently. To do this, Ado imitates conformity to the law, which forms a basis for subversion of the political fantasy on which it is based.

Reading in sympathy with Ado requires taking on this disavowal: to embrace the cognitive dissonance of believing in a symbolic order that one does not believe in. Ado seems to break in from outside to reveal a new reality, or another order, through malicious compliance, although resulting in her destruction. This is an acceptance of the inability to attain full knowledge. Ado invites the reading spectator to join her vision if they dare. This act of looking for Ado is not a display of her authentic person but is the return of a gaze in order to become nothing, so as to avoid the penetrating surveillant gaze that strips the soul of authenticity.

Surveillant Seeing and Instability

Abraham returns, in vv. 27–28, to a place where he looks down (שקף) and sees Sodom (consider that Yhwh has already tried to ‘go down’ in order to fulfil the desire to know in 18:20). By his vision he changes his perception of the scene. Sodom is now not a human place but is changed by the mirative particle in v. 28 הינ. This parallels Exodus 3:2, referring to the cry of Israel in Exodus 2:23–24 that causes Yhwh to remember promises, and to the realisation of Moses though הינ that there exists the presence of the deity in a burning bush. The difference is that in Exodus, the cry is heard with straightforward action. Like Yhwh, Abraham perceives identical information to the narrator, but interprets this differently, in a metaphoric comparison with troubled agitation. There is instability concerning the judgment after the fact. The narrator reiterates the


73 Žižek, The Plague of Fantasies, 29.
covenant and describes the tumult but does not explain the meaning of the investigation or the destruction any more than other characters.

So it was, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow (הָפַךְ), to overthrow (הָפַךְ) the cities in which Lot lived.

*Gen. 19:29*

It is too late for further investigation and surveillance, which has proven destructive. This is an embrace of the pain of uncertainty in surveillance. Given the previous characterisation of Yhwh in chapter 18 as open to change in categorisation through the surveillant eye, here is a growing instability as to the integrity of the data in the mind of Yhwh, and a development of the consideration of judgement and change in the divine character. We are not told by the narrator the ultimate reasons for the judgment or destruction, but what is of most importance is how investigation of the deity is legitimate. That is, who has the right to judge here?74 This also plays out in various human characters seeing behaviour after the destruction.

Lot’s reaction to the men of Sodom has foreshadowed his daughters’ reactions to him 19:30–38. His daughters also make the mistake of assuming that surveillance is able to furnish complete risk management in a circular closed system. So, as continuing panic and anticipation of further disaster sets in, they leave the allotted town of Zoar and escape to a cave. Caves are markers of the dead and placeholders for future inheritance of land.75 Rather than a way of settling into a line of the Abrahamic family by burying the dead, Lot’s daughters tell themselves that there are no men left ‘on the earth/land’. They refer to the experience of human reproduction universally, suggesting a Noahic story, to explain their actions. However, rather than inheritors, the sons born to the daughters of Lot represent not only personal panic but continuing displacement of the population and non-recognition. This scene is reminiscent of Noah and Canaan in Gen. 9:18–29, where transgression is punished by becoming invisible. The layers of seeing in the story begin with one daughter of Lot declaring the new information (or proof) to the other in 19:34 (ָיהוָה) of the incest, despite their premeditated collaboration. It also states in the story that

---


Lot did not know of this (יָדַע), any more than God knows or the messengers could find out what the trouble was in Sodom. The universalist perspective of the text sits awkwardly within the obvious limits of knowledge in the particularity of issues such as interethnic and interreligious conflict, personal obedience and responsibility.⁷⁶

Conclusion

A surveillance reading of biblical narratives can enable a discussion on the oscillating nature of knowledge and freedom, including explorations into the gaze of the divine, the biblical narrator and human characters. Societies that use surveillance operate on a drive for watching and being watched, to create order and security. However, there is a problematic side of practising surveillance, particularly for those who are not considered model citizens or as non-compliant participants. Surveillance is also both implemented and experienced more intensely in times when states of emergencies or disasters occur, as we have seen in a world affected by a viral pandemic.

This reading of Genesis 18–19 illustrates visual tropes of control or resistance by characters adjusting their social performance under a gaze. The storyworld is concerned with the representation of social and legal norms through surveillance and being surveyed. If the historical world of the Sodom-Mamre narrative is that of tensions between smaller communities of dominated people, such as Ammon/Moab and Israel/Yehud, in a post-exilic era of Persian domination, the larger polemic can be derived from the centralised ideology of returning exiles in the Persian period against sexual or tribal outsiders. The nationalistic struggle of groups against the universal power of empire is abandoned as they turn on each other. The fate of the Sodomites and Lot is in response to their use of the veillant field, and so they implode by their competing surveillance. Ado is a cipher to the account of surveillance, a visual reminder that the petition of Abraham is remembered, but others are forgotten, standing as she does in the precarious position between Israelite and the surrounding nations of Moab and Ammon. She is destroyed in high visibility, but also remembered for her stance that highlights the precarious and ambiguous nature of surveillance.

⁷⁶ “... the outsiders and their God Yhwh have come to take over, because they consider their God to be the God Most High. It is from their perspective that the text is written. Since then all readers have interpreted the text through their eyes only and grew used to blame the men of Sodom for their unlawful behavior.” E. J. van Wolde, ‘Outcry, Knowledge and Judgment in Genesis 18–19’, p. 96.
On the one hand, Lot, the men of Sodom and Lot’s daughters use surveillance and counter-surveillance in the vain hope of authentic survival but fail to achieve this. On the other hand, Ado uses sousveillance in response to the unempathetic gaze of the narrator. In this way the character of Ado becomes a monument to the divine logic of election: the declaration of ‘judgement’ by the deity is also subject to openness and change, due to the principles of justice and hospitality. Resistance to the possibility of change is narcissistic obsession with group survival. Indeed, surveillance without the openness to change is based on a terror of invisibility and irrelevance (even though the text is produced in the midst of imperial domination), not election within a covenant. Lot and the Sodom citizenry state their claim to greatness and authenticity through continual surveillant knowledge. As a foreigner and woman, Ado internalises the gaze of the powerful in terms of male power and in association with the line of Abraham. However, the sousveillance uses the same ideology in critique of the investigation of both her kin and that of her husband’s line. This is in light of the universal theme behind Sodom’s judgment. Here is a messy surveillant realpolitik illustrating the legal and moral tension between violence and Israelite reassurance and survival.