The Daughters of Lot: Legend and Fabliau

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IT WOULD not be unfair, I think, to say that the Book of Genesis still causes us moral problems, even if its place in the Old Testament is secure. This moral offensiveness became evident some time ago when I was thinking about the story of the daughters of Lot, who, after the destruction of Sodom, lived in a cave in the mountains. There the daughters made their father drunk so that they could seduce him. In a gesture of what looks like incongruous delicacy, the story explains that the girls took turns on alternate nights. But otherwise, there seems to be no hint of shame or even embarrassment. And there is no punishment mentioned, an omission which is almost shocking in comparison with another incest tale, Sophocles' treatment of Oedipus' marrying his mother Jocasta. **Oedipus The King** culminates in punishment, indeed, self punishment. We are likely to find this acceptable—Oedipus made a mistake, discovered his sin, and punished himself—particularly if we avoid reading on to **Oedipus at Colonus,** in which the sinful hero becomes something of a holy man in his old age. In short, sin is tolerable in a literary work if it is punished. But the story of Lot's daughters ends with only a brief genealogy:

> The first-born bore a son, and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites to this day. (Gen. 19. 37-8. RSV)

This story becomes even less acceptable if we compare it with another lusty little tale in Genesis, the story of Onan and his primitive birth control. He is immediately punished by death. But why is incest tolerable when birth control is a capital crime? For the laws against incest are very explicit. We could try to reconcile the incongruities by saying that there is a system of values underlying the stories. The stories do not articulate this system, but they seem to imply that life is an ultimate value. The daughters should be excused for their unnatural acts because they broke the laws as a last desperate attempt to propagate life. Life must be perpetuated. The propagation of life must take priority over all other values, laws, and taboos. These women accepted their destiny as women. Ripeness is all. My high-flown articulation of the value system is only a slight exaggeration of what many interpreters see here.

But one of the dangers of the Book of Genesis is that it tempts us in two contrary directions at once. The simplicity of the style tempts one to make simplistic interpretations. The age of the book tempts one to make interpretations which sound like the wisdom of the ages or the profundity of the collective unconscious, depending on the interpreter's bias. I should like to hold interpretations in abeyance for a time and try to examine the story of the daughters of Lot according to three different methods. I shall first look at the story through the eyes of commentators, ancient and modern, most of whom are concerned to find some way to have the story make sense morally. Secondly, I shall examine the story as a motif with several analogues in folk traditions. And then I shall examine the story as a literary anecdote, a fabliau. At this point I shall anticpate my conclusions only to the extent of saying that there is no reason why three con-

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clusions should necessarily harmonize if they have been arrived at by the three different methods.

I. Moral Law

One thing, I think, can be stated unequivocally: incest is a sin to ancient as well as modern ways of thinking. The Hebrew laws are clearly formulated in chapter 18 of Leviticus and again in chapter 20. Chapter 18 formulates the rules against various kinds of marriage between relatives as well as against homosexuality and perversions. Chapter 20 reiterates the rules and prescribes the punishments, which range from stoning to exile. It appears that some kinds of incest are worse than others. Most kinds, those listed in verses 10-16, are punished by death. But in the following verses there are sexual crimes for which, in somewhat ambiguous language, lighter punishments are prescribed. Thus, "If a man takes his sister . . . they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people." This means exile, I think. In any case, it is a punishable crime.

It could be argued, and indeed has been by a number of modern commentators, that the story of the daughters of Lot originated before there were laws against incest. This may very well be true, but I know of no evidence to support it. For, first of all, there haven't been any serious attempts to study the story carefully, and therefore we have no sense of even its approximate age. Secondly, we do know that the laws against incest are also very old and very widely disseminated. Notice in this connection the incest laws in the Code of Hammurabi (in Robert William Rogers, ed., **Cuneiform Parallels To The Old Testament**, New York, 1912). The Code, incidentally, makes the same kind of distinction between more and less serious incest.

154. If a man have known his daughter, they shall expel that man from the city.
157. If a man lie in the bosom of his mother after (the death of) his father, they shall burn both of them.

These laws bear a strong similarity to the Leviticus laws, and this is not surprising in view of the probable influence on Judiac law by Babylonian law. What I should like to emphasize is that the Code of Hammurabi is the older, dating from 2130-2088 B.C., according to one theory. Whether this date is exact is unimportant. But it is clear that the rules against incest antedate the writing of the Genesis story. It is also important to remember that Hammurabi did not invent the rules; he derived, codified, recorded, perhaps even borrowed them. They existed prior to the time of his writing. And so it is probably safe to assume that the laws of incest were part of the context in which the story of Lot and his daughters was invented and recorded, or into which the story was disseminated. Now, since part of the meaning of a story derives from the context in which the story is told, and since we have no evidence of a time when incest was permitted, I see no reason to assume that the daughters' conscious decision to commit incest ever meant anything other than what it now means—a decision to break a taboo. Questions of the relative strength of the taboo, of extenuating circumstances, or of incest as a "favor granted to exceptional individuals who had made themselves immortal in their work," as Otto Rank puts it in **The Myth of The Birth of The Hero** (New York, 959, p. 311), would require a subtle use of evidence which is not available.

