

## Research Article

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# “Look at What They’ve Turned Us Into”: Reading the Story of Lot’s Daughters with Trauma Theory and *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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**Abstract:** The story of Lot’s daughters’ incest with their father in Genesis 19:30–38 has been variously understood as a myth, a trickster tale, and an androcentric phantasy. In this paper, I will use insights gained from trauma theory, as well as from the characters of Emily and Moira in the Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, to evaluate the daughters’ actions. Studying the characters in the final form of the text, the women undergo traumatic experiences as their father offers their bodies to be raped (Gen. 19:7–8) and they witness the destruction of their home (Gen. 19:24–25). Consequently, they engage in what could be described as a traumatic re-enactment with their father, where the roles of the perpetrator and the victim are reversed, and the continuation of the patriarchal line is simultaneously guaranteed. Read in conjunction with the fates of Emily and Moira, the daughters’ experience could be summarized in Emily’s observation, “Look at what they’ve turned us into.” In the lives of all the women, the experience of cumulative and direct trauma influenced their decision making as well as the choices they had available. This leaves the audience in a moment of uncertainty, where evaluating the women’s actions becomes a complex, even an impossible prospect.

**Keywords:** Lot’s daughters, Hebrew Bible, trauma theory, re-enactment, revenge, traumatic amnesia, insidious trauma

## 1 Introduction

In the Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the characters Emily and Moira find themselves in police holding cells having been arrested after a protest.<sup>1</sup> They both ponder on past acts of violence they committed while still living in Gilead before their escapes to Canada. Gilead, a totalitarian patriarchal theocracy, is formed of parts of the old United States and is governed by rigid rules that separate women according to both class and function. Emily, a former handmaid, aka a sexual surrogate to elite families to bear children, and Moira, a former prostitute at a brothel called the Jezebel’s, both confess to killing someone prior to their escape. Emily, while living in the polluted Colonies and subjected to forced labour, poisoned a Commander’s Wife, one of the wives of the elite class, seemingly as a revenge for the rapes to which her class would have subjected handmaids. Emily does not feel remorse for her deed. Moira, in turn, killed (according to her somewhat needlessly) one of her clients at

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<sup>1</sup> *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Season 3 Episode 7.

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the brothel just before her escape. To this Emily responds, “Look at what they’ve turned us into.” The implication seems to be that had neither woman been subjected to the horrendous suffering they encountered in Gilead, neither of them would have committed these actions. “Look at what they’ve turned us into” becomes a phrase that echoes the pain as well as the outrage that the women feel against the society whose monstrous treatment of them moulded their minds in ways where the resulting deaths were, in some way, beyond their control. Moira then asks Emily if she has killed anyone since she left Gilead. Both admit that they have not. To this Moira responds, “So, I think we’re good.” The need for lethal violence is (at least for now) over, left at the gates of Gilead which created its own monsters.

Watching this episode from *The Handmaid’s Tale* caused me to reflect upon two other women, this time from the Hebrew Bible, who also took matters into their own hands and committed acts so outrageous that finding a reasonable explanation for them has proven exceedingly difficult. The story of Lot’s daughters in Genesis 19:30–38, where at the daughters’ initiative, the two sisters commit incest with their father Lot and consequently conceive the forefathers of Israel’s less-than-welcome neighbours, Moab and Ammon, has been understood by some as a myth,<sup>2</sup> possibly to extol the pure lineage of Moab and Ammon that in the hands of Israelite authors/editors was subsequently changed into an abhorrent tale.<sup>3</sup> Other options include a comic tale<sup>4</sup> and a variation of a male phantasy that displaces male desires on female victims, possibly even including a cover up of Lot’s abuse of his daughters.<sup>5</sup> Some have taken a more trauma-informed approach, such as Ruth Tsoffar’s 2007 article that focused on the analysis of traumatic elements in terms of otherness and hunger/scarcity in the stories of Lot’s daughters and the Moabite Ruth.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Kathleen O’Connor has approached the narrative of Genesis 18–19 as a story of traumatic violence from the distant past that reflected the questions and issues “that still haunted Judah in the post-Babylonian period,” including those of God’s justice, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the fate of the people that did, or did not, survive.<sup>7</sup> Using an intertextual approach, Juliana Claassens has discussed the story of Lot’s daughters as descriptive of traumatic experiences depicted not only in the fates of the characters, but also in the afterlife of the narrative, which has been “instrumentalized in such a way as to inflict even more pain and suffering in terms of Israel’s complex relationship with her neighbours.”<sup>8</sup> While comparing the story to Penelope Fitzgerald’s *The Bookshop* and, like Tsoffar, to the biblical narrative of the Moabite Ruth, Claassens argues that the Genesis story is replete with traumatic elements that also feed into Israel’s “anxiety regarding fragile boundaries” with her neighbours where the identity of the self (Israel) and the Other (Moab/Ammon) is tentative at best. Via the narrative account of Genesis 19, Israel can declare that, in the words of Randall Bailey, Moabites and Ammonites are “nothing more than ‘incestuous bastards’”;<sup>9</sup> yet this abject Other cannot be completely eradicated and hence the narrative also represents an unresolved trauma from Israel’s past, haunting generations to come with its depictions. Although according to Claassens the book of Ruth offers a kinder image of the relations between Moab and Israel, such is not the case with the daughters of Lot. They, in fact, have no ending. After the birth of their sons, they simply disappear from the story. The tale of the Moabite Ruth may offer a glimmer of hope to such a sad ending as the reader might re-envisage the daughters of Lot continuing with their lives (after all, their sons did become fathers of nations). Yet, Claassens also suggests that in the act of reading the narrative of Genesis 19, we may help the

<sup>2</sup> Stiebert, *Fathers & Daughters*, 135–6.

<sup>3</sup> Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 109–11. See, also, Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 258–63. However, Frymer-Kensky would consider the purity of lineage a sustained argument even in the present context.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters,” 29–46; *Comedy*, 39–50.

<sup>5</sup> Exum, “Desire Distorted,” 83–108; Seifert, *Tochter und Vater*, 82–6; Fischer, “On the Significance,” 273–4; Rashkow, “Daddy-Dearest,” 82–107. For seeing the narrative as an example of the image of ‘the Seductive Daughter,’ see Herman, *Father-Daughter*, 36–49. For an excellent summary of some of these views, see Stiebert, *Fathers & Daughters*, 130–44; and Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 169–73.

<sup>6</sup> Tsoffar, “The Trauma of Otherness,” 1–13.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connor, *Genesis 1–25A*, 268–72, 281–4.

<sup>8</sup> Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Bailey, “Incestuous Bastards,” 131 as quoted in Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 36.

