

The Sin of Sodom

Summary of the key facts prepared by David Coltheart

The modern concept of sexual orientation (gay versus straight) is not addressed in the Bible and the ideas such words suggest were completely unknown. The Bible writers assumed that everyone was heterosexual. People in Bible times had no idea of homosexuality as an identity or orientation. The word "homosexuality" was not even coined until the latter half of the 19th century. The first use of "homosexual" or its cognate in any Biblical translation in any language did not occur until 1946 with the Revised Standard Version.

Christians commonly assume that dozens of Bible verses condemn homosexuality as the worst possible sin. However, out of 31,103 verses in the Bible, there are only 6 that mention homosexual activities. And not everyone is sure that all six refer to what we call homosexuality.

The six verses are often referred to as “the clobber texts” because of the way they have been used as ammunition by Christians against gays and lesbians. Bible scholars in every denomination have different interpretations of these texts, and many theologians disagree with the standard interpretation. The first of the six is found in Genesis 19, the story of the angels’ visit to Sodom, a city that was located in the area around the Dead Sea in ancient Israel.

Genesis 19:1-8

“The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. “‘My lords,’ he said, ‘please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.’ “‘No,’ they answered, ‘we will spend the night in the square.’

“But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house.

“They called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with [*literally, know*] them.’ Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, ‘No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof”

The Bible Interprets Itself

For better or for worse, people are most familiar with these verses in terms of what they think the Bible says about homosexuality. Even the term “sodomy” is linked to this Bible passage. The great thing about defending the Bible against people who use this story to gay bash is that you don't have to do any work. The Bible interprets itself.

It is important to remember that God had already decided to destroy Sodom before this incident took place. Long before the crowd clamoured for Lot's guests, God had already condemned Sodom as "wicked," an apparent catch-all phrase for all types of transgressions (Genesis 13:13).

It is not likely that all the people in the mob that gathered at Lot's house – “all the men from every part of the city of Sodom, both young and old” - were homosexuals. Nor can we assume that they were motivated by homosexual desire. The Bible does not mention their sexual orientation and the modern concept itself was foreign to both the original writer and the readers.

We also have to ask why Lot would try to distract the men with his virgin daughters (a reprehensible act, indeed) if they were homosexuals. If this Genesis account is an argument for the immorality of homosexuality then it is much more a scandalous argument regarding the treatment of young women. Yet, those who condemn homosexuality routinely ignore Lot’s daughters.

Know or Have Sex?

According to the King James Version of the Bible, Genesis 19:5 says: "And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, 'Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them.'" The word "know" is the literal translation. The New International Version interprets the verse as: "so that we can have sex with them."

The Hebrew verb commonly translated as "know" is the word "*ya,da*" but the meaning is ambiguous. The word appears 943 times in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). Usually *ya,da* means, "to know a fact." In only about a dozen cases does the word refer to sexual activity; in these instances, the sexual meaning is always obvious. For example, the text generally talks about a man "knowing" a woman and of her conceiving a child as a result of the "knowing." With the possible exception of Genesis 19:5, all such references involve heterosexual relationships.

In this text, "know" could refer to either gang rape (implied by the context) or consensual homosexual sex (the interpretation held by the NIV translators). The NIV words: "have sex with them" implies mutual consent. It would appear that the NIV and other modern translations that follow the NIV are biased toward the latter.

Some scholars have suggested that to "know" in this case meant merely that the men of Sodom wanted to interrogate the angels to determine their reasons for entering the city. However, in view of Lot's protest about "this wicked thing" and his offer of his daughters to the men to "do what you like with them", the word suggests a sexual attack. Certainly, this was the case in the parallel story of the death of a Levite's concubine after a brutal gang rape (Judges 19:1-30).

Strangely, God did not condemn Lot for offering his two daughters to be raped. If God had been displeased with Lot's actions, God could have left Lot and his family to die in the fiery destruction of the city.

Gang Rape of Strangers

The story suggests that the men of Sodom regarded the two strangers with suspicion. Perhaps they thought they were foreign spies who had been taken in by Lot, himself an outsider. They were determined to humiliate the strangers in the way common to that time and area, by "treating them like women," by brutally raping them. The patriarchal society of that time devalued the status of women and girls as mere property. To be treated as a woman was the ultimate humiliation.

Rape is not sex – it is violence intended to insult and denigrate the victim. In much the same way today, new inmates are introduced to prison hierarchy. In time of war, victors routinely rape their conquered enemies. The same motivation is behind the use of the vulgar phrase "F**k you," often accompanied by a rude hand gesture. People thus abused realise that the speaker is angry, maybe angry enough to assault them, and is not simply making a pass at them. The real issue in the story of Sodom is sexualised violence against strangers.

