

WHO IS A SODOMITE? YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED!

The sin of Sodom is referred to often these days, but what really was their sin? To find out let's read the Biblical text, free of our preconceptions, and let's consult some real experts – people who lived some 2500 years closer to the destruction of Sodom than we do. Let's see how they understood the story.

The story of the destruction of Sodom takes two full chapters, totaling 71 verses, in the Book of Genesis. To understand it we have to read all of it.

It begins with God appearing to Abraham in the form of three men, as Abraham sat by the door of his tent. Abraham saw them, “ran” to greet them, urged them to let him bring them some refreshment, and offered them a place to rest. He then “hastened” to Sarah and recruited her help in preparing cakes for their guests. Then he “ran” to the herd and selected a calf – “tender and choice” – for the guests, and gave it to his servant boy who “hastened” to prepare it, and then Abraham served them, and “waited on them under the tree as they ate.”

The men then foretell that by the same season in the following year, Sarah will have borne a son. The text does not explicitly say that the birth to Sarah, whom we're told “had stopped having the way of women,” is a reward for the old couple's hospitality but that seems to be implied.

The men then set out toward their destination, which is Sodom. Abraham, still hospitable, walks with them “to see them off.” God decides that it is right to reveal to Abraham what God intends to do and so says, “The outrage (others: ‘outcry’) of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! I will go down and see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached me.”

But what was this “outrage/outcry/sin?” In the only prior reference to Sodom's sinfulness, in Gen. 13:13, we're told that “the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against God,” but that vague language doesn't help us answer our question.

Once told that God, in the form of the angels/men is going to Sodom to see if the townsfolk are really as bad as their “outcry” suggests, Abraham realizes that God might well destroy the town. He then pleads with God to spare the town if at least ten innocent people are there, and God agrees. This give and take suggests that, whatever the sin, it must have involved both women and men, both young and old, since all are ultimately wiped out when ten innocent people cannot be found.

The three men arrive in Sodom in the evening. Here they are met by Abraham's nephew Lot who, like his uncle, greets them, offers the shelter and hospitality of his house, and feeds them. The language of the story parallels that describing Abraham's hospitality, though where Abraham “ran” to greet them Lot only “rose” to greet them. Still, when they at first decline his offer, he “urged them strongly” and finally they accepted. Suddenly, however, a crowd of Sodomites, young and old, “all the people to the last one,” appear at Lot's door and shout to him to bring them (the two men, the third having been dropped, for no clear reason, from the story) “out to us that we may know them.”

Most commentators understand the Hebrew to suggest that the crowd was made up of the men of the town, though at least one scholarly translator (David Noel Friedman) says, “I see no basis for this whatever,” and translates the Hebrew to mean “people,” –

male and female – rather than “men.” This would fit better with Abraham’s insistence that a righteous God would not destroy innocent people.

In any case, the commentators do agree that the crowd is bent on sexual violence. Violent rape, regardless of the gender of the victims, seems to be what the townspeople intend. Understanding this, Lot’s answer is to offer his virgin daughters to the crowd, only “don’t do anything to these people for that is why they came under the shadow of my roof.” As horrible as it would be for Lot’s daughters to be raped, it would be less horrible than for those to whom he has given shelter to be harmed.

Is it not clear that the heart of this story is about the virtue of hospitality, which is so central to the ethics of desert dwellers in the Middle East? That is the whole point of the carefully constructed contrast between the protective behavior of Abraham and Lot toward those who are “in the desert,” and the violent behavior of the Sodomites, who show one of the terrible things that can happen in a society that doesn’t protect the most vulnerable in its midst.

“Yes,” some might protest, “but the behavior of the Sodomites is sexual! Isn’t this a story about homosexuality and the punishment due to a society that accepts it?”

To make that argument, one has to ignore everything written above about the true theme of the story, and one also has to ignore the fact that homosexuality, as a form of love between people, isn’t mentioned at all in the story. The only thing about homosexuality that is described is an act of violent rape, with men as the original target, Lot’s daughters as the offered substitute, and men, women, and children as the perpetrators.

“Still,” some will object, “it is homosexual rape that is described, so clearly this is what the story is trying to condemn. To subject a man to an unwanted homosexual act is clearly considered repugnant in this story.”

This is so, yet it tells us nothing about the Bible’s attitude to homosexuality in general. Homosexuals, too, find rape repulsive. Again, it is acts of violence against the weak and unprotected that is the issue, not the gender of those involved.

To prove this, let’s turn to some whom most would consider experts on the meaning of the Biblical text. Here’s what Sodom meant to the Prophet Isaiah:

Hear the words of the Lord
You chieftains of Sodom;
Give ear to our God’s instruction,
You folk of Gomorrah....
Your hands are stained with crime –
Wash yourselves clean...
Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the wronged,
Uphold the rights of the orphan,
Defend the cause of the widow.” (Isaiah 1:10-11)

Hmmm – nothing about sexual behavior there.

Not good enough? Do today’s preachers know more than Isaiah?

Well, then, let's consider also the Prophet Ezekiel:

Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom:
Arrogance!
She and her daughters had plenty of bread
and untroubled tranquility,
yet she did not support the poor and the needy.
In their haughtiness they committed abominations before Me
and so I removed them.(Ezekiel 16:49).

“Only this..” – “she did not support the poor” – that was Sodom's abomination!

Now we can answer our question –
Who today is a Sodomite?

- Someone who offers no shelter to vulnerable wayfarers.
- Someone who is part of the mob threatening the weak and unprotected.
 - o - those without shelter
 - o - those who are poor
 - o - those who are strangers in our midst
 - o - those who are without defenders, such as widows and orphans.

A Sodomite attacks the weakest elements in society, the least protected, the most vulnerable. The abomination they commit is social and economic cruelty and physical violence. Homosexuality per se is not a part of the Sodomite story, but violence against homosexuals and anyone else who is vulnerable, unprotected by law and society, pushed to the margins, and attacked, is very much a part of the story.

In our society today it is in fact the homosexuals among us who are the most frequently attacked, from the pulpit and on the street and in the halls of our legislatures. In our society, the Sodomites are the ones who do not offer homosexuals and other marginalized and vulnerable groups shelter, and who fail to protect them from the assaults they face in so many ways.

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