“forgotten Moabite and... the Ammonite mothers” assert that “they too existed in their own right.”<sup>10</sup> As *The Bookshop* may have been Fitzgerald’s “instance of melancholia” after her husband’s death and may have helped her, as well as her protagonist, to work “through loss” as noted by Christopher Knight,<sup>11</sup> maybe something similar could be envisioned for Lot’s daughters. By not giving them a happy ending, the author witnesses to their trauma and by witnessing and staying with it, helps the audience to begin a journey through it. It is not a happy ending, possibly not an ending at all, but it might offer another glimmer of hope.

Understanding Genesis 19:30–38 through the lens of trauma theory might indeed prove beneficial, and Claassens detailed as well as intertextual reading of Lot’s daughters offers insights that bring into awareness several matters that a (contemporary) reader of the narrative might face.<sup>12</sup> The issue of incest alone is distressing, and the somewhat odd portrayal of a family affair where daughters make designs upon their father (rather than *vice versa*) may seem perverse and fantastical at best. Yet trauma theory could help to explain at least aspects of the less than palatable content of the narrative and reading it intertextually with other trauma narratives as demonstrated by Claassens can also help us address concerns (at least for a contemporary reader) that may not be immediately obvious or even a matter of focus in the ancient text.<sup>13</sup>

However, even if we perceive the actions of Lot’s daughters in view of trauma, the question remains how exactly should this be understood? In other words, why would the trauma endured by Lot’s daughters cause them to commit incest rather than, for example, flee the cave? And why would they have been traumatized in the first place? If we read the story of Lot’s daughters as it now stands in Genesis 19 and address these concerns by focusing on the characters as they are presented, how could trauma theory help us understand the events that follow? In this article, I will draw upon both trauma theory and interpretations of Genesis 19 to tease out implications in the text that may explain the daughters’ actions and deepen our understanding of the narrative not only as a text of traumatic suffering, but a human drama where decisions and actions made amidst trauma remain questionable and ambiguous.

## 2 Lot’s daughters and trauma

An intriguing aspect of Genesis 19:30–38 is the often-noted active agency that the daughters display in committing incest with their father as well as the reason given in the text behind said act. For example, Tikva Frymer-Kensky has argued that “the action of the daughters of Lot was an act of love and faithfulness to their father and to the need to give life an honourable, even heroic act.”<sup>14</sup> Melissa Jackson understands Lot’s daughters as tricksters, where the author takes jabs at the patriarchal system by introducing a topsy-

<sup>10</sup> Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Knight, “The Second Saddest Story,” 69–70 as quoted by Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Using contemporary trauma theory to analyse biblical texts inevitably brings the question about the transferability of the research results. After all, research done in the twenty-first century is not directly transferable to the world of a biblical text, which assumes worldviews and cultural-social contexts that can differ significantly from those we inhabit ourselves (O’Connor, “How Trauma Studies,” 210–22; Smith-Christopher, “Trauma,” 223–43). However, it is also important to acknowledge that, as noted by Tracy Mary Lemos (“The Apotheosis of Rage,” 105; see her full article for examples), although trauma responses are to some extent culturally mediated, research is beginning to suggest that some trauma responses are based on our common physiology and psychology and may apply cross-culturally. Therefore, trauma research can help to enlighten at least some aspects of biblical narratives where characters are engulfed in situations of oppression, war and violence.

<sup>13</sup> Interpreting the text from the point of view of identity politics helps us understand the text as a cultural product facilitating identity formation regarding Israel and her neighbours as opposed to simply a tragedy involving just one family. In the story of Lot’s daughters, the cultural and individual form parallel discourses where the fates of nations and individuals are mutually established. However, as this article focuses on the trauma endured by the characters rather than the wider implications the story may have in defining Israel’s relationship with her neighbours, this aspect will not be addressed in this paper.

<sup>14</sup> Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 263.

turvy<sup>15</sup> world of male foolishness and female intelligence and heroism.<sup>16</sup> To view the daughters' actions as heroism becomes even clearer, if one is willing to accept the daughters' point of view: for reasons unknown, they believe that the world (rather than just Sodom and Gomorrah) has in fact ended and their father is the only man left to provide the daughters with offspring (Gen. 19:31–32). In such a scenario, desperate times could indeed call for desperate measures.<sup>17</sup> After all, continuing humanity would seem a reasonable, even a respectable goal if one believed, as the daughters did, that an annihilation event on so grand a scale had taken place as to leave the daughters, and their father, as the last man and women on earth. In such a case, could the daughters' action even be viewed, as Frymer-Kensky has argued, an act of love?

Even if we were to understand the action of Lot's daughters as loving or, less magnanimously, a lesser of two evils, could trauma theory help us shed some light on the reason why the daughters would have even contemplated the idea that the whole world had in fact perished? As Tsoffar has noted, the backdrop of the story in Genesis 19:30–38 is the total annihilation of the world as Lot's daughters would have known it: not only are Sodom and Gomorrah utterly destroyed (Gen. 19:25), but the daughters lose their mother on their journey to the village of Zoar as she is changed into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26).<sup>18</sup> Even before these events, the daughters would have been subjected to abuse in the hands of their father who seemed to have little qualms in offering them to be raped by an angry mob of men<sup>19</sup> who had instead requested to abuse<sup>20</sup> the divine visitors staying at their home (Gen. 19:1–11).<sup>21</sup> Although the rules of hospitality could explain some of Lot's behaviour,<sup>22</sup> this does little to repel the horror of the actual offer of his virgin daughters.<sup>23</sup> Rather, in the words of Katherine Low, “he [Lot] forces a sexual situation upon them [his daughters], regardless of their consent or non-consent.”<sup>24</sup> The daughters are not what the Sodomites are after, but Lot turns the situation into one where the rape of the daughters seemingly becomes the more “acceptable” alternative of two evils.<sup>25</sup> The father turns from a failed protector of his family<sup>26</sup> to an unsuccessful manipulator of the crowd, relinquishing any care and concern he may have harboured for his daughters in favour of total

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of a “topsy-turvy world” in ANE cultures where “symbolic inversion” was used to describe, among others, other ethnic groups or as a form of social critique, see Kruger, “The World ‘Topsy-Turvy,’” 115–21.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, “Lot's Daughters,” 46.

<sup>17</sup> Goldingay, *Genesis*, loc. 10464 of 33784; Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 109; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 313.

<sup>18</sup> Tsoffar, “The Trauma of Otherness,” 6–7.

<sup>19</sup> John Goldingay (*Genesis*, loc. 10301–21 of 33784) has made an interesting observation, where the people gathered outside Lot's house are understood to consist of both men and women. If rape was the intended fate of the visitors, the rape could have involved homosexual rape, but it may have also been the women who were supposed to rape the visitors. This, according to Goldingay, would also link the passage with Lot's fate in Genesis 19:30–38.