The Sins of Sodom

Sodom is mentioned in the Bible 48 times. The Bible describes Sodom's immorality repeatedly and in detail, and cites Sodom as a vivid example to avoid. Sodom's sins are listed in Ezekiel 16:49 as arrogance, greed, pride, and a refusal to help the poor and needy. In Isaiah 1:10-17, Sodom and its sister city, Gomorrah, are referenced for injustice, not rescuing the oppressed, refusing to defend orphans and failing to plead for widows. In Jeremiah 23:14, the sins of Sodom are adultery and hypocrisy. In Zephaniah 2:8-11 the sins are listed as bullying, boasting and pride. It is ironic that this story that condemns a city for its mistreatment of the poor, orphans, widows and strangers, is used by Christians to condemn another vulnerable group – gays and lesbians.

In the New Testament, Jesus refers to Sodom in connection with the inhospitality shown to the heavenly visitors (Luke 10:12). Hospitality was very important in those days. In this story, the men of Sodom made less than hospitable demands on Lot and his guests. The sin of Sodom was not homosexuality (since no sexual act actually happened) but of inhospitality.

In Jude 1:7, the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah are denounced for unspecified sexual immorality. Older Bible translations phrase this as “going after strange flesh.” In the original language used by Jude, the word for “strange” is the Greek word “*heteras*,” meaning “different”. This is the word from which we get our English word “heterosexual.” Some modern translations of the Bible have inserted the word “homosexual” into this verse but this is totally unwarranted. This would require the use of a different Greek word: “*homoios*” (same), which simply is not there. The NIV adopts a neutral stance: “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.”

Sodom and Homosexuality

Was Sodom destroyed because of homosexual activity? The Bible does not tell us. Neither in the first telling of the Sodom story in Genesis, nor in any later biblical reference, does the Bible specify or remark on a homosexual element in the mob’s threat. Although the Bible often mentions Sodom, homosexual acts are not mentioned as the reason for Sodom’s destruction. Biblical writers frequently referred to Sodom’s arrogance, gluttony, self-interest, its indifference to the needs of the poor, sexual immorality, and its rejection of God’s holy messengers but never referred to homosexual acts specifically.

Was the threatened crime in Sodom at least homosexual in nature? The Bible does address this, and no, not even the threat is homosexual. From the opening words of the Sodom story, the visitors are identified as angels, not human males (Genesis 19:1). In the New Testament, the incident in Sodom is compared to the “slander of celestial beings” (Jude 1:5-10). Jesus invoked the story of Sodom’s destruction as a warning against those who would not receive his disciples, sent like the angels as God’s messengers (Matthew 10:11-16). The Sodom story is about the threat of violence against angels, gang rape, the abuse of women, inhospitality and xenophobia. However, in the Christian era, the story has been retold to condemn homosexuality. The change of emphasis tells us a great deal about the cultures that inherited the Sodom story but nothing about the biblical account itself.

The use of the term "sodomite" as a term for a homosexual person has absolutely no basis in the Bible -- none. The Hebrew word for the ancient city of Sodom is “*Sedom*”. In five places in the Old Testament, the King James Version of the Bible uses the word “sodomite”, but this is a mistranslation of an entirely different Hebrew word “*qadesh*,” meaning “holy one” in the sense of being “separate” or “set apart.” In every case, the context indicates a temple prostitute for the worship of the fertility god or goddess. Fertility worship often involved ritual temple prostitution in order to encourage the god(s) to make the earth and its creatures more fertile. Modern translations have corrected this error. Much of the homophobia plaguing the world today can be traced to this tragic misunderstanding.

Conclusion

The Bible does not support the traditional association of Sodom with homosexuality. The Bible does not indicate that the people of Sodom ever engaged in homosexual acts. Nothing in the text indicates that Sodom was destroyed because of homosexual acts, threatened or otherwise, nor does it even hint that the men of Sodom were motivated by a desire for sex with other men, as opposed to sex with angels, or simply violence.

The inescapable conclusion is that the story of Sodom has nothing to do with homosexuality, but does describe the attempted rape of two strangers by a group of heterosexual men. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because their worship and society were divorced from social justice.

This summary of Bible evidence was prepared by David Coltheart using many different sources. Some of the sources that deserve mention are:

<http://wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/>

<http://www.gaychristian101.com/>

http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibl.htm#menu

<http://www.someone-to-talk-to.net/>

<http://www.stopbibleabuse.org/>