A lack of evidence has not prevented commentators from discussing the story, however. Most discussions have been in terms of the moral implications of the story. And for the most part they fall into two categories—a search for the condemnation implied by the story and an attempt to exonerate the daughters. A summary of these two positions appears in **The Abingdon Bible Commentary**, which is hardly the most thorough

analysis but which has the great advantage of being brief.

> These verses have been interpreted as a bitter sneer at Moab and Ammon. But it is possible that we have here a relic of a tradition which made the disaster universal, as was the Flood. In that case Lot's daughters must be regarded as heroines who adopted desperate measures to repopulate the earth. (p. 233)

The first of these interpretations proceeds on the assumption that the story is true and the Ammonities and Moabites tried to keep it out of the papers. Unfortunately, these two tribes may have been second-class citizens, but they certainly figure significantly in the genealogies of some of the most important ancestors of the Israelities, for example, Ruth, the wife of Boaz. One of the Talmudic commentaries draws a tortured conclusion from this complicated problem.

> A man should always (seek to) anticipate (his neighbor in the performance of) a meritorious work; for because the eldest daughter of Lot anticipated the younger by one night, her descendents were admitted into the commonwealth of Israel four generations before those of the younger. (Obed, Jesse, David, and Solomon, lived between Ruth, the Moabite, their ancestress, and Naamah, the Ammonite, the mother of Rehoboam.) (Synoptical notes on Gen. I. 5. Quoted in Paul Isaac Hershon, **Genesis, With A Talmudical Commentary,** Rev. M. Wolkenberg, trans., London, 1883.)

In other words, it is hard to see how this "bitter sneer" actually functions in the story, and so the interpretation seems untenable to me.

A similar interpretation can be found in the unsigned note about Lot in **A Dictionary of The Whole Bible** (ed. James Hastings, et al., New York, 1906, vol. III). In addition to seeing an Israelite diatribe against the neighbors, the author argues that the story is an exemplum illustrating the wickedness of desiring too many material things. If this were valid, it would still leave unexplained most of the details of the story as story. A good many other old tales could be called moral fables about wanting too much, and yet it is perfectly clear that the story of Lot is not the same in detail as the stories of Abraham, Jacob, or Adam.

The other category of interpretations —that the daughters of Lot are heroines in the cause of repopulation—is by far the most common in the ancient Midrashic and Talmudic material and in the most modern biblical commentaries. That this is a sounder point of view is suggested by the fact that it is based on a more careful reading of the story. For as E. A. Speiser points out in his edition of **Genesis (The Anchor Bible,** Garden City, 1964, pp. 144-146), the daughters "had every reason to believe that they were the last people on earth." (p. 145) His translation of Gen. 19. 32. reveals the same feeling: "in order that we may preserve life through our father." This was, he says, an "urgent" situation. The same point of view is reflected in a Catholic Commentary, John L. McKenzie, S. J., **Dictonary of The Whole Bible** (Milwaukee, 1965, p. 519), though the phrasing is a little more high-flown: the daughters "could be heroines who against all hope found a way to fulfill their destiny as women."

Similar views are suggested in Talmudic commentaries. In one of the notes appended (in Hershon) to Gen. 9. 38, the daughters are said to have "acted with the intention of performing a Divine injunction (to replenish the earth)." This attitude seems to lie behind a distinction made by Rab Nachman bar Yitzchak: "To commit sin with a good motive is better than to conform to the Law from a bad motive (which is illustrated in the case of Tamar and Zimri, and in that of Lot and his daughters)." (Hershon, notes to XXXIV, 31)

All these interpretations, as I suggested, are in some way or other moralistic. Confronted with a rather lewd story, the commentators have attempted

to contrive moralistic interpretations. Either the taboo was right and the girls were wrong, or the girls were right and the taboo was wrong (under the circumstances). Either this is an expression of "Israel's feeling of superiority" (L. Hicks, **The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible,** George Arthur Buttrick, et al., eds., Nashville, 1962, III, 163), or else the story describes Lot's being made drunk in an attempt "to preserve something of his reputation" (Buttrick, et al., **The Interpreter's Bible,** Nashville, 1952, I). Both sides of the rather mild controversy share the basic preconception that the important issues are moral. But moral preconceptions are not adequate to deal with folklore, and they will result in moralistic conclusions. It may be that moralizing is not the most important thing one could do with this little tale.

II. FOLKLORE

The methods of study developed by contemporary folklorists will lead us, perhaps indirectly, to some significant insights into the background of the story of Lot and his daughters. These methods will probably not explain such things as the intentions of the compiler of Genesis, but might give us some sense of the age of the story, some ideas about the origin of the tale, and a clarification of some obscure passages. (The details of modern folkloristic method are conveniently outlined in Stith Thompson's **The Folktale.**)

If I may attempt to extrapolate a basic assumption of folklorists, I would suggest that the historic-geographic method assumes that a tale, of whatever type, though it exists in oral tradition, is an objective reality in its own right. This means that a tale is not likely to undergo major revisions in the course of its dissemination. The structure of a tale will retain its shape, even though it goes through translation, a substitution of proper nouns, a change from one cultural context to another, a transplanting from one ritual to another or from within a ritual to outside any rituals, or from a religious context to a secular one. Thus, if one finds two similar tales and, after a point by point comparison, finds that they are analogous, one can safely consider them related, though the nature of this relationship cannot be described without further evidence of another kind. But if the point by point comparison reveals only general similarities, there is no reason to look for a relationship. In other words, a folklorist takes the story as he finds it.

