

“The true story of Sodom and Gomorrah”  
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*Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 and Genesis 19:1-13, 24, 27-29*

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We have been told a lie—whether out of ignorance or malice, I cannot say. But a lie nonetheless, told over and over until it has adopted the veneer of truth, obvious and incontestable. The lie has been heard from pulpits, read in books, chanted at rallies, proclaimed by politicians, shouted across dinner tables. It has been used to bludgeon the hopes of our children, to stomp out their lives, lashing them to crosses where they know not whether God is in the executioner or is upon the cross with them.

The lie says that God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, burning alive every man, woman, and child, because of that most heinous of crimes: homosexuality. The lie has so shaped our culture that the slur *sodomite* has come to mean one who engages in same-sex behavior.

Even though biblical scholars across the theological spectrum debunked this lie decades ago, on the simple basis that this is not what the text says, the lie persists.

So let us open again the pages of this holy book and see for ourselves what it says.

The story begins when Abraham’s nephew Lot settles among the sinful people of Sodom (Gen. 13:13). He goes to this prosperous land with a dream and a hope of building a life for him and his family. But the people of Sodom are not so welcoming, and as the years pass, a great outcry of suffering reaches God. God sends two angels to investigate (18:20-21). They enter the city as ordinary travelers, foreigners with no place to lay their head. Just days earlier, they had received food and welcome from Abraham. Now, Lot opens his home and gives them a feast to be remembered. It is a story of hospitality. But as we will soon learn, not all are Abraham or Lot.

The men of the city—all of them, we are told—surround the house and demand Lot send out the strangers, so they can have sex with them. Now there’s a word for forcing sex upon an unwilling person, and it’s not homosexuality. It’s rape—an act, not of love or even sex, but of power and domination. What Lot does next is quite brave: he steps out his door; he looks these angry men in the face, and begs them not to do this. He says it’s wrong, not because it would be a same-sex act—he never mentions that—but because he has a sacred responsibility to these strangers as their host. But as the heat of the mob comes over him, Lot’s courage falters. He makes a repulsive and terrifying offer, which speaks to both the patriarchy of the time (how little women were valued) and the ways in which Lot himself has begun to be corrupted by the city: Lot offers them instead his two daughters.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish midrash later interpreted Lot’s offer of his daughters as evil, saying that he was just as obligated to protect them from sexual abuse as his male guests. That midrash suggests that Lot had begun to become more like his Sodomite neighbors and thus he needed to be rescued before he was lost altogether to them (Rabbi Steven Nathan).

Fortunately for his daughters(!), the men reject the offer.

It's here that some would shout, "See! See! They're gay!" But the Bible doesn't say that. In fact, in response, the mob doesn't say anything about gender or sexual attraction. They threaten to rape Lot also. Why? Because he, like those strangers he's harboring, is a foreigner. "This fellow came here as an alien," they say! The men of Sodom are hell-bent on intimidating and dominating these foreign men who think they can come into their city without permission.

Remember that the ancient world of the Bible had no concept of modern sexual identity.

Besides, are we really to believe that the entire male population of the city was gay? Were there no wives, no children? Just a bunch of men having sex all the time? How did they even find each other? Billboards on sand dunes? Ads chiseled in stone?

The xenophobic mob smashes against Lot and tries to break down the door. Quickly, the angels pull Lot inside, shut the door, and blind the men outside. They tell Lot to escape with his family. As he does, God rains fire from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah.

The question is: why? Why does God destroy the cities?

Wouldn't it be great if only we had some passage in the Bible that told us why. Oh, wait, we do! Not just one, but 13 in the Old Testament and eight in the New.

From Deuteronomy to Lamentations, from Isaiah and Jeremiah to Zephaniah, the Hebrew Bible knew quite clearly the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah: they loved neither God nor neighbor, but worshiped idols, were proud and arrogant, oppressed the poor, crushed the needy, were cruel and violent, and failed to show their sacred duty of hospitality to the stranger.<sup>2</sup>

Ezekiel is most explicit: "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" (16:49-50).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 29, 32:31-33; Lamentations 4; Isaiah 1:10-20, 3:9-15; Amos 1:6-11, 2:7, 4; Zephaniah 2:9-10. Additional non-canonical Jewish writings from the second and first centuries BCE say much the same thing. Wisdom 19:15 says that God punished Sodom "for having received strangers with hostility." Moreover, Rabbi Steven Nathan reminds us: "We read in Midrash Pirkei Eliezer (a collection of rabbinic homilies collected in the 3rd and 4th centuries in the land of Israel) that any resident of these cities who attempted to give food or aid to a poor person was subject to death. As a matter of fact, this same midrash tells us that Lot's daughter was convicted of giving bread to a poor person each time she went to the well for water and, as the people began her execution, she cried out to God. It was this cry that reached God and prompted God to send the messengers (angels) to Sodom and Gomorrah to see if their sin was as great as her cry would imply."

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel goes on to say that they did "abominable things," which some unnecessarily, and with quite the leap, interpret as "homosexuality." The Hebrew word, *to'evah*, is broad and can mean all kinds of sin. Ezekiel 16 says nothing of sex, let alone homosexuality. Context clearly defines the term as a failure to care for the needy.

What's more: the Bible repeats the story in the Book of Judges. Everything happens the same way, but this time, the mob rapes and kills a woman, with the Bible condemning their crime, just as it condemned Sodom.

