

SODOM & GOMORRAH

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Intro to the Hebrew Bible
December 19, 2008

INTRODUCTION

The book of Genesis, the first book of the Pentateuch, the first book of the Hebrew Torah, the first book of the Christian Bible, is a beginning. The stories of creation and of humanity unfold in the pages, and both literary readers and religious scholars become enthralled with the stories, the passions, the scandals, and the images. Whether we look at Genesis – like the Jewish faithful from the Orthodox movement or from some fundamental Christian groups – as the true, literal, and unchanged truth, or – like Jews from the Reform movement or progressive Christian groups – as a collection of writings that *may* be true and certainly offer profound teachings, we must recognize the powerful influence that the Genesis narrative has had over humanity for thousands of years.

The Genesis influence continues today. The story of creation is hotly debated between creationists, evolutionists, and – somewhere in the middle – those arguing for intelligent design, and has come far enough that evolution is one of the only areas of science to become a full fledged legal issue, even making it to the United States Supreme Court. The story of “original sin” continues to be used divisively, some using it to blame women for the origin of sin or to insist on a woman’s subservience. The story of Noah’s Ark has spawned countless archaeological surveys and even purported discoveries along various mountain ranges from Turkey to Iran, and has inspired contemporary comedians like Bill Cosby and big-budget Hollywood movies starring the likes of Steve Carrell. The story of Abraham and his two eldest sons is at the root of the division between Judaism and Islam, and although both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an clearly define the close relationship between these two faiths, violence between them is a weekly – if not daily – feature in the national news. It seems as though

Genesis offered to humanity the beginning lessons on how to treat the world and the people in it, and in return humanity has worked for almost as long to use it as a tool of divisiveness.

This paper will focus on a story as yet unmentioned, and one used – perhaps even more than the others – to segregate, classify, demoralize, and persecute an entire class of society. The story of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis has been a central argument against same-gender relationships. This paper will explore the biblical account of this judgment in chapter nineteen. Recognizing that the two doomed cities are referenced in earlier chapters, this paper will touch briefly on these in order to maintain context. We will discuss the discovery of sites thought to be that of Sodom and Gomorrah, and finally the meaning of this narrative in relation to same-gender relationships.

THE ROAD TO DESTRUCTION

The first mention of the cities of Sodom and Gomorra is in the thirteenth chapter of Genesis. Verse ten tells of Lot surveying a large area of land to decide where he'd like to live. The narrative adds at the end of the verse that this part of the story happens before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and may be offering a contrast between the fertile land illustrated in the text and what must have looked like wasteland after the cities had been destroyed.

Later in verse twelve, we read that Lot settled near the city of Sodom, and immediately afterward in verse thirteen read that the people living on Sodom are “wicked, great sinners against the Lord.”¹ There is no indication in the text that either Lot or Abram are aware of Sodom's wickedness. We might wonder if this is a literary device designed to build tension in the narrative.

¹ *New Interpreter's Bible, The: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes.* vol 1. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 432.

In chapter fourteen, war breaks out in the region and there is some reference to the two cities and their kings. When Sodom and Gomorrah are plundered, how this will affect the citizens in the future – even after most of the plunder and captives are returned – is something that must be considered as possible motive for the riotous behavior of the citizens of Sodom. Chapters fifteen through seventeen return to Abram’s narrative where he has a son with his wife’s servant, is renamed Abraham, has made his covenant with the Deity, and is promised a son with Sarah. Neither Sodom nor Gomorrah return to the forefront until the end of chapter eighteen.

Verse sixteen of this chapter begins with three men to whom Abraham had shown hospitality leaving his company and journeying on the way to Sodom. As Abraham accompanies the men for the first part of the journey, the Deity is “overheard”² discussing whether or not to consult Abraham on imminent plans for judgment at Sodom and Gomorrah. Continuing the narrative, Abraham recognizes that he has been invited into the dialogue, and nobly advocates for any innocent persons who may be living in Sodom. He embraces his role in the dialogue, and asks specific questions while moving in stages until reaching agreement that the Deity will not destroy Sodom if there are just ten innocent people.

An important observation here is that the fate of the two cities has already been decided. There has been no riot in the streets; there has been no attempted rape of the visiting men or Lot’s daughters. Sodom and Gomorrah have been condemned by sins already committed. The narrative breaks away, however, before Abraham learns whether there are indeed ten innocents in Sodom.