It is for this reason that I shall have to disregard the psychoanalytic interpretations of incest tales. Otto Rank in **The Myth of the Birth of the Hero** (New York, 1959) indicates where he stands by means of a revealing footnote:

> For the formal demonstration of the entire identity with the other hero myths of the birth story and early history of Jesus, the author has presumed to rearrange the corresponding paragraphs from the different versions in the Gospels, irrespective of the traditional sequence and the originality of the individual parts." (p. 51)

This kind of approach is postulated on the assumption that the structures within the mind are stable whereas the structures of things which the mind concocts are like symptoms in being variable. This assumption may or may not be subject to scientific study, though I doubt that it is. But it is of more interest to psychologists than to folklorists, who assume that a tale is what it is. The raconteurs of folktales often insist that they have not changed a word in the tradition, and so folklorists feel duty bound to avoid making changes.

We can also infer from the folklorists' assumptions that we must make a distinction between the tale of Lot's incest and laws about incest. Though the tale is related to the law, they are not

the same thing. Confusion of the two is probably what has thrown the biblical commentators off the trail. Strictly speaking, the commentaries have engaged in legal studies or the studies of taboo. This is perfectly legitimate. But the narrative motif is an entity in itself and can be studied apart from the abstract law.

Even with this limiting of the study, we still find a large number of related tales, well documented in Stith Thompson's **Motif Index of Folk Literature** (Bloomington, Ind., 1959). The general category of "Father-daughter incest" (no. T411.) hints that the wicked deed has been done in Greek, Roman, Italian, Celtic, English, French, Dutch, Indian, Maori, and Eskimo folktales. Not all these tales are exactly alike, of course. But the wide dissemination of the motif suggests that the kind of tale is not or recent origin. Nor is the pattern of dissemination remarkable, for it seems much more like the travel patterns followed by other tales.

What is more revealing comes under the more precise rubric, "Daughters seduce drunken father" (no. T411.2.1.), with a reference to the **Motif Index of Talmudic-Midrashic Literature** (Dov Noy, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1954). The latter index indicates that the story of Lot and his daughters has clearly retained its shape in the Hebrew tradition. While it is certainly not one of the major tales, it appears from time to time in the writings of Josephus and in a good many of the **Midrashim.** Unfortunately, Noy does not trace the analogues beyond the Hebrew tradition, and so that task remains to be done.

I should like to proceed by taking the whole tale, not only the incest motif, and divide the tale into its component parts. It seems to me that the following are genuinely separable segments:

1. Three "men," having been entertainted by Abraham, announce that God will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham bargains with God for the salvation of the cities.
2. Two angels come to Lot in Sodom and he entertains them. The townspeople demand to have the angels. Lot offers his daughters instead. The angels strike the townspeople with blindness.
3. The angels announce the destruction of Sodom and warn Lot to escape. Lot bargains for the salvation of Zoar, and they grant his request and allow him to escape there.
4. God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah with "fire and brimstone," not only the people but also "what grew on the ground."
5. While escaping, Lot's wife turns back and is transformed into a pillar of salt.
6. There is a moralistic passage, Gen. 19. 29, which explains that Lot was saved for Abraham's sake.
7. The concluding episode is the story of the incest. This can in turn be analyzed into four parts:
   A. The motive — The daughters realize their father is old, that there are no other human beings left on earth, and that they wish to preserve the human race.
   B. The method — The daughters make him drunk, and they sleep with him in the order of their age, first the older and then the younger.
   C. The responsibility — The story makes it clear that the daughters are conscious of what they are doing but Lot isn't.
   D. The result — Both daughters give birth to sons, and the Moabites and the Ammonites are the descendants of these two boys.

This analysis helps to clarify certain inherent problems ,which I should like to make explicit.

1. The moralistic explanation of God's wanting to save Lot for the sake

of Abraham is not narrative material. I should imagine that this is a compiler's interpolation, and so it can be ignored because it is not genuine folk material.

2. The story does not explain where the two sons found wives. The daughters believe that the whole human race is destroyed, and yet the compiler does nothing to clear up the discrepancy between that belief and the fact that the boys founded tribes.

3. The daughters' motivation is in itself a problem. Why should they believe that the whole human race has been destroyed when the story of a few verses earlier carefully explained that Lot had made a deal to save Zoar?

4. Why does Lot's wife suddenly appear in the story just in time to be turned into a pillar of salt? This is a very widely disseminated episode, appearing in Thompson's **Motif Index** as "C961.1. Transformation to pillar of salt for breaking tabu" and "C331. Tabu: looking back." This latter motif is very widely disseminated, and the **Motif Index** includes a very long list of references. The question of why this popular element should appear in the story of Lot is not clear, for it seems to have no inherent connection with the rest of the tale.

5. Why is the story so repetitious? Three men visit Abraham; two men visit Lot—in both cases with the same announcement. Abraham bargains for two cities; Lot baragainst for the salvation of Zoar. The destruction by fire is foretold, then foretold again to Lot, then described, then described again in the pillar of salt motif, then alluded to in the incest motif.

