

# FIELDING "WHY" QUESTIONS IN GENESIS

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Genesis—a book narrating the accounts of creation, the flood, and the lives of a group of notable ancestors—contains brief sections of dialogue. These sections relate dialogues between God and a human, an angel and a human, an animal and a human, but mostly dialogues between humans themselves. These dialogues may contain questions, for questions are an essential element of interaction between speakers. Questions are of several types and serve various functions in the dialogue. For this reason an understanding of these questions and the responses to them is central to an understanding of the interaction between speakers.

In this investigation, the analysis will focus specifically on questions which ask "why" (only 21 of the over 120 questions in Genesis are "why" questions) and the spectrum of ways in which these questions are "fielded." Fielding a question is defined as the way in which the respondent handles or treats the question. Fielding is not the same as answering a question. It is broader, encompassing answering and other actions such as remaining silent, asking a return question to the questioner, and denying the validity of the question. Just as question types are broader than the simple query which seeks information, so fielding is broader than a simple verbal response.

The main purpose of this article is to investigate the ways in which "why" questions are fielded with the hope that the results will shed light on the two types of "why" questions in the Bible. The thesis here is that there are semantic differences associated with *maddûa*<sup>c</sup> (M) and *lāmmāh* (L) in Genesis which are especially evident in the ways respondents field the two types of "why." These differences show that M and L are distinct. The existence of such a distinction is the position taken by Jepsen and Nakarai.<sup>1</sup> However, this position is in contrast to the one

1. The more important and comprehensive of the studies asserting a distinction between M and L is the article by Jepsen (1967). Whereas Jepsen says that M is associated with questions for pure information and then amazement, sympathy, or compassion and that L

taken by Barr in his recent study (1985) asserting the lack of a distinction between the two "why" words when considering the entire *Tanak*. Since this investigation is limited to Genesis, I am not claiming that Barr is incorrect overall. The claim here is rather that in Genesis there is a distinction, that further intensive investigation using the approach utilized here is appropriate, and that this analysis suggests a possible partial revision in Barr's position.<sup>2</sup>

The common definition of a question is an utterance which has interrogative meaning and seeks an informative answer from the addressee. To signal their appearance, questions are generally introduced by an interrogative word such as "what," "who," and "how" or by the interrogative particle in Hebrew. In spite of the common definition, the investigator of Genesis quickly notices that not all questions seek information from the addressees as their primary function. One question may indeed seek information (for example, in 45:3 Joseph asks, "Is my father still alive?" and in 37:15 a man asks young Joseph, "What are you seeking?"). However, another type of question primarily seeks agreement and assurance (for example, in 40:8 Joseph asks Pharaoh's two jailed officers, "Do not interpretations belong to God?"). Another question seeks to express surprise, or desperation, or confusion (for example, Reuben exclaims upon discovering that Joseph is missing from the pit in 37:30, "Where shall I go?"). Yet another question seeks to criticize the addressee's behavior and/or seeks to correct that behavior for the future (for example, in 43:6 Jacob says to his sons, "Why did you deal badly with me by telling the man that you have another brother?").

That questions differ in primary function is true of the 21 "why" questions in Genesis (two M questions and 19 L questions).<sup>3</sup> Structurally, all 21 have the same inquiring form: "Why . . . ?" If form alone is the criterion, then all "why" questions can be considered as information-seeking. However, when considering context, tone, and semantic associations, it is clear that three distinct groups of "why" questions are distinguishable according to primary function: those which seek and receive information from the addressee, those which are critical/corrective toward the addressee, and those which are expressive/emotive. The

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is associated with criticism, Nakarai (1982) says that M is associated with seeking a basic reason or motive of an action and that L is associated with a request for a purpose.