² Ibid, 467.

SODOMITES

In looking at the core text of this story, the focus will be on the text from Genesis 19:1-11, the most frequently referenced text in the book of Genesis.³ This section will detail each section of the story using several commentaries including The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, and The Queer Bible Commentary. Other commentaries may be added when something unique is present, and of course this author's own ideas will be included.

The opening verses of the chapter illustrate the entrance of two messengers (*mal'-âk*, sometimes translated as angels) into Sodom. It is evening, and Lot is sitting at the gateway of Sodom. Lot rises to meet the messengers and then bows as one might bow to royalty. Here, readers might begin to wonder why Lot is waiting at the city gate, and wonder why his behavior changes rapidly between rising to meet the strangers and then prostrating himself before them. Readers might further note the time of day – evening – and wonder if this is significant.

Origen Adamantius writes that Lot's presence at the gate rather than in his home or somewhere in the city is an indication of his desire to welcome and serve travelers⁴; and Saint John Chrysostom writes that the onset of evening indicates Lot's extraordinary virtue in remaining at the gate in spite of the late hour.⁵ Theodore of Mopsuestia writes that the time of day itself is an ominous sign, that good things happen during the day and that bad things happen at night.⁶

However, this could be too much assumption and the reality may be simpler. The commentaries are unanimous in that these two messengers are the same here in the beginning of

³ Ibid, 473.

⁴ as cited in Mark Sheridan, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. vol 2. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 74.

⁵ Ibid, 73.

⁶ Ibid.

chapter 19 as those who left Abraham at the end of chapter 18. Since those men met with Abraham in the heat of the day, shared a meal, and then left directly for Sodom, this could simply be an illustration of a short passage of time.

On the sudden change in Lot's behavior, Chrysostom suggests that Lot is expressing thanks to the Deity for the opportunity to show hospitality to strangers. We might also wonder if there was something about the manner of dress or appearance of these messengers that indicated any sense of social status. That they are named as *mal'-âk*, they could be angels, and they could be messengers from one of the local kings. Remembering that Sodom had recently been overthrown and plundered by a consortium of kings, its people placed for a short time into slavery, this would be a completely appropriate reaction. Lot would rise to greet the strangers, and upon recognizing them as messengers from one of those tyrannical kings would immediately illustrate his subservience lest he bring about a repeat oppression.

Lot invites the two messengers into his home to spend the night and to refresh themselves before returning to their journey. He shows them great respect, and addresses them as *âdôn*, meaning lord or master. The messengers refuse him, and say that they will spend the night in the streets instead. He renews his invitation strenuously, and they ultimately accept. Lot welcomes them with a feast. Here, readers may wonder at the messengers' insistence on resting in the open air and why Lot objected so strongly.

Chrysostom writes of this verse that Lot is being exceedingly generous to the travelers. He addresses them richly and generously, and humbles himself like a servant. Chrysostom suggests that Lot is wealthy, and even then invites strangers under his wing.⁷ When Lot is turned

⁷ Ibid, 74.

down, Chrysostom writes that Lot is right to pursue them, and that true hospitality would be nothing less.⁸

Lyn M. Bechtel writes that this invitation-denial-renewed invitation is a complex ritual of shame and honor in a group-oriented social structure.⁹ Bechtel argues that the initial denial by the messengers is the socially appropriate response and that Lot manipulates them into acceptance simply by asking a second time. It would be shameful not to accept another invitation.

Although we as readers may discern that the messengers are in Sodom to observe and perhaps even to pass judgment, there is nothing in the text to indicate that either Lot or the inhabitants of the city are aware of this purpose or even their true identity. If we continue along the line of Lot's perception that these two men may be messengers from a group of oppressive kings, we can guess that Lot's sole motivation may be to do all in his power to please them. If, as Chrysostom writes, Lot is wealthy and respected in Sodom, he may have even seen it as his responsibility to show kindness and humble respect.

When the meal has been eaten, but before the inhabitants of Lot's house have retired for the night, the house is surrounded by all the men of Sodom. The text specifies that both the young men and the old men of the city are present, from every corner. No one was missing. The crowd calls out to Lot that they know he has guests, and they demand that Lot bring out these guests so that they might "know" them. With these verses, readers may question the specificity that young and old men from every corner of Sodom are surrounding the house, and why they've chosen this particular time and place. Another important question is exactly what are the men of Sodom asking?

