

Biblical Self-Defense Course on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns

Hospitable Interpretations of Sodom and Gomorrah

The Rev. Lindsay Louise Biddle
3538 22nd Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55407
(612)-724-5429
E-Mail: lindsaybiddle1@juno.com

Genesis 19:1–11

¹ The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² He said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the square.” ³ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵ and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” ⁹ But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. [NRSV]

Literary Context

The book of Genesis (“beginnings”) is the first of the five books (Pentateuch) comprising the Torah (“Law”). It can be divided into two parts: Chapters 1–11 dealing with the traditions about the origins of the world and humankind and Chapters 12–50 dealing with stories of the patriarchs (fathers of the Hebrew people) and the descent into Egypt. Chapter 19 is included in the story of Abraham, the first patriarch. It comes from the “J” (YHWH) source, the oldest biblical literary tradition and one that views God’s call of Israel in the perspective of God’s purpose for all humanity. [Interpreter’s, pp. 1–3, Anderson, p. 210.]

Genesis 19:1–11 succeeds Abraham’s intercession on behalf of his nephew Lot and his family after Abraham hears God’s plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16–33) and precedes the flight of Lot, his wife and two daughters from Sodom to Zoar (19:12–23) and the destruction of the cities (19:24–28).

Historical Context

Abraham is thought to have lived sometime during 2000-1900 BCE. Genesis 11:27 shows Lot as the son of Abraham’s brother Haran.

Sodom and Gomorrah were located near the Dead Sea perhaps just to the east and south. Both cities were inhabited during most of the third millennium and in places perhaps into the early second millennium. [Harper’s, p. 974.]

Cultural Context

According to Boswell, “The idea that homosexual behavior is condemned in the Old Testament stems from several passages. Probably the most well known, certainly the most influential, is the account of Sodom in Genesis 19. Sodom in fact gave its name to homosexual relations in the Latin language, and throughout the Middle Ages the closest word to ‘homosexual’ in Latin or any vernacular was ‘sodomita.’ None of the many Old Testament passages which refer to Sodom’s wickedness suggests any homosexual offenses, and the rise of homosexual associations can be traced to social trends and literature of a much later period. It is not likely that such associations played a large role in determining early Christian attitudes.” [Boswell, pp. 92, 93.]

According to the PCUSA report, “The story in Genesis 19:1–11 is one of the most commonly used to propose the sinfulness of homosexuality. As one reads the account, it becomes apparent immediately that the demeanor of the men of Sodom was violent. Their intent was to gang rape the guests in Lot’s home. In order to understand this text, it is important to know what cultural meaning the writer and readers attached to the violent sexual assault of males by males.

“In the first place, greater value was placed on a man in that time than on a woman. When Lot offered his two virgin daughters as substitutes for the two men, the offer was turned down because the rape of a man was considered a worse crime than the rape of a woman. Furthermore, violent and brutal rape was intended to humiliate, and was at times sanctioned for use on a conquered or foreign enemy. In this particular story, the intent was to humiliate and emasculate the distrusted foreign guests, who might well present a threat to the citizens of Sodom. What is condemned in this text is violent gang rape. To say that this account condemns homosexual behavior is to read into the story what is not there.” [PCUSA, p. 99.]

Textual Notes

Yada a Hebrew word meaning “to know” or “to become acquainted with” appears 943 times in the Hebrew scriptures. Only 10 times does it refer to

sexual intercourse, and each of these references are to heterosexual intercourse.

Yada combined with mishkabh meaning “the act of lying, as on a bed” appears 5 times in the Hebrew scriptures and refers to sexual knowledge.

Shakabh , the root of mishkabh , appears 50 times in the Hebrew scriptures, and in each context it serves as a euphemism for sexual activity, either heterosexual, homosexual or bestial.