2. For an earlier and partial version of many of the points raised in this paper see Hyman (1983).

3. The two M questions are in 26:27 and 40:7. The 19 L questions are in 4:6; 12:18-19; 18:3; 24:31; 25:22, 32; 27:45, 46; 29:25; 31:27, 30; 32:30; 33:15; 42:1; 43:6; 44:4, 7; 47:15, 19.

two M questions fall into the group which seeks information, and the 19 L questions belong to either the critical/corrective or the expressive/emotive group. Two L questions, 25:22 and 27:46, are clearly expressive/emotive. The other 17 L questions are critical/corrective, though it is possible to consider several (25:32; 47:15, 19) as perhaps having an expressive/emotive function equal to the critical/corrective one. Furthermore, with one exception which has an extenuating situation, the addressees field the two M questions quite differently from the ways in which they field the 19 L questions.

In 26:26 Abimelech, Ahuzzath, and Phicol visit Isaac in Beersheba. Isaac has recently moved there, built an altar, pitched a tent, and dug a well after being chased out of Gerar by Abimelech, the Philistine King. Isaac asks the three visitors, "Why [M] have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and you have sent me away from you?" The three men field the question with an answer. That is, they give Isaac the information they believe he seeks. Their answer is straightforward and direct when they say, "We saw plainly that the Lord was with you. . . ." Fleshed out, the response can be stated as, "We came to see you because we saw plainly that the Lord was with you. . . ." In short, Isaac asks for a "because" explanation, and he receives one. Similarly, in 40:7 Joseph asks his jailmates, "Why [M] are your faces sad today?" Pharaoh's two officers, the chief butler and the chief baker, field the question with an answer, "We have dreamed a dream, and there is no one to interpret it." Again it is possible to flesh out the answer by putting it into a "because" form: We have sad faces today because there is no one to interpret the dream we dreamed. In short, when Joseph asks for an explanation, he receives one just as any person would expect when asking for information.

The situation with regard to L questions is quite different in several respects. First, the tone and context of the L question most often lead the investigator to categorize the question not as information-seeking but rather as critical/corrective. Consider 18:13: "So God said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I really give birth though I am old"?"' Spoken with one tonal quality, God's question seeks an explanation of Sarah's behavior in 18:12. Spoken with a different tone, this question serves to criticize Sarah for doubting God's promise in 18:10 that she will give birth to a son. When taken in isolation and read in English, this question by God is easily classified as explanation-seeking. However, the tone, context, and the presence of several other clues (as indicated below) lead to the conclusion that God's question is rightly categorized as critical/corrective.

With L questions in Genesis there is often a semantic clue that the question is not primarily seeking information. That is, there is a clue that God is not seeking an explanatory answer from Abraham which could begin "Sarah laughed because. . ." With an L question there often appears, either 1) one or more other questions (generally a yes/no question introduced by an interrogative particle), 2) an imperative phrase or sentence, or 3) both another question and an imperative construction. For example, after God's question in 18:13 there follows in the next verse a leading yes/no question, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" With 12 of the 19 L questions there is such a clue. In 18:14 the additional leading yes/no question by God definitely supports the interpretation that the prior L question has a critical/corrective tone.

Finally, the addressees field L questions differently from M questions. In 11 of the 19 instances the addressee fields an L with silence (The two expressive/emotive L questions are in this group of 11). For example, Jacob says to his sons in 42:1, "Why [L] do you look one upon the other?" The sons say nothing, and Jacob continues to talk, "Behold, I have heard that there is corn in Egypt. Go down there and buy corn for us from there that we may live and not die." (Note the two imperatives, "go down" and "buy" with L.) Again the sons field Jacob's remarks with silence. Here as with two other of the 11 silent fieldings, the addressees perform what is commanded in order to correct the situation.