⁸ Ibid, 75.

⁹ Lyn M. Bechtel, "A Feminist Reading of Genesis 19:1-11," in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series): Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 1998), n.p.

The men of Sodom call out that they wish to know the visitors, using the Hebrew word *yâda'*, which could mean to see, to observe, to recognize, to acknowledge, and to acquaint with. The word has a common interpretation in this verse as a sexual euphemism, and it must be said that this is the same word used in earlier Genesis where *adam* “knows” his wife and she bears a son. In this case, we may guess that this use of *yâda'* is negative in nature by the way that Lot responds and calls them wicked. Let us, in this case, assume that the men are indeed calling on Lot to bring out the messengers so that they might be “known” in a sexual manner.

It is every man in the city who appears at Lot’s house. The text doesn’t say that the crowd revolted upon hearing the voice ask for the messengers, so we assume that all who are present are in agreement. By extension then, there is not a single man in the city – save for Lot – who doesn’t not want to “know” these messengers in a sexual way. The text doesn’t specify how the men of the city know that these messengers are in the city or how they have been traced to Lot’s house. It is only certain that the every man is there and that every man wants to “know” them.

The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary suggests that “if the assault had succeeded, the result could only be described as gang rape,”¹⁰ and that the grave sin committed here is an example that characterizes the entire city. Bechtel writes that this kind of rape would shame and dehumanize the messengers, and would be the opposite of welcoming or showing hospitality.¹¹ Following again the premise that the messengers are thought to be sent from another king, this threat of sexual violation is completely and totally about power. The city of Sodom had been conquered and plundered, the inhabitants enslaved. There must have been a great deal of anger and animosity toward the conquering army and its leaders. The perceived

¹⁰ *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible including the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical books.* vol 1. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 474.

¹¹ Bechtel, “Feminist Reading,” n.p.

possibility – however misconstrued – of such humiliation again could easily lead to a desire to inflict the same sort of shame upon those who might embody that threat. To take these men and force them into a sexual subservience – as with women of the time – would be the ultimate disgrace. The men of Sodom wanted to take power over those that they perceived as powerful.

With this grave threat uttered, Lot goes to the crowd of men – careful to close his door behind him – and addresses them as brothers. He begs them to change their minds about the two strangers and then offers instead his two virgin daughters as replacements. He invites the men to treat his daughters in any way that they please, as long as they leave the strangers alone. This must be done because the messengers have been welcomed into his home. Instead, the men turn on Lot as well, remembering that Lot himself is not originally from Sodom. The crowd presses in on Lot, coming ever nearer the door and their ultimate objective of the two messengers. Readers of this passage are understandably alarmed. How is it possible that Lot would offer his two virgin daughters up for gang rape, and why does the mob of angry men ignore the offer completely?

The *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* points out that the two girls, based on verse 14, are betrothed but unmarried.¹² From this, we may assume that they are in their early teens. The commentary continues that Lot may think the men will be satisfied with heterosexual rape rather than homosexual rape.¹³ With the refusal of the virgin teens, many assume that the Sodomites are only seeking homosexual intercourse. This seems – to this author – to be an unsupported assumption at best.

The men of Sodom aren't seeking sex from the strangers, and sex with Lot's daughters could not possibly satisfy their rage. The Sodomites are seeking power over those who have

¹² *New Interpreter's Bible*, 474.

¹³ *Ibid.*

oppressed them. Understanding that the messengers are perceived as a threat, we can come to the conclusion that Lot's daughters aren't refused because they are women, but because they aren't seen as dangerous. Only by directly and completely humiliating and shaming the messengers will the mob be satisfied. They seek safety and reassurance rather than sex, however horrific their methods.

The two strangers rescue Lot from the closing mob and strike them blind, leaving them groping for the door. This illustration and the great threat to Lot, his family, and especially to the messengers make all too clear the case for Sodom's destruction. Previous to chapter 19, Abraham received the promise that ten innocents in Sodom would spare it from destruction. We've seen that only Lot could be seen as innocent, and his innocence is sketchy at best in light of his offer of his virgin daughters to the crowd of Sodomites.