Now, think about this. People read the story of Sodom and say, "Because men threatened to rape another man, God condemns homosexuality." If that dubious logic stands, then we must conclude from Judges 19 that because men raped a woman, God condemns heterosexuality. Or maybe—crazy thought!—these stories don't have anything to do with sexual identity or loving relationships; they're about violence. In fact, in Judges 20:5, the man says that when the mob threatened to have sex with him, what they really wanted was to kill him.

Of all the times Jesus talks about Sodom and Gomorrah, never once does he connect them with anything remotely resembling sex or romantic love. He tells the story of a people failing to welcome God's messengers, first angels and now his disciples (Matt. 10:14-15, Luke 10:10-12).

In the few times that the Bible does connect sex with Sodom, it's always an extreme and violent lust, often between men and women, never once mentioning homosexuality (e.g. Jer. 23:14, Amos 2:7, 2 Pet. 2:4-10). Their descriptions certainly bear no resemblance to the committed, loving same-sex relationships we see today.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, this isn't a story about gay sex; it's a story about a people who grew so proud and so wealthy that they walled off their city and refused foreigners with hungry bellies, refused God's messengers who asked of them compassion and faith, sacrifice and generosity. They turned to violence.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jude describes "going after strange flesh" (1:7), which many interpret to mean homosexuality, but it's far more likely that Jude is describing Sodom's attempt to rape angels (cf. Mark Achtemeier). The prior verse is about angels, and the verse after is also about angels. Also, interesting fact: that phrase in Greek is *sarkos heteras*—literally, other or different flesh. Matthew Vines writes, "Hetero, of course, is the prefix for words like heterosexuality, not homosexuality. Far from arguing that the men of Sodom pursued flesh too similar to their own, Jude indicts them for pursuing flesh that was too different."

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Vines writes that Philo, the Jewish philosopher in 1st c. CE Alexandria, Egypt, "was the first biblical interpreter to explicitly link Sodom's sins to same-sex behavior. His is a late interpretation, given that the story of Sodom comes from the book of Genesis, traditionally dated more than 1400 years earlier. (The shortest time difference would be at least 600 years.) Philo's interpretation wouldn't become the standard Christian interpretation until the fifth century AD. Still, it became the consensus Christian view over time." Still, however, Philo would not have described this sin as homosexuality. Philo described same-sex behavior not as an orientation but as a temptation within all people, an over-indulgence of sexual desire similar to gluttony and drunkenness. He had no concept of some people being naturally and inherently attracted and loving to one sex (the same sex) and not the other. In fact his description of sodomites was men who "mounted" men while also pursuing "their mad lust for women," which doesn't sound at all like gay men. It would be centuries before Christians would adopt this perspective. For the first several centuries, they interpreted Sodom's sin as violence, inhospitality, and pride. Origen said it was their failure to welcome the stranger. Tertullian said nothing of same-sex behavior. Jerome said it was pride and gluttony. But even once Christians like Augustine picked up Philo's interpretation (just as Christianity was becoming an empire and beginning to place heavy emphases on procreation), they still interpreted the sin not as homosexuality but as same-sex "lust." There was no condemnation, nor understanding, of same-sex love.

Of course, we've still got a problem: even if Sodom's crime wasn't homosexuality, we are still left with a story of God wiping out entire cities. A wrathful God who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked—a God who shows up not only in the Old Testament, but in the New as well, on the lips of Jesus himself. Why?

My first thought is that maybe we need stories like this one, because we need to know that when someone walks into a Walmart and murders 22 people, in a spray of hate and gunfire, God doesn't just shrug, smile, and say, "That's OK. I forgive you." A God who loved those 22 people, a good God, should weep and rage, should rain thunder and fire, no less than you or I in defense of our children. We need to know that even a gracious God is still a just God, that there are consequences for evil.

We are Sodom and Gomorrah every time we separate an undocumented child from their parent, every time we walk past the poor as if they were invisible, every time we say no to someone who needs help, every time we do nothing to stop another shooting, every time we reject the God who cries out from the cross, with every oppressed person we've nailed beside Her.

We are Sodom and Gomorrah—not because we celebrate love, but because we celebrate it too little.

That's my first thought. My second thought is that this story is so much bigger than one chapter of Genesis. Right before this chapter, Abraham argues with God on behalf of Sodom, pleading for a God not of wrath but of mercy. He says, "Surely, this is not the kind of God you are." It's as if the biblical author is wrestling with who God is. Is God just? Surely, yes. But if that's all God is, then there is no good news, for we are all condemned. And so we have what Walter Brueggemann calls an "intrusion of grace... [a] graceful wedge," in which God saves Lot. But the wedge does not step there. In Ezekiel, God promises to restore Sodom, to give them—and us—a future beyond justice and destruction, a life in love (16:53-55).

But the wedge does not stop there. The prophet Hosea then hears from God a new word, in which God refuses the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>6</sup> God says, "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (11:8-9).

That word, *recoil*, *haphak* in Hebrew, when God says, "My heart recoils within me," is the same word used in Genesis 19 to describe the earthquake that "overthrows" Sodom and Gomorrah. This time, instead of destroying humanity, God decides to absorb the earthquake into God's own person (cf. Walter Brueggemann). God takes our pain. God climbs on that cross.

The lie, it turns out, is much bigger than we thought. Not only is Sodom and Gomorrah not about homosexuality, it's also not about a vengeful God. When read in the context of the entire Bible, when understood through an unfolding biblical debate about the nature of God, this is a story about consequences *and* a future unbound by those consequences. This is a story about the power of love—a love that rages when its children are hurt, and a love that is better than rage, a love that saves. **Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> Hosea refers to Admah and Zeboiim, cities near Sodom and Gomorrah which were also destroyed.