<sup>20</sup> The verb “to know”, יָדָע, can indicate that the men surrounding the house wanted to “know” what the visitors were doing in Sodom; however, the verb also carries sexual overtones and could suggest that the men wanted to sexually violate the visitors. As noted by George Athas, it is quite possible that both are intended in the passage (“Has Lot Lost the Plot?” 13).

<sup>21</sup> Bechtel reads Lot's offer as a means to ease tension: Lot offers the townsmen something they did not ask for, that is, two non-threatening women (“A Feminist Reading,” 112–15, 117–25). Bailey understands the offer to reflect Lot's xenophobia and thus a misinterpretation of the Sodomites' intentions (“Why Do Readers?” 538–45). In this paper, the threat as well as the offer will be understood as that of sexual violation, even if the Sodomites also wished to “know” why the visitors were in their town. See no. 20.

<sup>22</sup> See Hendel et al., “Gender and Sexuality,” 77–86; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 298; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 70–1.

<sup>23</sup> As noted by Sharon Pace Jeanson, “there are no indications from the Hebrew Scriptures that sexual abuse or other violence is condoned if done in the service of “hospitality”” (*The Women*, loc. 529 of 2114). Even if such customs existed in the cultural milieu of ancient Israel, their existence is not made evident in the biblical text.

<sup>24</sup> Low, “The Sexual Abuse,” 40.

<sup>25</sup> For reading Lot's offer as a decoy, see Athas, “Has Lot Lost the Plot?” 1–18. In my reading, the daughters are assumed to be engaged virgins and hence Athas' reading will not be pursued further.

<sup>26</sup> Note that Lot's offer seems to only enrage the townspeople and ultimately does not offer protection for anyone in the house (Gen. 19:9).

strangers Lot himself had insisted<sup>27</sup> stay at his house (Gen. 19:2–3).<sup>28</sup> The daughters quite literally “have no rights, no voice, no self-determination in this misogynist order.”<sup>29</sup> To add to this horror, the daughters were engaged<sup>30</sup> to men in Sodom, who may well have been standing outside with the angry mob demanding to rape the divine messengers (Gen. 19:4, 14).<sup>31</sup> This on its own might tell us something about Lot’s moral character in his presumed part in choosing suitors for his daughters; however, in any case his offer would now also be in breach of his agreement with the grooms<sup>32</sup> and, assuming the daughters would have survived the night, potentially even incurred the death penalty upon the women (Deut. 22:23–24).<sup>33</sup> As noted succinctly by O’Connor, the only person “from whom the daughters need protection before all others is their own father.”<sup>34</sup>

For the daughters I would imagine even one of these events could have been traumatic, let alone the compounding effect of all of them put together. However, to understand how the experience of trauma might have affected how the daughters remembered and understood what had occurred to them requires a more detailed understanding of the effect of trauma. Psychological trauma has been described by Judith Herman as “an affliction of the powerless.”<sup>35</sup> Trauma, originating from the Greek word *τραῦμα* to designate a physical wound, is now often understood to designate a wound to the self where the victim, as Herman continues, “is rendered helpless by overwhelming force.”<sup>36</sup> Such an overwhelming force, whether real, imagined, or witnessed, can shatter a person’s sense of safety, connection, and meaning, rendering the victim helpless and without agency. When a rupture of this magnitude takes place in the self, one’s recollection and understanding of the event bypasses one’s capacity to remember, narrate, and assign meaning to events in the traditional sense. Rather, as famously noted by Cathy Caruth, the trauma is experienced belatedly.<sup>37</sup> As per the title of Bessel van der Kolk’s seminal work on traumatology, the body quite literally keeps the score.<sup>38</sup> Rather than having “experienced” the traumatic event as we would normally understand it, the body “remembers” the event as images, sensations, and sounds, which often return in the form of disruptive flashbacks or nightmares. In the present, the victim keeps on reliving her darkest moments with the acuteness of the original event as if no time had passed at all.

Although to give a detailed account of trauma and its effect on a person’s psyche is beyond the boundaries of this paper, for our purposes there are four aspects that I would like to emphasize further. These are linked to four areas of the brain that, according to van der Kolk, are some of the necessary elements for understanding the nature of traumatic memory. They are the thalamus, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), the amygdala, and the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC). These van der Kolk has affectionately entitled the cook, timekeeper, smoke detector, and watchtower of the brain.<sup>39</sup> For an event to be experienced and become a part of our autobiographical narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end, all of these four systems need to function in unison. The cook (the thalamus) is like a “relay station”

<sup>27</sup> The verb used for insisting, *רצו*, in Genesis 19:3 is the same as the verb used for the men “pressing” against Lot in Genesis 19:9. The verb could implicate the fervency in Lot’s request to the visitors since the offer of his hospitality was originally denied (Gen. 19:2). See, also, Hendel, Kronfeld and Pardes, who argue that the use of the verb *רצו* links Lot’s hospitality to the lack of it among the Sodomites (“Gender and Sexuality,” 78).

<sup>28</sup> Tsoffar, “The Trauma of Otherness,” 7; O’Connor, *Genesis 1–25A*, 276–7; Low, “The Sexual Abuse,” 40; Hendel, Kronfeld and Pardes, “Gender and Sexuality,” 86.

<sup>29</sup> Carden, “Genesis/Bereshit,” 38.

<sup>30</sup> It is possible that the two daughters in the house were engaged to the men outside the home, or Lot may have had daughters who were already married. See Goldingay, *Genesis*, loc. 10360 of 33784. In this paper, the former description is assumed.

<sup>31</sup> See, also, O’Connor, *Genesis 1–25A*, 278–9.

<sup>32</sup> Exum, “Desire Distorted,” 90.

<sup>33</sup> Athas, “Has Lot Lost the Plot?” 3; Exum, “Desire Distorted,” 90.

<sup>34</sup> O’Conner, *Genesis 1–25A*, 278.

<sup>35</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11–2.

<sup>38</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body*.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 51–73.

that takes in phenomena from our senses and integrates it into what van der Kolk calls “the soup that is our autobiographical memory.”<sup>40</sup> It tells us what is happening to us at any given moment. The timekeeper (DLPFC), with the help of the hippocampus, gives an experience meaning and context: the DLPFC keeps track of how the event we experience relates to our past and how it may influence the future.<sup>41</sup> The smoke detector (the amygdala), with feedback from the hippocampus, makes an assessment whether what is happening is relevant for our survival. Most importantly for our purposes, this is done “quickly and automatically” and if a threat is sensed, the smoke alarm instigates a whole-body response including the release of various stress hormones, such as adrenaline, to prepare the person to fight or flee.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, the watchtower (MPFC) enables “people to observe what is going on, predict what will happen if they take a certain action, and make a conscious choice.”<sup>43</sup> This ability to take in the information produced by the body and calmly orchestrate a response helps to modulate some of our more hardwired responses and can, for example, be of help when deciding if the burglar alarm that has gone off in the middle of the night warrants a call to the police or finding the house cat that may have triggered it first.<sup>44</sup> Such an ability to ponder, evaluate, and choose is essential for our existence and for human communication and cohabitation. Overall, this somewhat simplified description of the brain’s ability to evaluate and respond to events may help us understand what happens during a traumatic event and why our responses, or those of Lot’s daughters, may be significantly different if undergoing a traumatic experience.