A silent fielding by an addressee also occurs after the critical/corrective question in 18:13, where God asks Abraham about Sarah's laughter. As shown above, God supports the L question with a leading yes/no question. This latter question does not seek information but contains an implied "no" response. Indeed, no one answers God's *lāmmāh* and yes/no questions. Abraham does not explain Sarah's laughter, and he need not reply to the question regarding God's omnipotence. Abraham recognizes the tonal quality of the two questions and their supportive linkage. He does not offer an explanation because he knows that one is not sought. He does not challenge God's omnipotence because he accepts it, as the very structure of the question requires. The result is that Abraham fields God's two questions with silence.

In three of the 19 instances of L questions the addressee apparently understands the question as a statement rather than a question in that the addressee fields the question with a further statement to continue the conversation. For example, in 47:15 the Egyptians appear before Joseph saying, "Give us bread; for why [L] should we die in your presence because our money is gone?" (Note the imperative "give" with L). Joseph apparently interprets the statement as, "Give us bread, for

there is no good reason for us to die in your presence just because we have no more money." Joseph fields the L question with his reply, "Give me your cattle and I will give you bread since you have no more money." Thus, Joseph implicitly agrees with the hungry Egyptians about dying, even accepting their criticism of him and the situation, but he nevertheless demands a barter trade of their cattle for his bread.

In only one of the 19 instances of an L question does the addressee field the question with an explanation. This situation involving Laban and Jacob in 31:27 is not, however, as unambiguous as the two M questions in 26:27 and 40:7. In 31:25 Laban catches up with Jacob, who has fled Haran without giving any notice to Laban. In 31:26 Laban begins a long, uninterrupted five-verse criticism of Jacob which begins by paralleling Jacob's earlier criticism of Laban. Laban begins with an expressive/emotive "what" question and follows with a critical/corrective L. After the two questions he continues to speak, relating that, though he has the power to hurt Jacob, he shall not do so because God has so directed him. He then removes his criticism of Jacob's flight by recognizing that Jacob felt compelled to leave. He says that Jacob left "because you were drawn to your father's house." However, since Laban is still angry, he ends his speech with another brief but biting critical/corrective L, "Why [L] did you steal my gods?"

By the end of Laban's attack upon Jacob (31:26-30), Laban mutes his criticism of Jacob's sudden and secret flight. By the end of his speech, there is only criticism for stealing Laban's gods. Laban in effect answers his own first L question, thereby excusing Jacob's flight. He removes responsibility from Jacob for the act which he initially criticized with the explanation that Jacob fled because he was drawn to his father's house. It is for this reason that Jacob takes an unusual step—he fields the first L with an explanatory answer of his own. Jacob answers, "Because I was afraid—because I said to myself that you might even rob me of your daughters."

Jacob's explanation for fleeing from Laban with his entire family differs from Laban's explanation. Jacob's explanation may or may not be more acceptable and valid than Laban's. Nevertheless, Jacob is willing to offer his explanation only when Laban has already removed the criticism of Jacob. Jacob is willing to speak about his fear of Laban because Laban has already accepted an explanation absolving himself of any wrongdoing or contribution to Jacob's action. Jacob fled, according to Laban, because he had no real choice. Jacob's explanation, however, expresses a choice based on fear of Laban. In sum, 1) Jacob's explanatory answer is only one of two explanations for the flight; 2) it is given

after three more verses of Laban's speech directly following the questions; and 3) it is given after Laban's self-absolving answer to his own question. Jacob's answer is the only explanation to an L question in Genesis. Whether Jacob's explanation is acceptable or correct is another matter.

In four of the 19 instances of an L question the addressee fields the question with some form of rebuttal or denial. There is also a rebuttal/denial related to God's L question in 18:13, but it comes from Sarah, not the silent addressee Abraham. These five rebuttals/denials are of the most interest since they are the strongest clues that the L question is being critical/corrective toward the addressee. There would be no justification for these irate fieldings if the L questions were simply seeking explanations. An exploration of these five fieldings follows below.