I do not plan to solve all these problems, but several of them could be solved (or dissolved) if we keep in mind a common phenomenon in oral tradition. Folk material floating around in an unwritten tradition tends to be attracted to or even attached to other material which has points of similarity. This can be illustrated with a brief and handy example. Some versions of two folk songs, "Frankie and Johnny" and "John Henry," have become confused with each other because of the similarity in the name John, and perhaps also because John Henry is said to love his wife. But this does not mean that the songs are instrinsically or historically related to each other. The same thing may have happened in the Lot story. If so, then the six component parts of the story (if we exclude the moralizing) are actually four or five or six separate narrative motifs which floated toward each other and became attached because of similarities of detail.. I say "four or five or six" because the first three segments, the announcement by the angels and the bargaining, may be separate stories or simply separate developments of the same story. The same principle may explain the inclusion of the pillar of salt motif. One of its analogues (see **Motif Index** no. C331), the Orpheus and Eurydice story, includes an escape from Hades, which I should imagine is much like escaping from a burning Sodom. And the same principle explains the most difficult of the problems, the discrepancies between the incest motif and the rest of the Genesis account. Surely a conscious chronicler would not say in one place that all people were destroyed and in another place that the children of Lot founded new tribes, presumably with wives. In fact, all these problems are problems only if we assume that all the parts of the tale were originally related. We can stop worrying about the repetitiousness and the discrepancies if we assume that this is a cluster of narrative motifs which somehow became joined together because they share a common idea, destruction by fire. Sharing this common element, the motifs were attracted to each other, and under the circumstances there is no reason why we should expect folk tradition to straighten out all the contradictions in the newly wedded motifs.

This assumption leads to a rather startling discovery — that the idea of destruction by fire turns up in many

other places surrounding the story of Lot. In **The Legends of the Jews** (Philadelphia, 1909-1938, vol. III, pp. 214-215), Louis Ginzberg documents a number of these floating legends in his notes on Abraham and Haran, brother of Abraham and father of Lot. Some of these are the same stories elsewhere told about Haran's more famous son. In one version, Haran's death was a punishment for an "incestuous crime." Ginzberg comments, "This l e g e n d makes Haran suffer for the crime of his son, or presupposes that the latter only followed in the footsteps of his father." In another version, Haran died in a fire. Abraham burned his father's idols, and when Haran tried to save them, he was himself burned. In a story told about the father of Abraham, "Terah and his entire household were burned by a fire which came down from heaven as a punishment for their idolatry which they did not renounce in spite of Abraham's exhortations to mend their ways." Finally, there are several versions with provocative suggestions. These versions connect Chaldean fire-worship with the destruction of Haran, who refused to worship. But Abraham was saved by Jehovah. Whether or not these hints of fire suggest a real connection with fire rituals, they do make it clear that the story of Lot was associated with fire by the time it became part of Israelite lore. The story may have originated somewhere else, and it may have involved some other kind of punishment in its earliest versions. But fire was the mode by the time the tale traveled to the Israelities.

If it is sound to think of destruction by fire as the central unifier of the motifs, I should like to suggest another step. The daughters believe that the whole word has been destroyed. (See Ginzberg, vol. V, p. 243, note 188.) Let us take them at their word. The world has indeed been destroyed. Fire was the cause. God's motivation was the sin of the people. As soon as we take the daughters' view at face value, a whole new group of possible analogies can be seen.

One direction in which this idea takes us is back to the more famous Deluge, which Noah survived. I wouldn't say that the story of Lot is a literary redaction of the Noah story, but it may be that certain similarities may be more than coincidence. In Robert William Rogers' edition of the **Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament** (New York, 1912) this similarity is glanced at. Rogers hints at evidence of an idea of a world conflagration among the Babylonians and Assyrians. Though he finds no indigenous texts to support this possibility, he does find evidence in Seneca.

> Berosus who interpreted Bel, says that this will happen through the course of the stars, and affirms it to this extent that he appoints times for the conflagration and for the deluge. He argues that the earthly things will be burned, when all the stars (i.e. planets), which now have diverse courses, shall come together in Cancer, so that placed in one position a straight line might pass through all. On the other hand. there will be a flood when the same stars come together in Capricorn. The former is the summer solstice, the latter the winter solstice—signs of great moment, for in them are the chief changes of the year. (pp. 112f.)

This is obviously second-hand information, and so one must not rely heavily on it. But the passage is provocative in making it sound as if fire and flood were annual events.

If I were a myth-ritual theorist, I would end my essay right here—after a few generalizations about Lot's daughters as fertility goddesses. But I'm not and I shan't. More interesting is the possibility that the Israelities may have had some knowledge of this Babylonian idea. But the possibility must remain a question with a tentative answer. Rogers alludes to "echoes"

of the idea in a number of passages. Typical of these is the one in Micah 1.4.

> And the mountains will melt under
> him
> and the valleys will be cleft,
> like wax before the fire,
> him
> like waters poured down a steep
> place.

The same kind of phrasing occurs in Nahum 1. 5. The wax simile occurs again in Psalm 97. 5, and the verb is changed to the present tense. But these similarities are vague, and one can conclude that a number of Hebrew writers use imagery which may have been derived from the idea of a world conflagration, possibly alternating with a flood.