Stock asks why, if the writers of Genesis 19:5 were referring to homosexual activity, did they use yada that refers (when used in a sexual context) to heterosexual intercourse rather than shakabh that could refer to homosexual activity? [Stock]

Marks comments, “The reputed wickedness of the inhabitants of Sodom (cf. 18:20) is immediately exposed in their depraved treatment of the divine messengers. Lot, who knows the customs of these city dwellers, cannot permit the strangers to pass the night unprotected from the unchaste designs of his neighbors. He is even willing to sacrifice his daughters for the sake of the well-being of the travelers, whom he treats as his own guests; and he is finally rescued from his plight only by the superhuman intervention of the strangers themselves (vss. 10–11). The evil of Sodom was not considered by all the OT writers to have been sodomy. Ezekiel defines it: ‘She had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy’ (Ezek. 16:48–50; cf. Isa. 1:10; 3:9; Jer. 23:14). This fact and the similarity of the attempted assault to the outrage at Gibeah (Judg. 19:22–26) suggest that this episode may originally have been an independent tradition. Cf. the visitors’ reception by Abraham (18:2–8) and by Lot (vss. 1–3), also the effect of their message on Sarah (18:12) and on Lot’s sons-in-law (vs. 14). [Interpreter’s p. 17.]

Boswell states, “On the basis of the text alone, there would seem to be four inferences one could make about the destruction of Sodom: (1) the Sodomites were destroyed for the general wickedness which had prompted the Lord to send angels to the city to investigate in the first place; (2) the city was destroyed because the people of

Sodom had tried to rape the angels; (3) the city was destroyed because the men of Sodom had tried to engage in homosexual intercourse with the angels (note that this is not the same as [2]: rape and homosexual intercourse are separably punishable offenses in Jewish law); (4) the city was destroyed for inhospitable treatment of visitors sent from the Lord.

“Although it is the most obvious of the four, the second possibility has been largely ignored by biblical scholars both ancient and modern, probably due to ambiguities surrounding homosexual rape. Since 1955 modern scholarship has increasingly favored interpretation (4), emphasizing that the sexual overtones to the story are minor, if present, and that the original moral impact of the passage had to do with the hospitality. Briefly put, the thesis of this trend in scholarship is that Lot was violating the custom of Sodom (where he was himself not a citizen but only a ‘sojourner’) by entertaining unknown guests within the city walls at night without obtaining the permission of the elders of the city. When the men of Sodom gathered around to demand that the strangers be brought out to them, ‘that they might know them,’ they meant no more than to ‘know’ who they were, and the city was consequently destroyed not for sexual immorality but for the sin of inhospitality to strangers.

“Numerous considerations lend this argument credibility. As Bailey [see Bibliography] pointed out, the Hebrew verb ‘to know’ [yada] is very rarely used in a sexual sense in the Bible (despite popular opinion to the contrary): in only ten of its 943 occurrences in the Old Testament does it have the sense of carnal knowledge. The passage on Sodom is the only place in the Old Testament where it is generally believed to refer to homosexual relations.

“Jesus himself apparently believed that Sodom was destroyed for the sin of inhospitality: ‘Whoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city’ (Matt. 10:14–15, KJV; cf. Luke 10:10–12).

“There are, moreover, numerous other references in the Old Testament to Sodom and its fate, and scholars have failed to accord this facet of the controversy the importance it deserves. Sodom is used as a symbol of evil in dozens of places, but not in a single instance is the sin of the Sodomites specified as homosexuality. Other sins, on the other hand, are explicitly mentioned. Ecclesiasticus says that God abhorred the Sodomites for their pride (16:8), and the book of Wisdom advances the same theory (19:13–14) that Bailey and others have more recently propounded. In Ezekiel the sins of Sodom are not listed categorically but contrasted with the sexual sins of Jerusalem as less serious: ‘As I live, saith the Lord God, Sodom thy sister hath not done as thou has done. Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy’ (16:48–40, KJV).