As mentioned earlier, Abraham fields God's two questions in 18:13-14 with silence. However, Sarah fields them orally with, "I did not laugh." She does not answer God's L question with an explanation. Rather, Sarah denies that she laughed, even though 18:12 indicates that in fact she did so. We can speculate as to why Sarah laughed, but in any case, she denies the laughter so that she can claim that the criticism of her is undeserved and that she is not at fault. She realizes that *she* is being criticized, although God is speaking to Abraham.

In verses 18:13-15 there is no pure dialogue of question and answer. Rather, there is a mixed dialogue interspersed with two narrative comments. The narrative phrase "then she denied" is the first break in the dialogue to underscore that this is not just a simple question and answer exchange. The narrator's phrase indicates that something quite different from a simple question and answer exchange is occurring here between God, Abraham, and Sarah. Moreover, to make doubly sure that we understand Sarah's feelings in the situation the narrator goes on to comment, "for she was afraid." Sarah's denial is then directly contradicted by God: "But He<sup>4</sup> said, 'No, you did indeed laugh.'" God has the last word, as he dismisses Sarah's denial with a firm statement that quiets Sarah. The episode then ends because there is nothing further

4. It is also possible to consider that Abraham is the antecedent of the pronoun "he" in the phrase "and he said" since no name is used in the Hebrew text. If we do so, then the series of actions is: God asks a critical/corrective L question to Abraham; while Abraham remains silent, Sarah denies laughing; Abraham, the original addressee of God's question, rebuts Sarah. In either case, whether it is Abraham or God who rebuts Sarah, the point about Sarah denying her laughter rather than offering an explanatory "because" answer to God's question remains intact.

to say. In summary, what occurs is a criticism by God, silence by Abraham, denial by Sarah, and rebuttal by God.

The second rebuttal/denial occurs in Chapter 29, but it is different from Sarah's. Upon discovering in the morning after his wedding that his wife is Leah and not Rachel, Jacob criticizes Laban with three questions in verse 25. In doing so, Jacob links his L question with two other questions: "What is this that you have done to me? Did I not work with you for Rachel? Why [L] did you deceive me?" When Laban fields Jacob's questions, he does not deny what he did and what is being criticized, as does Sarah in 18:13-15. Rather, Laban in 29:26 defends his giving of Leah (rather than Rachel) to Jacob. Laban rebuts on the ground that the criticism is undeserved because the custom of Haran requires that the older daughter be given in marriage before the younger one.

In this way Laban acknowledges what he did to evoke Jacob's criticism, but denies that he has deceived Jacob. For Laban the issue revolves around interpreting the deed's motivation, not the deed itself. For Laban the act is in conformity with the social norms of his society; therefore, it is perfectly justified (or so Laban claims). In any case, Laban offers a justification, however weak, even though his agreement with Jacob in 29:18-19 identified Rachel as the reward for seven years of work. The point remains that in his rebuttal Laban acknowledges the act which evokes Jacob's criticism, in contrast to Sarah's fielding of God's criticism.

The first rebuttal/denial by Sarah may be called "deny the act." The second one by Laban may be called "justify the act." The third one, in Chapter 31 by Jacob, may be called "challenge the accusation." That is, in 31:30 Laban asks, "Why [L] did you steal my Gods?" In 31:32 Jacob fields Laban's question as we would expect—he strongly denies that he stole Laban's gods. He denies the act, but, does so only implicitly by challenging Laban to find the gods and thereby to prove the charge of theft. Jacob even pledges death to the thief, just as his sons do later in 44:7 in the parallel story of accused theft of a precious object. Jacob says, "With whomever you find your gods, he shall not live; before our brothers discern what is yours that is with me and take it with you."

Jacob does not field Laban's question with a "because" answer. He does not explain anything to Laban. His rebuttal is a combined challenge and pledge that might frighten away a person less resolute than Laban, who has just had his estate decimated. Laban is resolute; he was willing to pursue Jacob even though Jacob had a three day head start. Laban pursued Jacob because the loss of his livestock, children, and gods are

too much for him to bear without taking corrective action.<sup>5</sup> Because Jacob is foolishly though innocently bold in his rebuttal, the narrator proceeds in the same verse as Jacob's fielding move to state that Jacob did not know of Rachel's theft of the gods.