The Deluge and the fire might be connected in a different way. One of the legends in Ginzberg's collection refers to "Adam's prediction that the world was to be destroyed at one time by the force of fire and at another time by the violence and quantity of water." (I, 122) In another form of this tale, the fire and the flood occurred simultaneously. Citing Philo's **Moses** (2. 36), Ginzberg explains exactly how the two forces were combined.

> But God bade each drop pass through Gehenna before it fell to earth, and the hot rain scalded the skin of the sinners. The punishment that overtook them was befitting their crime. As their sensual desires had made them hot, and inflamed them to immoral excesses, so they were chastised by means of heated water. (V. p. 149)

Another version describes the same combination but motivates the fire by means of a different sin: "punishment by fire came upon the generation of the flood because of the robberies they had practised." (p. 149) "The punishment by fire during the flood is connected with the conception of the world-conflagration which then took place for the first time." This seems to imply that the legends discuss a periodical fire, not a single event.

I should like to leave this undigested material for the moment, drawing no conclusions except that in an odd sort of way it seems to make sense to connect stories about a world-wide flood with stories of a world conflagration. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised to discover other cultures making the same connection, which is self-contradictory but doesn't seem so.

Another direction in which to look for analogues to the story of the Lot and his daughters is to other cultures. And there we find a number of examples. One of this group is the story of Myrrha (sometimes Smyrna) which appears in the work of Latin mythographers. Ovid's treatment of the story is the fullest. Myrrha is in love with her father, Cinyras. In despair she tries to commit suicide but is discovered by her nurse who, though horrified, agrees to help arrange the liaison. (This motif appears again in the story of Hippolytus.) They wait until the feast of Ceres, a time when women do not sleep with their husbands. Thus, Cinyras is deprived of his wife, and because of the feast he is "drunk with wine," and so he doesn't know what he is doing or who the girl is. However, "It chanced," as Ovid puts it, "by a name appropriate to her age, he called her 'daughter,' and she called him 'father,' that names might not be lacking to their guilt." (11. 467-8) Later, the girl's identity is revealed and she is exiled. Because in her eyes she is acceptable to neither the living nor the dead, she asks to be transformed into a tree. She becomes a myrrh tree. Ten months later the tree splits and a son is born. This son is Adonis. Other versions occur in the **Library** of Apollodorus (III. 14. 4. 1-3) and in the **Fabulae** of Hyginus (nos. 58, 242, and 164c).

This tale has been studied by Alexander H. Krappe in "The Birth of Adonis" (**The Review of Religion,** VI, 1, Nov., 1941, 3-17). Krappe places his emphasis on the half of the story which

doesn't concern me—the transformation and extraordinary birth. But he points out, sensibly I think, that Ovid's tale really consists of two moitfs, and goes on to a further question:

> Where was the incest story added to the myth, in Arabia or in pre-Hellenic Asia Minor? The name of the heroine's father, Theias, and also the names given in Cypriote versions (called B) would decidedly favor the latter view. Furthermore, incest stories of a similar type abound in the traditions of the pre-Hellenic populations of Greece and Asia Minor, but are very rare among the Semites. (p. 17)

These are provocative clues.

I think it is clear that the Latin version is the same story as the Genesis tale. As I mentioned earlier, the story can be analyzed into four parts. Two of these parts are evident in the Latin versions. The Hebrew girls deliberately make their father drunk; in Ovid's version Myrrha waits until the father is drunk at a feast; in one of the versions of Hyginus Myrrha gets her father drunk **(inebriavit).** Similarly, the Genesis account explains that the daughters are conscious of committing incest but their father is not; the Latin versions also make the same careful distinction between the daughter's awareness and the father's lack of awarenes. The initial motivation of Lot's daughters—repropogating the race on the earth—is not at all evident in the versions of Apollodorus and Hyginus. It is not impossible that the feast of Ceres in Ovid's version is a remnant of some sort of fertility notion, but it is in itself not strong enough evidence to build a case on. The conclusions of the respective versions have some similarity. The career of Adonis is quite unlike that of Moab, but in all cases the incest led to the birth of sons. I wouldn't want to make much of this fact, however, since when one gives birth to children, there are only two sexes to chose from. But the central portions of the motif are so strikingly similar that I think we must conclude that Ovid and the author of Genesis used tales which derived from the same source.

Now, it is unlikely that Ovid was in the habit of reading Genesis: there is no possibility of direct borrowing. Where did the stories come from? Krappe's suggestion, pre-Hellenic Asia Minor, seems plausible but it is unsubstantiated. The question of geographical origin seems less important to me than the question of genre. What kind of tale did this motif come from? The Genesis version seems moralistic. Ovid's is moralized, romanticized, and transformed into an illustration of the flux of the universe. The other versions are simply chronicles with no particular point of view. All these versions taken together suggest a wide dissemination in time and place, but not much more.

I shall advance the hypothesis that all these versions of the motif are related to a very ancient myth, and that they are closely related to the tales classified in the **Motif Index** as "New race from incest after world calamity" (no. A1006.2.). And I might say that I am aware of making a great leap when I switch from calling the motif a "tale" to calling it a "myth." The former term is of course the more neutral. It simply means a narrative which may or may not have meaning, which may be clever or stupid, profound or silly, and which may or may not have cultural significance. One can refine the notion of a tale to a particular genre: there are jokes, fables, epics, novels, exempla, short stories, sagas, and so on, but the non-committal "tale" refers to all in general and none in particular. But the term "myth" is of a special kind. It means at the least a narrative with a particular kind of content—stories about the gods or the origins of things—and with a particular kind of response—calling forth or recalling a state of be-

lief. When we tell a joke, we do not believe it to be true or believe that anyone ever believed it to be true. But when we recount a myth, we do so with reference to someone's belief.

