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STUDIES AND OBSERVATIONS

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The Hebrew Prophets And Sodom And Gomorrah

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The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is without doubt a horror story. It was included in Genesis, I think, so that it might arouse terror in the hearts of those who read it and realize that they find themselves in a similar situation. Persons who are afraid that God might forsake them, should they commit some grave sin, cannot help but feel utter terror, if they meditate deeply on this story and identify with the people involved and with what happens to them. What greater terror is there than to imagine being forsaken by God?

One might sense such terror at the thought of what might happen to oneself, if one committed such a sin. How much greater, then, the terror evoked with respect to others – perhaps loved ones – who are caught in such acts? Terror might also be evoked by the risk of “divine collateral damage” – i.e., the consequences for oneself if one, though innocent, got caught in God’s judgment on the guilty ... like people in Sodom and Gomorrah, who may have been utterly guiltless of what happened at Lot’s door. Such thoughts may be so overpowering and frightening that the feelings of horror and terror they evoke make it difficult to examine this event for any meaning it may have, other than that God passes a terrible judgment on men who engage in sexual relations with men.

In view of the usual understanding in our day of what the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about, the context that the Hebrew prophets, and also Jesus, put this story into seems very odd. The reasons they give for what happens to these cities never include the sexual activity that figures so prominently in this story. They certainly do refer to a terrible sin and emphasize God’s judgment upon it. They use the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah to illustrate the severity of the judgment that God will pass on Jerusalem, Babylon, Tyre, or other cities or empires that are seen as having committed exceptionally wicked acts against God and God’s people. But there is never any mention in any of those passages of sexual acts of the kind the men of Sodom are depicted as

having wanted to engage in with these two men, guests of Lot, who apparently were divine beings. An exact translation of the Hebrew term used to describe them is “messenger”; they are messengers of Yahweh. That they were divine beings would seem to be of great significance for understanding what this story in Genesis 19 is about.

It also seems significant, as well as odd, that in Genesis 14 there is nothing said about the men of Sodom that even hints that there is anything out of the ordinary about them, anything that would categorize them as especially evil. This chapter tells us that King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah and three other kings were embroiled in a war when they were attacked by King Amraphel of Shinar and three other kings, among them Chedorlaomer of Elam, who seems to have been the actual leader of this coalition of warring forces. When these two forces joined battle, Chedorlaomer and his allies defeated Sodom and Gomorrah and their allies. The defeated fled from the battlefield and many fell into the bitumen pits that were numerous in that area, which was the Valley of Siddim, while others fled to the hills. Chedorlaomer and his men “took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah (“goods” here seems quaintly to include women and children, as appears later) and all their provisions, and went on their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abram’s brother, who lived in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.” (Genesis 14:11f.) When Abram learned of this, he gathered his own armed men and those of his allies, pursued Chedorlaomer and his army and in turn defeated them. “Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods, and the women and the people.” (Genesis 14:16)

The king of Sodom, to demonstrate his gratitude, said to Abram, “Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.” Abram refused to take anything except reimbursement for what his young men had eaten, and made provision that the leaders of the men who had joined his foray should have their share. There is nothing but good will and respect between Abram and the king of Sodom, not a breath of any kind of depravity. There is nothing here leading us to suspect that God was passing any kind of judgment for grave sins on Sodom and Gomorrah by this defeat. In fact, through Abram, the one whom God had chosen to be a blessing to all the families and nations of the earth, God here gives them and their people the blessing of deliverance.

I suggest that it was for something more, or perhaps one could even say, for something *else*, than that they had a culture which included men desiring to have sexual relations with each other, for which God brought this horrifying fate as a punishment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Their wanting to have sexual relations with the two guests in Lot's house is certainly on centre stage in this story. But I suggest that their wanting to have sexual relations with them as men is not what this story is about. There is, I think, something much deeper involved here. As I mentioned above, my reason for daring to suggest this is how the Hebrew prophets and Jesus use the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. They use it to illustrate the severity of God's punishment upon the evil-doers they are calling to repentance. The way they saw this story must be of greater importance to us than the way many today see it, for they are much closer to the event and stood within a living tradition that must have known more about the historical and social background of this event than we do. Nowhere do the prophets or Jesus mention homosexual practices as the reason for God's punishment of these cities.