In short, Jacob calmly and briefly fields Laban's first L question with an explanation. In contrast, he fields Laban's second critical/corrective L question regarding the theft of the gods with a challenge to Laban to prove the accusation. Jacob pledges an extreme penalty because he has a false confidence that the accusation is untrue. Jacob believes that he has taken away only what belongs to him—his wives and livestock, for which he served Laban twenty years. His pledge of death to the thief constitutes a denial to Laban's critical/corrective "why" question about the gods. Since he believes Laban's criticism to be undeserved, he denies Laban's accusation. He does so by implicitly but strongly denying the act, as shown by the bold challenge to prove the act which he wrongly believes unprovable.

Jacob does not remain silent, nor does he answer Laban's last question. Silence or an explanatory "because" answer would indicate an acceptance of the criticism as being deserved. Only when Laban unsuccessfully finishes his search of all the tents for his gods, does Jacob vent his anger at him. Only when Jacob completes the second part of his rebuttal, does Laban offer a peace covenant.

The fourth rebuttal/denial resembles the second one as offered by Laban, but it has a twist. When in 43:6 Jacob criticizes his ten sons for revealing to Joseph the existence of their younger brother Benjamin, he does so with an L question: "Why [L] did you deal badly with me by telling the man that you have another brother?" In contrast to their fielding of Jacob's criticism of them in 42:1, where they silently accept the criticism and act to correct the situation, here the brothers rebut Jacob. Their method is a combination which may be called "explain the act and claim no choice as justification."

The sons admit to Jacob that they did tell Joseph about their brother. They do so in a unique way. They say, "The man specifically asked us about ourselves and our relatives saying, 'Is your father still alive? Do

5. Speiser's and von Rad's commentaries on the importance of the gods to Laban as a sign of legal possessory rights to property are illuminating. Note also that Laban calls them "gods" and Jacob uses that term in answering Laban's question. However, in referring to Rachel's actions, the text refers to "images" or "household gods" (*tērāpîm*). See Speiser (1964, pp. 249-251) and von Rad (1972, pp. 309-310).



you have a brother?' So we told him according to these words. Could we know in any way that we would say, 'Bring your brother down here?'" (It has not been revealed in the narration of the previous chapters that Joseph did ask his brothers these exact questions.) Thus, the sons field Jacob's question by admitting that they told Joseph about Benjamin, but they claim that they were compelled to do so. The sons do not justify their act by claiming social custom, as Laban did, but rather by claiming lack of choice in a power situation and lack of ability to predict the consequences of their revelation to Joseph. They never admit that they have wronged Jacob because they claim that they had no choice in what they did.

The fifth rebuttal/denial occurs in Chapter 44 and may be called "countercriticize and challenge." Upon their return to Egypt, Jacob's sons offer this fifth approach to rebutting a critical/corrective L question. Joseph and his steward have arranged to test the brothers by accusing them of dishonesty and a lack of gratitude for the food which Joseph has provided for them in their hunger. At Joseph's direction, the steward in 44:4 pursues the brothers when they leave for home, overtakes them, and says, "Why [L] did you repay good with evil? Is this not the goblet from which my master drinks and which he uses for divining? You have done a bad thing." (It is worth noting here again that the clues provided by the *lāmmāh* pattern in combination with the context of the verses indicate that the steward's questions are critical/corrective and not explanation-seeking: L is used for "why" rather than M, there is an accompanying yes/no question, the verse ends with an explicit accusation of wrongdoing, and the plan devised by Joseph explicitly sets out to challenge the brothers.)