I define the term in this indirect manner because it is not always easy to tell whether a narrative is a myth or some other kind of tale, or whether a raconteur actually believes the story in the way he says he does. Furthermore, an abstract definition is easy to contrive: the problem lies in applying the definition to a particular tale.

We might notice in this connection Mircea Eliade's definition. I might emphasize four of his important points.

1. Myth narrates a sacred history. . . . myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality.
2. Myth tells only of that which **realiy** happened, which manifested itself completely.
3. Myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic break-throughs of the sacred (or the "supernatural") into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really **establishes** the World and makes it what it is today.
4. It always deals with **realities.** The cosmogonic myth is "true" because the existence of the World is there to prove it; the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man's mortality proves it, and so on. (**Myth and Reality,** New York, 1953, pp. 5-6)

This is a theologian's definition, of course. I find it interesting that Eliade emphasizes those things which connote ultimacy, unqualified reality, those things which command unqualified belief.

Exactly the opposite is suggested in the definition of Alexander H. Krappe who, in **The Science of Folk-Lore,** traces the etymology:

> The Greek word **mythos** merely means "story," or "tale," which is an important admission on the part of society which first coined the word, to the effect that it drew no fundamental distinction between a "myth" and an ordinary tale. (p. 312)

We, however, do so distinguish, as Krappe is well aware. What happens, he explains, is that tales are taken into religious contexts and become myths, while in a later stage of religious development the myths are sloughed off again. This process of adopting and later allegorizing and dispensing with myths is not the work of the popular imagination—**das Volk,** as the Germans put it, a phrase with semi-mystical overtones. Rather, it is the work of "a class of poets, usually in close relations with an organized priesthood." (p. 315) And the job of the folklorist is "to analyse the finished products of a Snorri and a Homer and so to get at the popular materials thus utilized." (p. 315) His final definition, then, is that

> Myths are merely certain tales, largely of popular origin but utilized and reworked by poets so as often to be considerably modified, loosely connected with certain religions of native growth but never incorporated by them into their creeds and dogmas, only half believed in by the poets and often not taken seriously at all. . . . (p. 318)

The contrasting of Krappe's and Eliade's definitions suggests two working principles. The first is that we do not have to assume the ultimate seriousness of a given myth, if Krappe is right. It may be that Eliade is taking the myths themselves too seriously. It is just as likely that Krappe understands "belief" in a narrow or oversimplified way. It may be that a mythographer's state of belief lay somewhere between the two extremes, or that Homer was as capable of believing and simultaneously not believing as Paul Tillich was. Secondly, the definitions seem to

suggest that narratives exist in their own right; they become or cease to be myths because of priestly-poetic treatment.

Keeping in mind that the story of Lot may have been a myth at some time in its history, we discover that the tale may be related to the category in the **Motif Index,** "New race from incest after world calamity." This suggests another wide area in which we find close analogues in India and China. The most well-developed of these is in the **Shatapatha-Brahmana** (I. i. 1.). The epic tells that a small fish asks Manu to protect him from the bigger fish. In return for the favor the fish foretells that there will be a great flood. Manu builds a boat and survives. But he is "desirous of offspring," and he offers an oblation to the waters. A year later a beautiful woman rises up. She refuses to have anything to do with other men, saying, "I am his, who begot me." She finds her father Manu and explains her origin as "the oblation, which thou didst cast into the waters, clarified butter, coagulated milk, whey, and curds." She promises that if he will "apply her" in "the sacrifice," he will have many children and possessions. All this comes true.

Not only is the butter in this story clarified, but the incest is purified. But there are several points of similarity to the story of Lot: 1) it is announced that the human race will be destroyed; 2) one man survives; 3) the daughter takes the initiative in arranging the match; 4) the man and his daughter have children. There is an important difference: the Hindu destruction is by flood, not fire. But most of the other Hindu versions of the flood myth, while eliminating the incest motif, tell that the world was destroyed by both fire and flood. The **Vishnu-Purana,** for example, explains that Vishnu swallowed all the water in the world, including body fluids, and then spit it out again—hence, the fire and then flood. Other versions explain the motivation for the destruction, which is left unexplained in the **Shatapatha-Brahmana.** The **Mabharata** XX (CLXII) documents at great length the sins of the people, and these resulted in the fire, followed by flood. (See Suryakant Shastri, **The Flood Legend In Sanskrit Literature,** Delhi, 1950, esp. pp. 1-58; also A. Berriedale Keith, **Indian Mythology,** Boston, 1917, p. 92.)