“One must also bear in mind that such Old Testament writers were responding to the same story which some modern interpreters still claim ‘obviously’ refers to ‘homosexuality’ and that they were on a far more intimate footing than modern writers with both the language and life-style of the people involved. Their refusal to see the account as a moral about homosexual behavior cannot be lightly disregarded, especially in the face of so little evidence to support a homosexual interpretation.

“Indeed only one argument can be advanced to demonstrate any sexual desire on the part of the Sodomites: that Lot’s offering his daughters to the men must suggest some anticipation on their part of sexual satisfaction. This argument, however, does not stand close scrutiny. Bailey comments, ‘Its connection with the purpose (whatever it was) for which the citizens demanded the production of his guests is purely imaginary. No doubt the surrender of his daughters was simply the most tempting bribe Lot could offer on the spur of the moment to appease the hostile crowd.

“This action, almost unthinkable in modern Western society, was consonant with the very low status of female children at the time and was not without its parallels even in the more ‘civilized’ Roman world.” [Boswell, pp. 93–95.]

Boswell shows the striking parallel of Genesis 19 to Judges 19:22 ff; of the latter he states, "But Jews and Christians have overwhelmingly failed to interpret this story as one of homosexuality, correctly assessing it as a moral about inhospitality" (pp. 95, 96). He then discusses the sacred right of hospitality ("theoxony") and concludes, "Genesis 19 obviously belongs in this context, no matter how many modern commentators may have ignored it, and a sexual element, if present at all, was probably intended only as the concrete expression of the Sodomites' lack of hospitality" (pp. 96, 97).

Edwards discusses the spectrum of scholarly thought on Genesis 19 and Judges 19. He believes that while Hermann Gunkel reads homophobic stereotypes into Genesis 19, Bailey's attempts to remove any sexual interpretation from the story is not justified. Edwards then goes on "to show from an examination of the parallel passages that Judges 19 is the earliest exposition of Genesis 19 we have, that it does sustain the sexual interpretation of "know" in Genesis 19:5, but that Josephus [Jewish historian, ca. 37–100 CE], for ethnic reasons [Saul, Israel's first king, was from Gibeah], chose to repress this element in the rape at Gibeah." [Edwards, pp. 32–35.]

The PCUSA report says, "As a result of this narrative, the term 'Sodom' became an elastic metaphor that was used in different ways by subsequent generations. Ezekiel 16:49–50 states that the 'sin of Sodom' was to have great prosperity and yet ignore the poor and needy. It was not homosexuality. Even the mention of 'abominable things' refers to idolatry. The word 'abomination' (Hebrew: shiqquz, to'ebah, shequez) has to do with pagan and idolatrous worship very frequently involving flesh of prohibited animals and sacrificial flesh.

"In Luke 10:10–13 Jesus says that Sodom and Gomorrah will be treated more kindly than any city that mistreats and rejects his disciples. The connection between the mistreatment of Lot's guests and Jesus' disciples is quite clear. 2 Peter 2:6–10 uses the Sodom metaphor to dramatize God's judgment on the ungodly. Jude 1:7 speaks of Sodom as a symbol of sexual immorality and

pursuit of unnatural lust. While 2 Peter and Jude both imply sexual misconduct, neither specifically describes generalized homosexual behavior. Many other forms of sexual behavior were, in the opinion of the early church, lawless and defiling. (This would include insolence, brutality, and disregard for social structure.)" [PCUSA, p. 100.]

Conclusions

Boswell concludes, "Although the original understanding of the story of Sodom survived in some circles until well into the Middle Ages, the increasing emphasis of Hellenistic Jewish and Christian moralists on sexual purity gave rise in late Jewish apocrypha and early Christian writings to associations of Sodom with sexual excesses of various sorts. Thus the Epistle of Jude: 'Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire' (7, KJV). In these early accretions to the story there is no hint of homosexuality: 'strange flesh' hardly suggest homoeroticism. The Jewish tradition to which Jude alludes was a legend that the women of Sodom had intercourse with the angels.