The brothers in 44:7-9 rightly deny the steward's criticism because they have not stolen the goblet and have not repaid good with evil. They are indignant and field the questions not with an explanatory "because" answer but with critical/corrective questions of their own. They do not explain why they are blameworthy. On the contrary, they criticize the steward with a parallel L question and then proceed to explain why they cannot be guilty. They are so confident that they pledge the ultimate penalty for theft—death. They say to him, "Why [L] does my lord speak these words? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing. In fact, we brought back to you from Canaan the money which we found in the tops of our sacks. So, how could we steal from your master's house silver or gold? Whoever of your servants is found to have the goblet shall die, and we shall also be slaves to my lord."

The brothers rebut the criticism in four steps: first comes an L question; then comes a statement of astonishment, swearing, and pleading by use of the term "far be it"; then comes a critical/corrective "how" question paralleling Joseph's question to Potiphar's wife in 39:9; and finally there comes an offer of a severe self-inflicted penalty as an indication of their outrage and certainty of innocence. They challenge the steward to find the stolen object just as Jacob challenges Laban in 31:32. The steward accepts their challenge and finds the goblet.

The brothers rebut the accusation of theft of the goblet rightly, because they do not deserve it. It is this rightful countercriticism in the face of apparent evidence of deserved criticism that creates the perplexing situation and leads the brothers to rend their clothes in 44:13 as a symbol of a present disaster. Thus, in contrast to Sarah and Jacob earlier, who wrongly deny the act which evokes criticism of them, the brothers here deny rightly and countercriticize in a form parallel to the steward's criticism. The brothers field the L question by boldly countercriticizing the steward; they challenge him to prove the accusation of theft and pledge death and slavery as punishment if they are guilty.

In summary, each of the five rebuttals/denials in Genesis to critical/corrective L questions is different from the others, although there are some similarities among them. These five fieldings of L may be characterized as follows:

18:13—deny performing the act

29:25—justify the act by reference to social custom (i.e., deny any negative interpretation of the act)

31:30—challenge the accuser to prove the act

43:6—admit the act but justify it by claiming no choice in doing the act

44:4—countercriticize and challenge the accuser to prove the act

There is no similar fielding in any way related to the two M questions, since the addressees of those questions simply provide the explanatory "because" answers requested of them.

As shown above, M and L questions are different in Genesis in that they are used in different contexts, with different attitudes, and with different semantic associations. They also evoke different types of fielding. What emerges from this analysis is a pattern for M and a pattern for L which are each distinct. M appears by itself, primarily performs the function of seeking information, and evokes the expected explanatory "because" answer. L generally appears along with one or more other questions, with an imperative phrase or sentence, or with both another question and an imperative construction. The L question is fielded most

often with silence. It is also fielded with continued conversation which accepts and then treats the L question as a statement rather than as a question. Sometimes it is fielded with a rebuttal/denial. Only once, due to an exceptional situation, is it fielded with an explanatory "because" answer.

These two patterns for M and L appear together in the Exod 2:18–20 episode, which is the single best example of the two patterns occurring within the same dialogue. In that dialogue, where Reuel speaks with his daughters about Moses, the distinction between the two Hebrew words for "why" is made quite clear as the patterns are followed precisely. Reuel asks his daughters, "Why [M] did you come home early today?" The daughters offer an explanatory "because" answer, "An Egyptian man saved us from the hands of the shepherds; and he surely drew water for us and watered the flock." Then Reuel asks, "And where is he? Why [L] did you leave the man? Call him so that he will eat bread." The daughters say nothing; they silently accept the criticism and invite Moses to their home (Exod 2:21).

This investigation of the "why" questions in Genesis shows a clear distinction between *maddûa*<sup>c</sup> and *lāmmāh*. It is not a complete examination of all "why" questions in the *Tanak* but only of those in the first book. Nevertheless, it does suggest that further investigation of other instances of the use of M and L in the *Tanak* is needed in light of the clear distinction existing between them in Genesis. Perhaps an appreciation of this particular semantic distinction may result in a clearer understanding of an inevitably knotty and complicated text.

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