These Hindu versions seem to support the hint of a fertility rite, which I mentioned above in connection with Ovid. In that version Myrrha waited until her father was drunk at the feast of Ceres, which seems to be a fertility ceremony. One such variant would prove very little, but several would seem to suggest a pattern. Now, one doesn't get drunk on curds and whey, but certainly Manu was performing a fertility rite when he offered the oblation to the waters. If this fertility ceremony is a genuine part of the motif, one of the curious locutions in the story of Lot's daughters begins to make sense. When the older daughter proposes the incest plan to her sister, she says, "Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring through our father." The next day she says, "Behold, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring through our father." To some extent, one can dismiss this repetitiousness, for sometimes biblical writers do go on and on. Nor should we be surprised if the plot information were repeated. But when the older sister repeats, "that we may preserve offspring through our father," this seems like more than a stylistic quirk. It seems likely, under the circumstances, that she is reciting a ritual fertility formula.

Finally, in all versions the incest occurs because of the daughters' initiative. In Ovid she falls in love, and this starts the action. In Genesis the daughters trick their father. In the Hindu

form the daughter goes off in search of her father, deliberately fending off other men by means of an equivocal statement. This detail is probably significant, and it clearly distinguishes this tale from, say, the story of Oedipus who falls into incest by mistake.

Other, less highly developed analogues might be mentioned. In one of these, which seems to have undergone more poetic revision, Brahma creates himself Manu, "born of and identical with his original self, and the female portion of himself he constituted Satarupa, whom Manu took to wife." (John Dowson, **A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature,** London, 1953, p. 199) Versions of the tale occur in Chinese folklore. (See "Ida" in E. T. C. Werner, **A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology,** New York, 1961.) Since the outlines of the tale and even the same proper nouns occur in these Chinese versions, I think we can assume that this is a direct borrowing.

To the southwest, there are other close parallels in Egyptian legends. One may be mentioned briefly. According to Plutarch's description of the legend of Isis and Osiris, they were brother and sister, and,

> having a mutual affection, enjoyed each other in their mother's womb before they were born, and . . . from this commerce sprang Aroueris, whom the Egyptians likewise call Horus the Elder, and the Greeks Apollo." (E. A. Wallis Budge, **Egyptian Literature: Legends of the Gods,** I, London, 1912, pp. 217f.)

I am afraid I would not accept Plutarch's equation: this is not the same story as Ovid's tale about Myrrha's tragic love. But it does make the birth of Apollo depend on incest, which may be significant.

There are more revealing ideas in "The Legend of the Destruction of Mankind." (See Budge, pp. 15-41.) I shall not insist that this legend is a genuine analogue. But it does seem to be, and its enigmatic quality is tantalizing. There are two relevant episodes. In the first the people of the world are said to be indifferent, and the god Ra calls a conference of the gods. They agree that he sould send out his Eve in the form of Hathor, the goddess, and she slaughters many people. In order to stop her the gods make a brew of beer and blood. She gets drunk and sleeps. This is why we always have beer at festivals. In the second episode, Ra becomes weary and decides to "go away." The goddess Nut, who seems to be his daughter in this version, becomes a cow and places him on her back, and they go away. The saga continues, "And the Majesty of this god said unto Nut, 'I have placed myself upon my back in order to stretch myself out.' What then is the meaning of this? It meaneth that he united (?) himself with Nut." (pp. 25-7) Maybe this is an analogue, maybe not. The bare outline—the destructionof mankind followed by a father "uniting" with his daughter—seems to be more than coincidental similarity. I might call attention to the fact that again the incident begins with the daughter's taking the initiative.

I should not like to suggest that this is enough evidence. But unfortunately there isn't much evidence available. It may be possible, however, to make a few guesses.

The first is that the tale is not history. The evidence makes strong hints that the story of Lot's incest is a tale derived from the oral folk tradition. There may have been a Lot and Moabites and Ammonites, but their connection probably did not take place on two successive drunken nights in a cave up in the mountains above Zoar. I think we can draw another inference, namely, that there is enough evidence for us to distrust any interpretation which assumes the historical truth of the tale.

Secondly, I think we can guess at the outlines of the archetype of the tale

(and here I should repeat that I use the term "archetype" in the folklorist's, not the Jungian sense). I would guess that the original tale began with an announcement of the destruction of mankind. This may have been by fire, water, or some other means. As I have shown, the modes of destruction seem to become interchangtable in oral tradition. Furthermore, the incest motif may have begun with a quite different form of destruction, but have been attracted and attached to the form we now know. This much is very tentative.

The incest motif itself is a little clearer. After the destruction, there were survivors—a god and his daughter or a man and his daughter. (Lot's having two daughters looks lika a local variation.) They performed a fertility ceremony. At the initiative of the daughter, they committed incest. The result of this union was a son who was identified locally as the progenitor of a group.

Guesses about the age and geographical origin will have to be even more tentative. I shall, however, outline the forms which the argument would take, beginning with the place of origin. There are two possibilities. If we can assume that the Egyptian version is a genuine analogue, the tale may be Egyptian. Explaining its journey from Egypt to Palestine would be no problem. And the story's mention of fire, which may be part of a recurring fire-and-flood cycle, would support an aetiological interpretation of the tale. This would be, then, another of the cluster of tales growing from the banks of the Nile. But if we take the frequency of occurrence as a giude, we would have to consider India the source. For there the story is still in the oral tradition. Stith Thompson and Jonas Balys (**Motif Index of Indian Folk Literature,** Bloomington, 1958) note that the story of a couple committing incest after a world calamity was recorded by folktale collectors in Central India in 1949. Though this is not conclusive evidence, the fact that the story persists is a hint that it may have been rooted there.

