Sodom and Gomorrah: Sex or Greed?Carla A. Grosch-Miller

Genesis 19 tells a horrific story – only outdone in horror by the companion story in Judges 19, where the threatened violence is actually carried out, a woman gang raped all night long until she died, her body then cut up and sent as a message throughout the territory of Israel. In Christian tradition, the horrors of the story of Genesis 19 focus on the threat of homosexual gang rape. Far less attention has been paid to the horror of Lot’s offering of his virgin daughters: *do to them as you please*, he says, hoping to protect the strangers who have taken shelter under his roof. The fate of the cities’ populations, genocide, is thought to have been deserved: this is what happens when you sin against God.

What were the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah? Here Christian and Jewish commentators differ significantly. The Christian interpretation that the sin of Sodom was homosexual desire probably began with Philo of Alexandria in the first century. ([Carden, 2006, pp. 36-37](#_ENREF_1)) A few generations later, in the late first or early 2nd century, Christian commentary continues with the book of Jude, v. 7, where the sin is named as sexual immorality and ‘going after other flesh’ ([NRSV, 1991, note g](#_ENREF_2)). The homosexual hypothesis began in earnest in the third century, but was not the dominant reading of the text for several centuries. In the West in the 11th century, the monk Peter Damian invented the word *sodomia*/sodomy and from that point *the Sodomite…*became *a creature in rebellion against both* God *and the divinely mandated natural order.* ([Carden, 2006, p. 37](#_ENREF_1))

The definition of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as homosexual desire is a misinterpretation, confusing desire or inclination with the violence of rape, and born of a lack of understanding of ancient Middle Eastern culture and fear of homosexuality. The offering of the daughters of Lot provides a hermeneutic clue: This was a culture where women were property, bargaining chips to make alliances or stave off violence. To be a woman was to be less than and powerless. The cult of privileged masculinity deemed that real men were powerful and penetrated their female chattel. This and the fact that robust procreation was necessary for the survival of the clan is why male homosexual penetration was condemned in Leviticus. The crowd’s calling for Lot’s guests was an act of extreme xenophobia, meant to scare the life out of any foreigners who dared broach the city walls. Rape of these men by the men of Sodom would feminise the strangers, declaring that they were powerless in this city and subject to violence.

Lot offers his daughters (can you imagine overhearing your father offer you?) to be raped. In that time and place the law of hospitality was that strangers were to be welcomed, fed, sheltered and protected. Lot offered his daughters to do just this: to protect his guests. In the chapter before the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, we are treated to a paradigmatic example of Middle Eastern hospitality: Abraham running to greet three strangers, killing the fatted calf, ordering the baking of cakes, tending to the strangers as honoured guests. This was how it was to be done. In the harsh climate of the desert, the law of hospitality is what enabled a nomadic people to survive. This law is expressed in the First Testament over and over and implicated in Jesus’ instructions to the travelling evangels in Matthew (10:5-15). In Genesis and beyond, the Hebrew people are told to welcome the stranger and the alien dozens of times. It usually reads this way: *Welcome the stranger, do not oppress them; you know the heart of the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.* [Exodus 23:9] Most of these statements are geared toward the resident aliens; the Sodomites were doing their best that no aliens would reside among them. Hear them shout at Lot *You came here as an alien, and you judge us?*

In contrast to the Christian myth of homosexual desire as the sin of Sodom, Jewish traditions have highlighted its hostility towards outsiders, the unwillingness to share resources and cruelty towards the poor and the stranger. In Ezekiel 16:49-50, we read:

This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did what is taboo before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Sodomites were concerned to maintain their wealth and privilege, going so far as to *corrupt the mechanisms of justice* and engaging in acts of cruelty to keep foreigners away. ([Carden, 2006, p. 37](#_ENREF_1)) A rabbinic tradition, described in the [Mishnah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mishnah), postulates that the sin of Sodom was related to property: Sodomites believed that "what is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours" (Abot), indicating a lack of compassion. Another rabbinic tradition is that these two wealthy cities treated visitors in a sadistic fashion.

The sin of Sodom in the predominant Jewish view sounds much more like the sin that has made the gap between rich and poor in the UK to grow significantly in the past 30 years, the sin that makes tax avoidance clever and tax evasion rampant, the sin that seeks to create a two-tiered health system, dismantling the NHS and enabling consultants and surgeons to prefer to serve the rich.

The interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah as related to homosexuality has created a world where Nazis could begin their genocide by murdering gay people and no respectable person blinked an eye, a world where well-intentioned Christian people reject their gay children, a world where the attempted suicide and suicide rates for young people wrestling with their sexuality soars in comparison to their straight peers.

Which interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah’s sin makes the most sense to you?

Carden, M. (2006). Genesis/Bereshit. In D. Guest, R. E. Goss, M. West & T. Bohache (Eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary* (pp. 1-60). London: SCM Press.

NRSV. (1991). *The Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. See also Jeremiah 23:14, where the sins of Jerusalem are compared to Sodom and are listed as adultery, lying, and strengthening the hands of evildoers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)