During a traumatic event, three of these systems, the cook, timekeeper, and watchtower, shut down. For the cook, this means that rather than creating an autobiographical soup of what is happening in the moment, the event is remembered as “isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations that are accompanied by intense emotions, usually terror and helplessness.”<sup>45</sup> This is not a story with a start, middle, and an end. Rather, with the accompanied collapse of the body’s timekeeper, the event is remembered as if it were happening right now. The sense of time disappears, and the person becomes quite literally “trapped in the moment.”<sup>46</sup> This in turn has major implications for the smoke detector, since if the event is understood as happening now and is also interpreted as threatening for our survival, stress responses associated with fight or flee are triggered producing a whole-body response, causing anything from an elevated heart rate to angry outbursts.<sup>47</sup> Lastly, as the smoke detector is working on overdrive, this makes it all the harder for the watchtower to have any say in the course of events. Rather, the watchtower is outvoted, and the body is taken over by more primal responses, trying to help us survive a perceived imminent threat.<sup>48</sup>

How would such an assessment help us understand Lot’s daughters? If we assume that they would have experienced the annihilation of their hometown as traumatic, this would mean that it was not only Lot’s wife who was doomed to be frozen in time.<sup>49</sup> Rather than turn into pillars of salt, the daughters’ experience would have locked them in a traumatic memory with no timeframe, as if the extinction of their world were occurring all over again. With their internal timekeepers destroyed and their smoke detectors firing on all cylinders at anything that reminded them of the original trauma, the daughters would have been trapped in a living nightmare. And sadly, reminders of the original trauma would not have been hard to come by. Their impoverished circumstance, the loss of their home, the presence of their father, the absence of their mother,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 60–1.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 62–3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 60–2, 68–9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 60–4.

<sup>49</sup> See O’Connor, *Genesis 1–25A*, 279, 282–3. She reads the fate of Lot’s wife as descriptive of the “body-and-spirit-paralyzing impact of disaster upon victims and witnesses” of the exile (282).

and the smoked remains of the plain presumably visible from the confines of their cave would have been more than enough to begin the cycle of traumatic memory over and over again.

However, if the destruction of Sodom would have become inscribed in the daughters' traumatic memory, what happened to their memory of their visit to Zoar (Gen. 19:20–23)? Even if the daughters would have been trapped in a living nightmare regarding the annihilation of the plain, why did they think that there were no men left on earth to provide them with offspring (Gen. 19:31–32), which presumably also included the men in Zoar? Reading the story with an understanding of traumatic memory, it is plausible that some of the events surrounding the original trauma could have become victims of trauma-induced amnesia. In his work with Holocaust survivors, Lawrence Langer describes a woman giving birth in a ghetto during the Nazi regime. She is able to “remember” some details of the birth but equally some elude her, including the ability to reconstruct the events in a precise chronological order.<sup>50</sup> In interviews conducted in 1994, van der Kolk reports trauma victims being able to remember some elements of the trauma with astounding clarity, whereas other elements, such as the identity of the first person who helped them, were not recollected.<sup>51</sup> Judy Cohen, a Holocaust survivor who was liberated at the age of 16, reported amnesic episodes regarding trains or travel, both during and after the Holocaust. For example, even though she could remember being liberated, any transit involving trains on her journey back home could not be recollected.<sup>52</sup> The ability to “remember” some elements but not others regarding a traumatic event or a period in one's life could also explain the episode in Genesis 19: while the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah may have become a vivid traumatic memory for the daughters of Lot, some events surrounding the trauma, such as the visit to Zoar, may equally not have been incorporated. In such a case, this could have led to the daughters' assessment that there were no men left to father their children apart from their elderly father (Gen. 19:31–32).

Furthermore, even if their escape to Zoar would have been integrated as part of the daughters' autobiographical narrative, it is possible that this visit would not have held any significance. After all, it was Lot's fear of being overtaken by the catastrophe that first caused them to escape to Zoar and presumably eventually to the mountains (Gen. 19:18–20, 30).<sup>53</sup> In light of the actual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and that feared upon Zoar, the daughters could be forgiven for thinking that Zoar was or would be wiped out as well.<sup>54</sup> If in the cave, the daughters would have found themselves reliving their trauma and, continuing with van der Kolk's analysis of a watchtower, their brains would have been outvoted by the smoke detector predicting immediate, unavoidable destruction, this would have also stopped them from being able to analyse their situation in any manner other than a threat to survival, confusing both time and space. Hence, to judge the daughters for not doing something “sensible” like considering the men in Zoar is somewhat beside the point. As far as the women were concerned, the threat was ever-present and the destruction total. Either their trip to Zoar was lost in the space of trauma-induced amnesia or even if Zoar was once there, it had been or would soon become a casualty of the destruction. If there ever was a past or a future, both died in the rain of burning sulphur over Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24).

### 3 Lot's daughters, revenge, and re-enactment

If the daughters were as traumatized as suggested above, it is quite intriguing that rather than become passive and withdrawn, the women become active agents in shaping their own future. In fact, some have

<sup>50</sup> Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 16–7. See, also, van der Kolk and van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past,” 158–82.

<sup>51</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body*, 195.

<sup>52</sup> Judy Cohen as referenced in van der Hart and Brom, “When the Victim Forgets,” 8.

<sup>53</sup> The reason for the move to the mountains is not clear in the text but it would seem to be reasonable to assume that it was probably related to the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah. See O'Connor, *Genesis 1–25A*, 280; Tsoffar, “The Trauma of Otherness,” 7.