The question of the age of the tale must be handled with a different kind of delicacy. If I may advance a bold guess, I shall suggest that the story of a man surviving a fire is older than the story of a man surviving a flood, though I have no idea how old the Noah story is. There are several reasons for this hypothesis, and my argument depends not so much on what the story says as on what it neither says nor assumes. First, the motif of surviving a flood presupposes enough technology for the story-teller to imagine living in a ship; the story of a man surviving a fire presupposes no technology. Second, the story of a flood presupposes acquaintanceship with large bodies of water. The story of fire does not, and so the story of a world conflagration could have originated in an inland area—in an area, for example, pre-dating the coastal civilizations. Third, when one compares the various Hindu versions of the flood story, one notices that they become less and less like the story of Lot and more and more like the story of Noah. This becomes clear when reading Shastri's collection in chronological order. It looks as if the Lot story, occurring very early, were being influenced and finally supplanted by an extrinsic tale. This may, in other words, be a case of the big fish swallowing the little ones. Postulating that the world-fire story pre-dates the flood story and was finally supplanted by it, we could account for the fact that the incest tale appears to be a minor variation of the flood tale, and that the incest tale seems barbaric, so barbaric that even early Hindu epics had to allegorize the events. It was left to literate cultures, therefore, as a slightly disreputable myth. And it became a tale again, a sardonic tale about the neighbors or an exemplum to illustrate a moral lesson or a tale of tragic love.

III. Literary Analysis

Thus the tale has come down to us as a written anecdote. It should be discussed as a piece of writing, and one might call this literary analysis, if heavy-handed terms are permissible. Some literary matters have already been mentioned, such as the inclusion of a repetitious fertility formula; others will be ignored, such as the rhythm (which, by the way, is quite skillful). But I do need to comment on one technical matter, the author's emotional distance from his material. It is my observation that not many critics deal with biblical material as artistic writing. This is a pity. For the author of this little tale knew a great deal about how to construct a story. My observation of this technique was initiated by Krappe's doubts about mythographers' belief in their tales. A myth may very well be truth to someone. But do we have to assume that the biblical chroniclers always believed everything they wrote to be literally true? Do we have to assume that every time they doubted something, we can count on their backing off to moralize about it? It may be that the exact degree of belief is expressed in literary form.

If my folkloristic analysis of the motif is reasonably accurate, I think we could say that the story came to the chronicler in a debased form. This was no longer the exalted myth of Manu repopulating the world, no longer a story about worldwide destruction, but only a story about two cities that got what they deserved. Nor had it yet become the heart-rending story of a daughter gripped by love. It was, in fact, a shabby tale.

And the writer left it in that shabby condition by carefully establishing and maintaining his emotional distance. Ordinarily a reader will automatically sympathize with an author's point of view. If a character makes claims for some sort of contrary sympathy, we tend to take the author's side against the character. And so, even though the author doesn't spell out his claims, we are likely to adopt his point of view rather than the daughters'. He carefully has the daughters say that the human race has been destroyed. The author's opinion is indicated by the fact that the statement is in dialogue rather than narrative summary.

Indeed, the many discrepancies in the tale could be taken as further indications of the author's point of view. At the beginning of the incest episode, we are told that Lot fled to the hills "because he was afraid to dwell in Zoar.' Why was he afraid? We aren't told. We don't have to be told, for the narrative technique, even without moralizing, catches the grotesque irony of Lot's fear after the destruction is over, after he has escaped, and after he has been assured that Zoar will be saved. Similarly, throughout the episode the daughters insist that they are motivated by the laudable desire to repopulate the earth. At the end the author steps back and remarks drily that the sons founded tribes. He doesn't tell us that there were other human beings around after all, and the girls didn't have to resort to incest. He simply shows us the populous earth around the hills where they are hiding. We are likely to sympathize with the author. Even though the daughters make a contrary claim for sympathy, we can see with the author's eyes.

In our time we have a good visual metaphor for the literary technique which the author uses—cinematic technique. The anecdote begins with a panorama shot: we see the smoking valley. Then the camera moves in for a closeup: there is a little dramatic scene. Then the camera moves back again, and we see the great number of descendents. There is no need to moralize about this. The girls' breaking the taboo is grotesque because it is pointless and unnecessary. The juxtaposition of discrepancies brings out the ironies. The technique is the message.

We do not need to settle for the dilemma set up by the modern biblical commentaries. To call this a "bitter sneer" at the neighboring tribes is to underestimate the author's literary sophistication, particularly his ability to handle emotional distance. It also misses the point of the ancient development of the tale not as history but as folktale. Nor do we have to believe the daughters when they say the world has been destroyed. Look around you, the author seems to say; there are the Moabites. Rather, we are here in the state of suspended judgment and suspended belief of tragicomedy. Or we might call it grotesque comedy. It is the world of the sad, painful, bitter, beautiful Jewish jokes: I've sometimes thought the story of Lot and his desperate daughters ought to be told in a Yiddish accent, ending with, "So after all that work what happened? Their kids were **goyim.**" We have a modern phrase for this: "Dark comedy." This is modish jargon, but it refers to that very ancient state of mind in which great sin and great heroism alike are brought down with a wry smile.