"But in an intellectual environment vehemently opposed to the casual hedonism of the Hellenistic world, many issues which had not been specifically sexual became so; this was the case with marital questions such as adultery and onanism [from Gen 38:9, masturbation, early withdrawal from intercourse or self-gratification] and with homosexuality. It was a short step for those predisposed to object to Graeco-Roman gender blindness from the 'strange flesh' of the Sodom story to the 'alien intercourse' which some early fathers vociferously condemned.

"On the other hand, Genesis 19 was not a principal source of early Christian hostility to homosexual relations, although it eventually gave a name to those who took part in them. This was partly due to misgivings about the Old Testament's authority, especially among Christians of non-Jewish ancestry, and partly due to the survival of more authentic interpretations of the story's meanings." [Boswell, pp. 97, 98]

Edwards concludes, “The reader must put aside pious heterosexual anathemas on private, voluntary, same-sex acts by homosexually predisposed adults. The key is the violent, aggressive abuse of power that had already brought on the city the outcry of ‘foul play’ (hamas) long before the advent of the divine emissaries in Genesis 19. This mode of interpretation is substantiated in the tradition of Jesus.

“It is a major impediment to those who wish to use scripture as a cudgel against homosexual persons to deny them membership or office in the community of faith that the teachings of Jesus contains no reference to homosexual disposition or acts. The singular fact is that this saying [on Sodom’s demise], in all three of its occurrences [Matthew 10:15; 11:24; Luke 10:12], sets Sodom’s doom in the context of inhospitality to the representatives of Jesus or to Jesus himself. This is consonant with the underlying motif of the spurning of divine representatives ascribed by Gunkel to Genesis 19 on the basis of history-of-religions methodology. It accords with the requirement to defend the alien and dispossessed arising from sociological criticism of the period of the conquest (1250–1050 BCE) and the deepest historical roots of the word Hebrew. It accommodates without exegetical coercion the sexual interpretation of Genesis 19:5 by its stringent repudiation of the phallic aggression represented in that text.

“This interpretation liberates the text from the oppressive use it has so long served in our religious history and enables the reader (gay/lesbian or straight) to enter into the striving after justice that is the heart of prophetic faith and the soul of evangelical freedom.

“Because the saga of Genesis 19 has no recognizable cultic elements to encourage the opinion of some commentators that it is Canaanite cultic prostitution which is under attack in the depiction of the men of Sodom, the practice of phallic aggression, in the larger setting of opulent, xenophobic hybris, underlined by Ezekiel and Josephus, provides the most logical explanation of the sexual dimension of Genesis 19. This specific understanding leads Thorkil Vanggaard to affirm that ‘the aggressive element, void of all eroticism,

is precisely what is operating in the such scenes of collective violence as that described in the biblical tale of Sodom.’ It should be self-evident that the healthy homosexual would no more condone the conduct implicit in Genesis 19:5 than the healthy heterosexual would approve the conduct of Judges 19:22–25. “ [Edwards, pp. 44–46.]

The PCUSA report concludes, “The original meaning of the Genesis Chapter 19 story, as accurately as we can ascertain, indicates that the biblical writer was condemning the violent gang rape of men whom the men of Sodom considered a threat. Consequently, the Sodom and Gomorrah story should not be used in today’s context to condemn homosexual behavior per se, since that was not its original intent.” [PCUSA, p. 100.]

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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly Special Committee on *Human Sexuality. Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality, and Social Justice*. Louisville, KY: Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1991. See especially section I.C. "The Resources: Authority, Sources, and Norms" and section III.B. "Gays and Lesbians." To order copies of the Majority and Minority Reports (\$5 per set or \$5 each) contact the Office of the General Assembly, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville KY 40202-1396.

Stock, Harry. "Homosexuality and the Bible." An unpublished lecture. The Rev. Stock is President of Bare Feet Ministries, Inc., Box 33182, Washington DC 20033.

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