

---

Abstract:

Essay Question:

“...the goals of the permeable individual are characteristically and repeatedly subordinated to those of the linear group” (Di Vito, R.A., “Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 61 [1999], 234).

Discuss Di Vito’s observation in the light of your reading of Gen.19:1-11 and W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Methuen 1982), 31-77 (i.e. chapter 3).

Author: Wayne Marshall

---

This tutorial paper will discuss Di Vito’s observation considering the Lot story in Genesis 19.1-11 and W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*. This paper is divided into two parts. The first part will look at Di Vito’s paper and the Lot story, with an emphasis on social systems and the role of the father. The second half of the tutorial paper will discuss Di Vito’s observations and Ong’s examination the differences between oral and written cultures using examples from the Lot story.

Di Vito’s observation is that in Israel, individual rights are permeable to the goals of the whole group. While Israel focus’s on a linear relationship system there are two others, individual and collective. These three ways of organizing relationships are interrelated but exist within a hierarchy. For example if a society views individual as important it will place this above collective groups (Kluckhohn 1973 pp. 18-19). In Di Vito’s observation of Israeli culture the individual is subordinated to the linear group through a form of heteronomy. In Israel family kingship groups were the main unit of society. Individuals had little rights other than those granted by the father. He had to consider what was best for the whole family, as he was responsible for its survival (Kluckhohn 1973 pp. 18-19; Di Vito 1999 p. 235). Di Vito observed that the family is at the center of a complex web of interrelationships. Linear social relationships may have placed great emphasis on continuity, leading to a society that encouraged religious and kingship obedience (Di Vito 1999 p. 222). This suggests why Lot was so willing to sacrifice his daughters and why they did not object.

---

With Di Vito's examination of Israeli the culture relationship systems, the Lineal system, new insights into Genesis.19:1-11 can be gained. Individual rights in Israeli culture were different then those of today, all rights were granted by the Father. As such the social idealism of the time were different then those of today. In Genesis.19:6 decided to offer his daughters to be raped by the men of Sodom. Its interesting that in the story their is no reaction from Lots daughters, perhaps they saw the greater virtue to protecting the guests. Lot and his daughters may have thought that the virtue of hospitality was greater then that of the individual. In this way the story can be seen as a moralizing tale. Lot, being righteous, tries to protect the strangers, who are perceived to as vulnerable to attack(Alexander 1985 pp. 289 & 281; Toensing 2005 p. 67). This new perspective may be better understood if an understanding of how it was constructed can be gained.

Ong's, *Orality and Literacy*, says that written or spoken modes of language can shape human behavior. In oral cultures language is used as a mode of action while written cultures describes things analytically. Ong explains that oral language will use expressive, epithetic, and repetitive language, with a focus on traditional past and the present moment. In Lot's story there is use of this mnemonic language. In each scene there are just two playing characters progressing in a sequence, the two angels, then the angels and Lot, and then Lot and the men of Sodom. Ong says that oral cultures use patterns as a mnemonic device to remember, such a the sequence of twos (Ong 1982 pp. 34-36). This use of pattens suggests that the Lot story was traditionally an oral story later written down. Throughout Genesis.19:1-11 their is no analysis of the motivations and thought process behind each character just the actions they performed. In a literacy culture the individuals thoughts and feeling would be more likely conveyed in the story. As a whole though, Lots moral tale is consistent with Di Vito's observation, individual were less important then those of the linear group.

---

Di Vito's statement of the permeable individual relates to Ong's explanation of oral language by showing that language can shape social organization. Di Vito's shows that Israeli culture was traditionally group based, individual had little rights. Somehow this tradition of subordination would have to be maintained. Ong maintains that oral cultures must repeat knowledge otherwise it will be lost and this repetitive pattern creates a conservative mindset. However, with each retelling the story there will be slight differences. The storyteller, would adapted the tale to new audiences just playing with formulas and reshuffling them to suit (Ong 1982 pp. 41-42). Lot story when written down would have become stuck in the mindsets of the era of when it was written. With the introduction of writing things could be written down and as they did they became a fixed cultural construction. Modern interpretations of these texts would have the difficult task of analyzing Lot's story without fully understanding of the cultural and religious values of that society at the time of writing and the transitions it went through (Alexander 1985 p. 289). Di Vito's paper shows that modern ideas about individual right cannot be applied to ancient Israeli society. Modern interpretation would lack that cultural backdrop because their social system focused on a lineal kingship system while today the individual system is more predominant. Our sense of modern identify is inward focuses with sharp personal boundaries and Israeli identity is form by group interaction with transparent personal bounders (Florence Rockwood Kluckhohn 1973 pp. 18-19; Di Vito 1999 p. 221). Writing became the tool which allowed individualism to take center stage. Linear group identify did not have this external reference individual became permeable within group with their dreams easily scarified in the name for the greater good.

This tutorial paper discussed Di Vito's statements in connection to Lot's story and Ong, *Orality and Literacy*. This paper examined various aspects of social structure related the individual and kingship linear groups and how these play out in the role of the father and the story of Lot. Then this paper examined Ong's study into oral and written cultures and how Ong's research helps explain Di Vito's statement and Lot Story.

---

## **Bibliography**

- Alexander, T. D. (1985). "Lot's Hospitality: A clue to His Righteousness." Journal of Biblical Literature **104**: 2.
- Di Vito, R. A. (1999). "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity." Catholic Biblical Quarterly **61**(2): 217.
- Kluckhohn, F. R. (1973). Variations in value orientations. Westport, Greenwood Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1982). Orality and Literacy. London, Methuen.
- Toensing, H. J. (2005). "WOMEN OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH: Collateral Damage in the War against Homosexuality?" Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion (Indiana University Press) **21**(2): 61-74.

---

## Bibliography

- Alexander, T. D. (1985). "Lot's Hospitality: A clue to His Righteousness." Journal of Biblical Literature **104**: 2.
- Di Vito, R. A. (1999). "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity." Catholic Biblical Quarterly **61**(2): 217.
- Florence Rockwood Kluckhohn, F. S. (1973). Variations in value orientations. Westport, Greenwood Press.
- Kluckhohn, F. R. (1973). Variations in value orientations. Westport, Greenwood Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1982). Orality and Literacy. London, Methuen.
- Toensing, H. J. (2005). "WOMEN OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH: Collateral Damage in the War against Homosexuality?" Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion (Indiana University Press) **21**(2): 61-74.