<sup>54</sup> See Tsoffar, “The Trauma of Otherness,” 7–8.

suggested that rather than succumb to their fate (the assumed end of Lot's line, Gen. 19:31–32), the women set out to create their own path through revenge. That vengefulness may be at the heart of the daughters' actions is at least suggested by Michael Carden who sees in the image of daughter-initiated incest a reversal of the earlier event where Lot offered his daughters to be raped. Now it is Lot who is rendered "powerless and silent... his authority... stripped from him."<sup>55</sup> This, according to Carden, could perhaps be understood as "poetic justice" for Lot's earlier misdeeds.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Weston Fields argues that "Lot is later punished measure for measure by the very daughters whom he so cavalierly proffered to his assailants: it is they who trick him into incestuous copulation."<sup>57</sup>

In their ground-breaking work on revenge, Tomas Böhm and Suzanne Kaplan (2011) argue that once a person feels violated, feelings of revenge may rise in order for the victim to "regain an inner psychic balance through re-establishing...self-esteem,"<sup>58</sup> a conclusion supported also by other studies.<sup>59</sup> Instead of experiencing helplessness, fear, or loss, revenge becomes a coping strategy where the victim attempts to recover their agency via vengeful feelings, thoughts, or actions, seemingly reversing the roles of the victim and the perpetrator.<sup>60</sup> Such a role-reversal can also be observed in the incest narrative in Genesis 19:30–38, where Lot's daughters shift from potential victims of gang-rape to actually raping their father; however, I must concede that viewing the narrative as a tale of vengeance will remain a hypothesis only. In the text there is no indication that the women engage in incest because they felt vengeful towards their father.<sup>61</sup> Rather, they are concerned in continuing the father's line (Gen. 19:31–32). Although their father's offer of their bodies would undoubtedly still have come as a shock, if the daughters were so indoctrinated in patriarchy and the associated "rights" of the father,<sup>62</sup> they may not have felt the need to get back at him, or at least not enough to act out on their feelings.

However, another way to understand the daughters' incestuous relations with their father that still retains a link to the earlier trauma of Lot offering his daughters to be raped is that of trauma re-enactment. The process of acting out previous trauma, or the repetition compulsion, has long been recognized by scholars; however, the reasons as to its cause are variant<sup>63</sup> and more than likely there is no one single explanation for these phenomena. For the purposes of our text, the explanation that I wish to focus on is that of coping with and mastering the traumatic event, where the victim re-enacts their previous trauma in the hope that they may in some way "overcome" or "cope with" the incident. It needs to be noted that the concept of mastering trauma remains controversial as life-long re-enactments of trauma have rarely been shown to result in such mastery.<sup>64</sup> In fact, actively repeating past traumatic experiences can result in what Michael Levy calls "a maladaptive defensive posture."<sup>65</sup> This includes actively mastering the trauma by victimizing others where, for example, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse may become an abuser themselves. As Levy further notes, "in these cases, reenacting past abuse by becoming an active abuser is a defensive stance that ensures that the terror and helplessness related to the old traumatic situation or relationship do not get reexperienced."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," 39.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>57</sup> Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 124.

<sup>58</sup> Böhm and Kaplan, *Revenge*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Goldner et al., "Revenge Fantasies;" Gäbler and Maercker, "Revenge;" Berger, "The Vocabulary;" Orth, Montada and Maercker, "Feelings;" Orth, "Perpetrator Punishment."

<sup>60</sup> See Böhm and Kaplan, *Revenge*, 34–5.

<sup>61</sup> Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 259.

<sup>62</sup> According to Exum, Lot's offer of his daughters shows his control over their sexuality even though as engaged women the daughters were technically not his to offer ("Desire Distorted," 90). That Lot exceeded his paternal rights in offering his daughters is assumed by Jeansonne (The Women, loc. 526 of 2114). For our purposes, it is only important that Lot perceived it as his right to dispose of his daughters, regardless whether it was appropriate for him to do so.

<sup>63</sup> Chu, "The Repetition;" Levy, "A Helpful Way;" van der Kolk, "The Compulsion;" Bloom and Reichert, *Bearing Witness*.

<sup>64</sup> Levy, "A Helpful Way," 228; van der Kolk, *The Body*, 32; van der Kolk, "The Compulsion," 1.

<sup>65</sup> Levy, "A Helpful Way," 229.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 229.

To view the actions of Lot's daughters as traumatic re-enactment, where the daughters master their previous trauma by committing rape against their father, is certainly possible and some elements in the text could support such a conclusion. Firstly, the concept of trauma repetition would tie the themes of rape at the start and at the end of the narrative together. Secondly, it could also explain why the daughters' plan of incest as well as its execution is described in some detail and, more importantly, that both the stages of plan and execution are repeated for both daughters (Gen. 19:31–35). Although Cheryl Exum may well be right that in the act of repetition we can see a type of unconscious androcentric fantasy unfolding,<sup>67</sup> from a trauma perspective the act of repetition speaks to a possible need to re-enact the original trauma of the father's offer of his daughters' bodies. However, this conclusion must remain tentative since within the field of contemporary research, it is in fact abused men who tend to become abusers themselves, whereas abused women are often prone to become victimized again in later life.<sup>68</sup> Such a supposition does not of course exclude the possibility of traumatic re-enactment, and the theory of trauma repetition remains at least a strong possibility to explain parts of the women's actions.

## 4 Lot's daughters and insidious trauma

Whether the daughter's deeds are understood as the result of traumatic amnesia, revenge, re-enactment, or a combination thereof, it is important that these are understood within the larger socio-cultural framework of the daughters' lived experience. Expressions of trauma are at least to some extent culturally determined and, as noted by Maria Root, the socio-cultural environment can also play a part in creating a culture of oppression and discrimination. This is often directed against those who possess "a characteristic intrinsic to their identity" which "is different from what is valued by those in power, for example, gender, color, sexual orientation" or "physical ability."<sup>69</sup> Discrimination of this kind often starts at birth and its effect is cumulative through one's lifetime, impacting one's worldview and one's place within society.<sup>70</sup> This type of traumatic experience is labelled by Root as insidious trauma, a concept which has been subsequently used by Claassens to read the effect that an "all-encompassing system of patriarchy" in its various manifestations and degrees would have had on the lives of Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah in Genesis 29–35. Most appropriately for our study, Claassens reads the narrative intertextually with the story of the main protagonist Offred in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.<sup>71</sup>

That the totalitarian patriarchal theocracy of Atwood's fictional state of Gilead would produce an environment ripe for systematic oppression against women as presented in the book *The Handmaid's Tale* has been analysed well and in detail by Claassens. However, in order to compare the story of Lot's daughters with that of Emily and Moira, whom I introduced at the beginning of this article, some of the events that led the women to commit acts of murder need to be discussed and some of the trauma theory readdressed. In the very first episode, Emily finds herself without voice and without rights, separated from her wife and child who have managed to escape to Canada.<sup>72</sup> Due to her fertility, Emily is destined to be a handmaid, passed from one Commander's family to another in the hopes of producing a child.<sup>73</sup> She manages to keep some sense of her agency intact by participating in the efforts of Mayday, a secret resistance group in Gilead.<sup>74</sup> However, Emily is eventually forced to undergo a presumed clitoridectomy

<sup>67</sup> Exum, "Desire Distorted," 87–9, 94–5.