BRIMSTONE FINALE

Lot is urged to leave, and he is finally told that the city will be destroyed. The messengers identify themselves as having been sent by the Deity, and Lot begins to prepare his family for their imminent departure. Strangely, Lot's sons-in-law – those who were due to marry Lot's virgin daughters – thought the episode was a joke and refused to leave. Even Lot and his family hesitated, and were finally thrown forcibly out of the city by the messengers. They are told to flee into the hills or face their own destruction

Lot, perhaps recognizing at last the foolishness of waiting so long, begs the messengers not to make him run the full distance to the hills. Lot argues that the destination is too far and that he fears that he won't make cover in time, asking instead to find shelter in a small city nearby. The messengers agree, and he and his family head the city which is then named Zoar.

“Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven: and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.” (Genesis 19:24-25, NRSV)

REDISCOVERING SODOM

There are a number of accounts of the discovery of the ancient cities of the plain, including Sodom and Gomorrah. While there has not yet been found any irrefutable evidence of a known location for either of these two cities, compelling evidence abounds. Because the biblical text specifies that the cities of the plain were near the Dead Sea, all reasonable claims center in that area.

Bryant G. Wood at the Associates for Biblical Research writes that solid archaeological evidence for the cities of the plain surfaced in 1973 with the discovery of four sites near Bab edh-Dhra southeast of the Dead Sea. Conducted by Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub, the sites date from the early bronze period (roughly 3300 – 2000 B.C.E.). Bab edh-Dhra along with Numeira, thought to be Sodom and Gomorrah respectively, Wood argues that the cities show evidence of destruction not once but twice. He references the military overthrow of the two cities as the first destruction, and references evidence of destruction and then rebuilding of city fortifications. He then references the raining of sulfur and fire for the second destruction, citing charcoal, broken and fallen bricks, and ash.¹⁴

The BBC writes that Graham Harris, a retired geologist, believes that the two cities can be found on the shores of the Dead Sea and that they traded regularly in a naturally occurring asphalt, used on boats and in building construction. Dr. Harris suggests that a massive earthquake took place during the biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that such an

¹⁴ Bryant G. Wood, PhD. “The Discovery of the Sin Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah,” Associates for Biblical Research, <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/04/The-Discovery-of-the-Sin-Cities-of-Sodom-and-Gomorrah.aspx>.

event could have released large pockets of methane gas from under the Dead Sea shores. He argues that the earthquake that released such gasses could have ignited them, that the ground would have turned to quicksand, and that the cities would have been swept into the water.¹⁵

Finally, FOX News reported in an April 2008 article by Lewis Smith that a nearly 3000 year old clay tablet holds the key to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁶ According to Smith the tablet was found in Nineveh in the mid-19th century, and that it is thought to be a copy of notes by a Sumerian astronomer from around 700 B.C.E., and that the events recorded occurred around 3123 B.C.E. According to the tablet, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah can be attributed to a giant asteroid more than half-a-mile across. As this celestial giant burned through the atmosphere, fire and sulfur may have rained down from the sky, accounting for the reported events from Genesis.

INTERPRETATION AND PERSECUTION

The fantastic story of the judgment and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is easy to recount with its scandalous imagery, its palpable tension, and its fiery climax. The story has been passed down not only in its literary form, but also with commentary and condemnation as a “moral judgment made there against homosexual relations.”¹⁷ The passage is cited along with Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:10 and 1 Timothy 1:10 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* presenting “homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity.”¹⁸

The presentation of the text to support a homophobic interpretation has only been questioned in recent history, beginning in the 1990s, and most early opponents were self-

¹⁵ Jessica Cecil. “The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah,” BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/cultures/sodom_gomorrah_01.shtml

¹⁶ Lewis Smith. “Researchers: Asteroid Destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah,” FOXNews.com, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,343674,00.html>.

¹⁷ Gareth Moore, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* (London: Continuum, 2003), 69.

¹⁸ Ibid.

described gay men.¹⁹ This understandably led to many questioning the validity of the work, no matter how diligent. We have come to understand the context of Sodom and Gomorrah differently. This is not a lesson on same-sex attraction, nor is it a referendum on homosexuality. The account of the judgment and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is more closely related to the tragic affects of war. It is more closely related to the sometimes violent grasping of power by those who feel powerless. It is about rage; it is about oppression; it is about humiliation; it is about shame.

And what a shame it is to have been used for so long to oppress and to humiliate, to hold power over a great number of people, and to wage war against those who are perceived as different or threatening. Sodom was judged for just such a sin. How will humanity be judged when the time has come? I pray that just a few innocents can save the world.

¹⁹ Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2004), 7.

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