

Sodomy Stories and Sodomy Laws: What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?

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The issue of homosexuality has been at the center of much controversy and debate throughout the centuries, particularly within Christian and Judeo-Christian circles. Much of the arguments surrounding the arguments against homosexuality, or “Sodomy” as it is often called because of the narrative it refers to, come from the Genesis story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Various ways of reading this narrative have been proposed to either downplay the homosexual roots of the destruction of the cities or to focus on the primitive and backward cultural standards that are seemingly being endorsed in the story. Is Genesis 19 a story about homosexuality or something else?

Genesis 19 starts out by recounting how two angels visited Sodom in order to bring word to Lot, Abraham's nephew, about the impending destruction of the city. The two angels are assumed to have been male because in Genesis 19:2 Lot refers to them as “lords”, *Adoown אֲדֹוֹן* which is the plural of *Adonai*. *Adonai* is a masculine noun¹. In Christian tradition, angels are usually known as being genderless for they “neither marry nor are given in marriage.”² The fact that the angels in this narrative are portrayed as at least having some masculine qualities so as to elicit the response of *Adonai* from Lot, seemingly stands oppositely juxtaposed to modern Judeo-Christian thought. When the angels told Lot that their plan was to spend the night in the town square, he was immediately distressed and pleaded with them to spend the night under the safety of his roof.

Whether this was for fear that they would be violated by the townspeople or simply an expression of common Near-East hospitality, the text does not tell us explicitly, but it does give some insight into the sexual climate of the town. After the angels agreed to spend the night with Lot, the

¹ Blue Letter Bible. "Dictionary and Word Search for '*Adonay* (Strong's 136)". Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 4 Apr 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H136&t=ESV>>

² Gospel of Matthew 22:30

townspeople came to Lot's house: “the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them’³. ” The first thing of interest here is the fact that only men are mentioned as having come to Lot's house, there were no women. Additionally, the men were of various age groups, “both young and old,” every man in the town was present and demanded that Lot's visitors be brought out. The description of this town is given to us here: the first impression we have of the townspeople is that they are rude and not interested in the well-being of Lot's visitors. The town's entire male population formed a mob and came knocking at Lot's door, this is certainly not a friendly encounter by any means. Why did the mob form? They wanted Lot to bring out his guests “so we may know them.” The Hebrew word used for “know” is *yada* יְדָא. Robert Gagnon argues that the word *yada* has been interpreted by liberal scholars as meaning “to get acquainted with” rather than “having sexual intercourse with.⁴” This view is untenable, however, considering the wealth of context given for this word throughout the Torah. Even though the word, itself, does not carry a sexual connotation, the surrounding word usage gives a clearer definition as to the intention of the verb. Lot's response to the request of the townspeople is this, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any 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.⁵” Lot understood the intentions of the men and pleaded with them to “not act so wickedly”; instead he offered his own two daughters “who have not known a man.” Had Lot's daughters never been acquainted with any man before? That reading seems odd and implausible. It is safe to say that

3 Genesis 19:3b-4

4 Robert A. J. Gagnon. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002, pp. 73

5 Genesis 19:7-8

this evidence creates a solid case for a sexual understanding of the verb *yada* in this passage, and this in turn, leaves no doubt as to the intentions of the men in the town: they anticipated engaging in some kind of sexual act with Lot's guests, the angels. After Lot attempted to stop them they threatened him and endeavored to break his door down and take the men by force, but the angels thwarted their plan and struck them all with blindness. The uncanny timing of their physical blindness seems like the logical culmination of their lifestyles that were indicative of spiritual and moral blindness.

Lot is then warned by the angels to take his whole family and leave the city with the explicit command to “not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away.”⁶ This part of the narrative deals with Lot's family fleeing to Zoar while God destroyed the two cities. Unfortunately, Lot's wife disobeys the charge of the angel, “turns back,” and is made into a pillar of salt. Gwynn Kessler comments on the motif of “turning back” and compares it to searching for the truth by studying past Hebraic sources such as the Midrash.

The story ends as follows: “And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and he looked and, behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.”⁷ This was the physical end of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It is evident that the story is clearly dealing with sexual immorality, specifically homosexuality as is evidenced by the townspeople's requests for Lot to bring out his guests that they may “know” them and his refusal to do so. Gwenn Kessler makes this argument, “I open up various readings, using different characters and different points of view in an attempt to forefront the multiplicity of available

⁶ Genesis 19:17

⁷ Genesis 19: 27-28

interpretations...⁸” I have to disagree here. There simply is no other tenable way to read the text. One of the most important pieces of evidences is the proper translation of *yada*, which we know to have a sexual connotation because of the surrounding context. Furthermore, in Genesis 18 when God was speaking to Abraham he made known the fact that “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave...⁹” Later, in verse 23, while God and Abraham discussed the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah they referred to the citizens of the cities as ‘wicked’ (*Rasha רָשָׁא*), as opposed to being righteous (*Tsadiyq צָדִיק*). Some scholars have suggested reading Ezekiel 16:39-40 in order to get a better understanding of what the real sin of Sodom was: “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.” When reading this passage, the second part is often forgotten, even Kessler agrees with this: “However important, and correct, it is to point out that elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic tradition, the sin of Sodom lay not in homosexuality but far more primarily in an utter lack of hospitality, this corrective reading still, more often than not, takes the story of Sodom out of its immediate textual context...¹⁰” The sin of Sodom was not just greed and laziness; they “did detestable things” before God. The Hebrew word used here for detestable is *tow'ebah* **תֹּוְבָּה**¹¹. This is the same word used in Leviticus 20:13 as a prohibition of homosexual relations, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination (*tow'ebah*); they shall surely be put to

8 Gwynn Kessler. “Looking Back to Look Forward: Parashat Vayera (Genesis 18:1–22:24).” In *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 29

9 Genesis 18:20

10 Kessler pp 31

11 Blue Letter Bible. "Dictionary and Word Search for *tow'ebah* (Strong's 8441)". Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 5 Apr 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H8441&t=KJV>>

death; their blood is upon them.” Thus, at least in the Torah and the writings of the prophets, the meaning of the story was clear. Sodom and Gomorrah sinned by committing detestable acts in the sight of God, among these was engaging in homosexual relations.

The New Testament also makes mention of Sodom and Gomorrah in several places. Jesus often compared wicked and unbelieving towns of Judea to Sodom: “But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.¹²” In 2 Peter 2:6, Sodom and Gomorrah are said to be examples unto the wicked, that they will face the same fate as them if they keep on living in sin and wickedness. Jude 1:7 also says that Sodom and Gomorrah are examples to the wicked, but this passage gives specific insight into what was believed to have been the sin committed there, “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.” Their sins were “fornication” and “going after strange flesh.”

It is not difficult to see how prohibition laws against homosexuality arrived as a result of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The tale clearly depicts a depraved city that is in the clutches of its own sin and has the wrath of God upon it. Attempts to contextualize the story and erase the anti-homosexual rhetoric fail miserably in light of the evidence and the common reading of it by Jews and Christians for thousands of years.