<sup>68</sup> van der Kolk, "The Compulsion," 3–4.

<sup>69</sup> Root, "The Impact," 240.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>71</sup> Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 72–97.

<sup>72</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 1; Season 2 Episode 2.

<sup>73</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 2.

<sup>74</sup> The first implication of Emily being involved in an unnamed resistance group appears in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 2.

after an affair with a Martha (a female housekeeper), whom Emily witnesses being hanged.<sup>75</sup> During another posting, Emily steals a car and runs over a guardian (a member of the police/guards), which results in her being sentenced to forced labour in the toxic Colonies.<sup>76</sup> It is during her imprisonment that she poisons Mrs. O'Conner, who is a Commander's Wife. While the Wife lies dying and Emily watches on, the Wife claims that Emily will burn for all eternity for what she has done to her. To this Emily responds, "Every month, you held a woman down while your husband raped her. Some things can't be forgiven."<sup>77</sup> The next morning the Wife's body is found hanging on a cross, presumably at the hands of Emily and/or other inmates.

Emily's story and her eventual escape to Canada is interwoven with several independent events of direct trauma as well as indirect trauma as she witnesses the exploitation of other women in her life. All these instances are enveloped within the concept of insidious trauma, describing the continuous oppression and its cumulative effect on Emily as she tries to survive in Gilead. The fact that her choices are limited, and her expression of agency confined to covert operations as well as occasional instances of direct rebellion, even murder, raises the question of how a viewer of the televised adaption of *The Handmaid's Tale* is supposed to understand Emily's actions. As noted by Root, some of the effects of insidious trauma(ta) can be seen in the activation of "survival behaviors"<sup>78</sup> where the victim directs all of their energy towards self-preservation, with little or no room left for "(unnecessary) socially desirable behaviors:" forgiveness, generosity, humour, and considering the other's perspective might all be lacking.<sup>79</sup> Instead, the victim engages in behaviours such as splitting, shutting down (dissociation), self-referencing, perseveration (rumination) and, most importantly for this project, anger and egocentrism.<sup>80</sup> Whereas anger "is both a fighting and protective response" to threat, egocentrism indicates that all of one's energy is directed toward the survival of the self in the face of perceived annihilation.<sup>81</sup> In such a setting, questions surrounding the ethical behaviour of the victims become complicated as at least part of their behaviour might well be normal responses to the experience of trauma, as well as self-defence, rather than the result of, for example, lack of empathy or deficit morality.<sup>82</sup> After all, "everyone has a breaking point"<sup>83</sup> and how is one to judge what the consequences of meeting that point might be for oneself or anyone else?

As Laurie Vickroy notes in his analysis of trauma narratives, ethical questions in trauma novels are highly intricate due to the complex nature of the circumstances as well as the fluid identities of the characters. Victims of traumatization can act in ways that seem immature or unethical to readers, or even become perpetrators themselves; yet these actions may well be understood otherwise if viewed through the lens of trauma.<sup>84</sup> For example, in Vickroy's reading of Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (based in part on the historical figure of Grace Marks), the insidious traumata that Grace has endured due to, among others, her vulnerable position as a young woman in the social underclasses, as well as an immigrant and a servant, are clearly portrayed, yet she may have become an abuser by potentially participating in the murder of her employers. Both the traumata Grace has endured and the trauma she may have inflicted are described or implied, yet we as readers are left in a world of ambiguity regarding exactly how to evaluate her actions. This is made even more difficult since Grace does not recollect some of the events surrounding the murders, including her own (lack of) participation in them.<sup>85</sup> In doing so, as Vickroy further argues, *Alias Grace* "raises the problems of victimization and personal agency and asks whether these can coexist in

<sup>75</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 3.

<sup>76</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 5; Season 2 Episode 2.

<sup>77</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 2 Episode 2.

<sup>78</sup> Root, "The Impact," 241.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 248–50.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 237, 250.

<sup>83</sup> Root, "The Impact," 237; see, also, Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 16–7, 76; and Vickroy, *Reading Trauma*, loc. 300–407 of 4137.

<sup>84</sup> Vickroy, *Reading Trauma*, loc. 628–746 of 4137.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 1072–256 of 4137.

situations of powerlessness, of lack of choices under coercion, of the circumscription of women's lives and women's frequent subjection to violence or death."<sup>86</sup> As a victim of various forms of oppression, her lack of agency due to her underprivileged position and even the possibility of mental illness all complicate an evaluation of Grace's culpability, possibly even precluding such a conclusion altogether.<sup>87</sup>

Such a conclusion seems also to be halted in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the murder of the Commander's Wife, Emily appears to be taking vengeance against a system that subjugated her and other handmaids; yet in light of her traumatic experiences as well as the discussion on trauma and revenge presented earlier, Emily's action could also be understood as an attempt at self-preservation and agency in the inhumane environment of the Colonies as well as Gilead at large. In the case of Moira, who becomes a prostitute at the Jezebel's and seemingly for no apparent reason killed a Commander prior to her escape,<sup>88</sup> a traumatic re-enactment as an attempt to master previous trauma(ta) as noted earlier might well be an appropriate reading in the absence of any obvious links to a revenge motif. To judge either woman for their behaviour becomes increasingly difficult as the viewers have followed their suffering and oppression from the beginning. What ethical choices are available for those whose agency has been severely compromised or limited by a system designed to subjugate them? And can we really judge the attempts, ethical or otherwise, of the women who in such circumstances reclaim at least part of their power?

Returning to the story of Lot's daughters in Genesis 19, the effects of insidious trauma can also be observed in this narrative. Both women live within an ancient patriarchal system with little rights or say regarding what happens to them. Moreover, Lot seems to view his children as property to be disposed of in order to preserve male honour (Gen. 19:6–8),<sup>89</sup> and he does not consult his daughters' (or even his wife's) opinions or feelings in any of his decision making. As the patriarch, Lot is in control of what happens to his daughters. This is, until the daughters decide to rape their father with the intent to produce offspring. We do not know the stories of Lot's daughters in anywhere near enough detail to make conclusive judgments on their actions; however, if read intertextually with the stories of Emily and Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale*, possible parallels do emerge. Women in both stories are subjugated under a patriarchal system for a prolonged period and in both cases the women do take actions to secure agency. In the absence of revenge motif in Genesis 19, the daughters' incest with their father could possibly be better described as traumatic re-enactment like that seen in the actions of Moira; however, an additional detail that we do not receive from Moira is the apparent justification that the older daughter gives for their actions in Genesis 19:31b–32: "Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth: Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father" (KJV). That the daughters considered their father, as opposed to the men in Zoar, as the only possible man to father their offspring might well be explained either through traumatic amnesia or the expected or assumed destruction of the village as suggested earlier. However, what is of particular interest is that the production of offspring seems to be the primary concern of the daughters. As noted by Root, under traumatic circumstances the preservation of the self becomes of primary importance and actions that may appear inconsiderate or even immoral to others can be explained via the survival behaviours in which a traumatized person often engages.<sup>90</sup> However, in this case survival behaviour is directed not at the survival of the daughters *per se* but of their future offspring. That the survival of their father's seed would cause the daughters to break incest taboos is a curious feature in the text and has been described by some as a noble act considering the presumed worldwide destruction assumed in the older daughter's statement. This is indicated by, among others, Carden who notes that in their rape of Lot, the daughters not only "act to save the human race but they also initiate the line of the Messiah," referring here to the Moabite Ruth and Namaah, a wife of Solomon, both of whom are in the lineage of Jesus.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, Tsoffar suggests that the

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., loc. 1270 of 4137.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., loc. 1335 of 4137.

