

The Story of Sodom

The story of Sodom remains the most familiar and influential biblical passage traditionally associated with homosexuality. The account has had a profound effect upon the same-sex fears of Christendom for 2000 years. Although the ruins of the burned city have long disappeared, its glare still ignites an abhorrence of homosexual love and enflames a phobic animosity toward gay/lesbian issues.

Why was Sodom destroyed?

Neither the actual narrative (Gen.19:1-29) nor any preceding reference (Gen. 13:13; Gen.18:20) ever clearly specifies the exact character of the crimes of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other Cities of the Plain. Indeed, absolutely no evidence exists that same-sex abuses were present in the region prior to the Genesis tale. In fact, the story itself does not totally demand that the immediate sin of the Sodomites was sexual, let alone homosexual, in nature.

It appears rather unrealistic to believe that “all the men of Sodom, both young and old, without exception” (Gen.19:4) were sexually aroused by Lot’s visitors. It seems more reasonable to think that the two strangers were considered possible spies for neighboring enemies.

The proper interpretation depends on the significance of the Sodomites’ demand “to know” Lot’s guests (Gen.19:5). The Hebrew word *yadha*, often used elsewhere throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, has no definitive sexual meaning, despite the translation in some English Bibles. The verb means “to observe, recognize, get acquainted” in 928 instances and “to have heterosexual intercourse” on only 15 occasions. In fact, an entirely different Hebrew verb *shakab* describes homosexual relations elsewhere in Scripture (Lev.18:22; Lev.20:13).

Many of today’s biblical scholars have increasingly favored an interpretation of the controverted text as an example of gross inhospitality rather than as an argument against homosexual acts. However, even if the attempted crime were definitely sexual in character, the passage could only condemn the violence of homosexual rape, indeed a terribly repugnant expression of inhospitable feelings. Yes, the townspeople acted as an evil and wicked group, here obviously intent on serious abuse of others, but clearly punished for many additional offenses as well.

How is Sodom later referred to?

The twenty-one later references to Sodom in the Hebrew Scriptures do not even mention homosexual acts but rather specify inhospitality, pride, or idolatry (e.g. Wisdom 19:13-14; Sirach 16:8-9; Isaiah 1:10ff.). St. Paul, after his own verses on same-sex abuses (Rom.1:26-27), makes no allusion to them in his single citation of Sodom (Rom.9:29). Jesus himself supports an identification of the city with inhospitality when he denounces the unfriendly reception of his disciples (Matthew 10:14-15; Luke 10:10-12).

Inhospitality at Sodom also seems plausible from the deliberately parallel account of the outrage at Gibeah (Judges 19:1 to 21:25). Here the same Hebrew word *yadha* occurs, when the men

demand “to know” a male guest (Jg.19:22). Commentators have overwhelmingly interpreted the identical action as an inhospitable request rather than as a homosexual proposal. The visitor himself makes it clear that the townspeople intended to kill him (Jg. 20:5).

Furthermore, no reference to Sodom is given at any of the biblical passages, whether Hebrew or Greek, which prohibit same-sex vices (Lev. 18:22; Lev.20:13; Rom.1:26-27; 1 Cor.6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10). Yet such an allusion could have been obviously made if in fact scriptural writers commonly believed that the city was destroyed for homosexual acts.

But doesn't the offer of Lot's daughters prove a sexual context?

Not really. Lot suggested his daughters as a possible diversion or appeasement to avoid violating the welcome of strangers in his home. Due to the unfortunately sexist character of primitive times, the honor of women in the family was of less importance than the sacred duty of hospitality. Lot emphatically declared, “These men are my guests, whom I must protect under my roof!” (Gen.19:8b).

Incidentally, as a knowledgeable resident, Lot considered the Sodomites to be heterosexual in orientation. Otherwise, he would not have offered them virginal females (Gen.19:8a). In fact, two of the men of Sodom were betrothed to Lot's daughters (Gen.19:14).

Thus the townsmen, even if sexual in their demands, should not appear as primarily interested in same-sex pleasures. Rather they would have intended to humiliate the male visitors, who were to be treated like women and thereby demasculinized, according to the standards of a patriarchal society.

In the similar passage about Gibeah's crime, the men accepted the male guest's concubine, i.e. secondary wife, and raped her so repeatedly and violently that she died at daybreak (Jg.19:25-28; 20:4-5). Yet people have not reacted by condemning all heterosexual acts, although they become enraged at homosexuality when quoting the horrendous story of Sodom.

When did Sodom become associated with homosexuality?

The Sodom episode, which occurred about 2000 B.C.E., became clearly associated with homosexuality only as a much later interpretation around 100 B.C. Some Hebrew authors gradually read certain ideas back into the original account, first sexual allusions, and then homosexual references, as arguments against the widespread idolatrous pagan promiscuity of their own generation. Most Christian writers in general adopted the newly established Jewish explanation without further question.

However, various Church commentators still recognized the original understanding of Sodom's crime primarily as inhospitality and secondarily, if at all, as sexual misbehavior. St. Ambrose of Milan, although he noted the carnal interest of the Sodomites, viewed the moral issue principally as inhospitable conduct (Patrology, Latin Series, 14:440). St. Isidore of Seville completely ignored any sexual implications of Sodom's fate (Patrology, Latin Series, 83:647). St. Boniface of Germany defined sodomitical lust as adultery, incest, and promiscuity, without mentioning or

implying any kind of homosexual abuse (Hadden and Stubbs, *Councils*, 3:359). Even the 1975 Vatican Declaration on sexual ethics did not use the Sodom text in its reference to homogenital actions (no. 8).

What does Sodom teach us?

Whatever explanations are accepted, the story of Sodom certainly illustrates how offensive God finds any of us when, like its inhabitants, we abuse and disregard other individuals. Yet, amazingly, some Christians have so interpreted the passage as to encourage mistreatment and persecution of homosexual hitat who may have even accepted their given orientation honestly before God.

Society has subjected lesbian women and gay men to insult, brutality, and oppression for centuries. In the name of a traditional understanding of the sin of Sodom, many continue to repeat the most serious crime of the Sodomites, i.e., abusive conduct, by their inhospitable attitudes and behavior toward gay/lesbian people.

“So what was the sin of Sodom? Abuse and offense against strangers. Insult to the traveler. Inhospitality to the needy... In the many biblical references to the sin of Sodom, there is no concern whatever about homogenitality...”

(Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, p. 39, 1994)

From *Homosexuality: A Positive Catholic Approach*, Third Revised Edition
© 2003 New Ways Ministry. All Rights Reserved.

www.NewWaysMinistry.org