<sup>88</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 9; Season 3 Episode 7.

<sup>89</sup> Hendel et al., "Gender and Sexuality," 86.

<sup>90</sup> Root, "The Impact," 247–50.

<sup>91</sup> Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," 39.

context of trauma and annihilation in Genesis 19 would have expanded the context of survival “from the individual or familial realm to the realm of humankind.”<sup>92</sup> What is at stake is not simply the survival of Lot's family, but that of all humanity.

However, if we look at the passage through the lens of insidious trauma, I believe another conclusion is possible. What is intriguing about the older daughter's reasoning is the emphasis on preserving seed of/from our father, וְנִחְיֶה מֵאֲבִינוּ וְנָרָע. Although one might hear an echo of the story of Noah's ark and the command “to keep seed alive” (לְחַיֹּת זָרַע; Gen. 7:3) of the animals as noted by Sharon Pace Jeansonne,<sup>93</sup> it is remarkable that in the context of Genesis 19 the focus is still on preserving the seed of/from Lot rather than rescuing “the seed of man” or “the seed of Adam” or something similar with a more all-encompassing notion. Intriguingly, even Jeansonne understands the reference to the seed to be an indication of the dire circumstances (akin to the Flood) in which the daughters find themselves rather than a sign of more universal motifs.<sup>94</sup> In Genesis 19, the daughters (and the wife) are only referred to as regards their relationship to the men in their kinship group and in Genesis 19:1–29<sup>95</sup> their fate is determined by Lot's (or the visitors') actions and decisions. In addition, the only time the daughters speak, or at least are implied to do so, are to express the plan to commit incest to produce progeny or to name their children.<sup>96</sup> As noted by Exum, it seems clear that the daughter's wish in their incestuous act is to continue “the patriarchal line.”<sup>97</sup> The story revolves around the father and the daughters and the daughters' wish to preserve the seed of the father in an effort to “save the household itself from destruction,” even if this is at the cost of Lot's and/or the family's honour.<sup>98</sup>

If we read the story of Lot's daughters considering the cumulative effect of trauma caused by living under the strain of patriarchal subjugation and expectations, the fact that the daughters' survival instinct would focus itself not simply on their survival but on the continuation of the patrilineal line is hardly surprising. In her analysis of Genesis 29–35, Claassens notes that Rachel's and Leah's plight to have children were in large part determined by their cultural context (as well as their wish to win Jacob's affection), where women were valued “predominantly for their ability to procreate.”<sup>99</sup> She draws on the work of Candida Moss and Joel Baden on biblical infertility, who note that the cultural context of ancient Israel was “practically designed to make infertile women feel outcast and alone.”<sup>100</sup> Having progeny was important on all levels from individual to the national, and as women had limited opportunities to gain success outside the home, having children became “the means to and a signal of cultural success.”<sup>101</sup> Having lived with such societal norms and pressures, the fact that Lot's daughters would place extreme importance on gaining progeny even in the face of incest becomes plausible. It speaks to the psychological, social, and familial pressures placed on them, which now under extreme duress would take on the survival mode of perpetuating that for which they had been conditioned: to produce children at any cost.<sup>102</sup> Unlike Moira and Emily, who in their acts worked against those who subjugated them, our protagonists would

<sup>92</sup> Tsoffar, “The Trauma of Otherness,” 7.

<sup>93</sup> Jeansonne, *The Women*, loc. 582 of 2114.

<sup>94</sup> Jeansonne, *The Women*, loc. 582 of 2114. Jeansonne also argues that rather than believe in universal destruction, the daughters would have found their circumstances in the cave so impoverished and isolated that their possibility of gaining husbands or offspring otherwise might have been severely limited (*The Women*, loc. 570 of 2114). Although this is certainly possible, reading the narrative through the lens of trauma offers other avenues for exploration.

<sup>95</sup> Hendel et al., “Gender and Sexuality,” 88.

<sup>96</sup> Low, “The Sexual Abuse,” 44.

<sup>97</sup> Exum, “Desire Distorted,” 95, 97. See, also, Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 263.

<sup>98</sup> Hendel et al., “Gender and Sexuality,” 88. Bill Arnold argues that the cause of the daughters' concern was not necessarily the lack of eligible partners, but that Lot would not continue his own line if he remained a widower (*Genesis*, 186). Although my reading is different to Arnold's, his observation does heighten even further the patrilineal emphasis in the story.

<sup>99</sup> Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 80.

<sup>100</sup> Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 39; Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 82.

<sup>101</sup> Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 35.

<sup>102</sup> Naomi Steinberg notes that Lot's daughters' incest with their father “witnesses to the women's commitment to bear children: they will do whatever is necessary -go against all taboos -in order to have children” (*Kinship and Marriage*, 72). However, she argues that the purpose of the incest was most likely to do with the daughters' concerns about their own social standing than about the father's line *per se*.

perpetuate the cycle of trauma and succumb under the pressure of ancient patriarchal expectations. In raping their father, they may well have re-enacted their trauma, but they would have also taken the system that valued them for their procreative prowess to its ultimate, horrifying conclusion.

This conclusion is also supported by the fact that, as noted by Root, ethical considerations can be of little importance to those engaging in survival behaviours.<sup>103</sup> Since the daughters experienced the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as total annihilation, their energies would have focused on actions that engendered survival rather than on matters that were non-essential for this purpose. As in Vickroy's analysis of the protagonist in *Alias Grace* and our reading of Emily and Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale*, assigning moral culpability becomes extremely difficult when dealing with characters within the circumstances of trauma, subjugation, and limited or no agency. As noted by Vickroy, characters in trauma novels (such as those by Atwood and Toni Morrison) can find themselves in situations making impossible choices that are "not really choices" because they involve "avoiding a worse dehumanization."<sup>104</sup> In our story, that worse dehumanization for the daughters would have been the annihilation of the father's line, which in their minds was not a viable option.

In order to produce progeny, the daughters make their father drunk and sleep with him on two consecutive nights (Gen. 19:33–35). In fact, the story is at pains to demonstrate that Lot is in no way culpable for these actions as not only do the daughters "cause their father to drink wine" but in his supposed drunken stupor he does not "know" when the daughters "lay down" or "get up" (Gen. 19:33, 35). In this episode, the daughters are the active agents while their father is rendered passive, a reversal of the events in the threatened gang-rape in Genesis 19:6–8. To present Lot as passive could help to portray him as a victim or at least lessen his guilt,<sup>105</sup> yet the portrayal could also render him as the fool of the story or even play to a male fantasy.<sup>106</sup> However, reading the narrative through the lens of trauma raises the question as to why the daughters even felt compelled to get their father drunk? Even if we assume that in Genesis 19 incest between father and daughter(s) was viewed in a negative light,<sup>107</sup> Lot had not exactly shown himself to be a paragon of virtue before so why did the daughters assume he would deny their request to continue his line? Here I must agree with Jeansonne who argues that in the book of Genesis, Lot is presented "as an insincere, self-centered individual."<sup>108</sup> In Genesis 19 alone, he has disregarded his daughters' welfare, failed to bring his whole family out of Sodom, and let hesitation and fear dictate his actions (Gen. 19:6–8; 12–14, 16, 18–20, 30).<sup>109</sup> And most importantly, in all his choices Lot did not endanger his own bodily integrity. In offering his virgin daughters to be raped (Gen. 19:6–8), Lot protected his guests' honour, but he also protected his own bodily boundaries: after all, he did not offer to take the guests', or the daughters', place.<sup>110</sup> To protect his own person seems, at least in the minds of the daughters, to extend to Lot not being willing to endanger his own body or honour even to continue his own line. Lot is a shrewd player who will risk his daughters and his family, but he will never directly risk himself alone. Considering Lot's actions in Sodom, this is something that the daughters would have been all too aware.

In such circumstances, the daughters were indeed standing before impossible decisions, none of which in their perceived reality provided a good outcome. Traumatized and fighting to survive, they did the

<sup>103</sup> Root, "The Impact of Trauma," 237, 248–50.

<sup>104</sup> Vickroy, *Reading Trauma*, loc. 1361 of 4137; also quoted in Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, 86 n.45.

<sup>105</sup> Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 169; Greenough, *The Bible*, 40; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 261–3.

<sup>106</sup> Jackson, "Lot's Daughters," 39; O'Connor, *Genesis 1–25A*, 281, 283; Goldingay, *Genesis*, loc. 10446–64 of 33784; Exum, "Desire Distorted," 93–7; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 261.

<sup>107</sup> See Stiebert for a useful conversation on the assumption that father-daughter incest is frowned upon also in Leviticus 18/20 despite the absence of a specific law detailing said offense (*Fathers & Daughters*, 102–30).

<sup>108</sup> Jeansonne, *The Women*, loc. 556 of 2114.

<sup>109</sup> O'Connor has argued that Lot's fear in the passage may even be a sign of his own traumatization (*Genesis 1–25A*, 280, 283). See, also, Tsoffar, "The Trauma of Otherness," 7. In fact, if we accept that Lot was present in Genesis 12:10–20 (v. 5; v. 20 LXX) when Abraham endangered Sarah in Egypt by asking her to pretend to be his sister, one could argue that in Genesis 19:6–8 Lot re-enacts the abuse by endangering his own daughters and/or continues a transgenerational cycle of abuse. Neither of these topics are a point of focus in this paper but would benefit from further research.

<sup>110</sup> For the preservation of male honour, see Hendel et al., "Gender and Sexuality," 85–6; Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," 37–8.

unimaginable since not continuing the father's line was not something they were willing to risk. Reading the daughters' deeds through the lens of trauma can help to explain some of the daughters' decisions via concepts of direct and insidious trauma, as well as survival behaviours and trauma re-enactment. Yet, as all trauma narratives, the story leaves the audience at a place of uncertainty and ambiguity where judging right from wrong becomes at best a complex if not an impossible endeavour.

## 5 Conclusion

"Look at what they've turned us into." In the Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, this statement is made by Emily as she ponders on the lives she and Moira led prior to their escape to Canada. This sentence echoes the reality and the impossibility of the women's traumatic experiences. They were both subjugated and abused in various ways at Gilead, and both committed acts of murder before their escape. The effects of direct, indirect, and insidious trauma are evident in their lives and this leaves the viewers to reflect as to how much culpability should be placed on these women regarding their deeds. In Genesis 19, we meet two other women, two daughters, whose father offers them to be gang-raped to save his and his guests' honour. The women experience further trauma in the destruction of their home, and they live out the effects of the insidious trauma of having lived under patriarchal suppositions and obligations by raping their father in a cave to save his seed. All these women acted under impossible circumstances and made impossible decisions to gain at least a sliver of agency. To understand their actions apart from trauma would do them injustice; however, this does not mean that any of these women are necessarily without guilt. Rather, it means that making ethical evaluations of the characters becomes complex as decisions made in circumstances with limited or no agency remain exceedingly problematic. Perhaps the best we can do is, as suggested by Claassens, to listen to the story and give witness to the suffering contained in it.<sup>111</sup> A sympathetic reading of the narrative would not judge the daughters at the outset but rather come alongside them and listen to their story. For myself, reading the account of Lot's daughters has left me in an interesting quandary where traumatic elements in the narrative make the unfolding of the events somewhat plausible, yet they also illustrate the cracks in the patriarchal power structures presented.<sup>112</sup> In other words, if in the daughters' minds preserving the father's line was so important as to warrant incest, it suggests the possibility that obsession with the patriarchal line is ultimately a doomed effort. In times of crises, it can cause its adherents to act in ways that are unethical, immoral as well as devastating and produce one's very own enemies, in our story, the nations of Moab and Ammon. Understanding Genesis 19:30–38 through the lens of trauma thus helps us not only to better understand the traumatized daughters, but also to see the fragility of the power structures behind the narrative. Perhaps its message to contemporary readers is not simply to empathise with those who suffer, but a warning to those abusing their power. Old sins indeed cast long shadows and the fate of Lot might be just one crisis away.

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## Episodes of *The Handmaid's Tale*

- The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 1, "Offred." Hulu. 26th April 2017.
- The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 2, "Birth Day." Hulu. 26th April 2017.
- The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 3, "Late." Hulu. 26th April 2017.
- The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 5, "Faithful." Hulu. 10th May 2017.
- The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1 Episode 9, "The Bridge." Hulu. 7th June 2017.
- The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 2 Episode 2, "Unwomen." Hulu. 25th April 2018.
- The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 3 Episode 7, "Under His Eye." Hulu. 3rd July 2019.