Passages From The Prophets

What, according to the prophets, was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? I suggest that we begin with a look at Ezekiel. Though this prophet writes at a later period in Israel's history, rather far removed from the Sodom and Gomorrah event, nevertheless he agrees with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Zephaniah, Deuteronomy, and, in the New Testament, with Matthew and Luke.

Ezekiel 16:49f. reads: "This was the guilt of your [Jerusalem's] 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 abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it."¹ (This and all other quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.)

Ezekiel goes on to say in 16:53-63 that the Lord will restore Sodom and her daughters and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters in order that the people of Jerusalem may be ashamed of all that they have done and be a consolation to Sodom and Samaria. Now that they, the people of Jerusalem, have been conquered by Babylon and carried into captivity, they are a byword among neighbouring people, as Sodom was a byword for utter depravity among the people

of Jerusalem – until their own wickedness was uncovered. “You must bear the penalty of your lewdness and your abominations, says the Lord.”

Verses 59-63 state that their sin basically was that they broke the covenant with the Lord and worshiped other gods. This is, of course, a central concern of the Hebrew Scriptures in every age throughout the history of Israel. The words “abominations” and “lewdness” are often taken uncritically as referring to what since the nineteenth century, at least in western culture, has been known as homosexuality. In view of the fact that these words occur in connection with references to Israel’s breaking of the covenant with the Lord, I suggest that this is a questionable interpretation. What this sin of breaking the covenant entailed is described in some detail in Ezekiel 16:15-19. It’s the worship and of the Baals and Ashteroths. This, of course, according to things said in the Hebrew scriptures about such worship, included sexual acts for the purpose of inducing fertility, either in the fields or in the begetting of a child, or sharing in the qualities of the god the worshiper was uniting him/herself with. But this included not only homosexual but probably actually mainly heterosexual acts. Also included was the sacrifice of children on the altars of these gods (Ezekiel 16:20-21). Later in the chapter the prophet also talks of Israel as “whoring” with neighbouring cultures, probably meaning not only making alliances with them but including the worship of the gods prevalent in these cultures. Jeremiah 23:14 mentions adulterers and evildoers as persons who deserve the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah.

But the main things emphasized, besides the doing of such abominable things, are pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, not aiding the poor and needy and haughtiness. Arrogance is again mentioned, this time in Jeremiah 49:16, as a reason why the Lord will destroy, in this case, the people of Edom, as he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. In Jeremiah 50:31,39f. the prophet speaks against Babylon, because of its insolence in having conquered Jerusalem and killed and carried its inhabitants into captivity, as well as having been an oppressive regime over other people it had conquered. “I am against you, O arrogant one, says the Lord God of hosts, for your day has come, the time when I will punish you ... Therefore wild animals shall live with hyenas in Babylon, and ostriches shall inhabit her, she shall never again be peopled, or inhabited for all generations. As when

God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbours, says the Lord, so no one shall live there, nor shall anyone settle in her.”

There are other texts that relate the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah to idolatry, as well as to the arrogance and haughtiness of the people. In Isaiah 2:5-9 we have the prophet saying, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! For you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob. Indeed they are full of diviners from the east and of soothsayers like the Philistines, and they clasp hands with foreigners. Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures, their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. And so people are humbled, and everyone is brought low ... The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low, and the pride of everyone shall be humbled; and the Lord alone will be exalted ...”

In Isaiah 3:8f. the Lord goes on to say: “For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, and they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves.”

Closely related to the sin of idolatry is the lack of social justice and caring. In Isaiah 1:10f. the prophet says: “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! (*meaning Jerusalem, of course, in this context*). Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord; I have enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts ...” In Isaiah 1:16,17, he goes on to say, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Isaiah 5 continues the themes of chapters 1-3, though Sodom and Gomorrah are not mentioned in that chapter. Here the sins already mentioned at the beginning of this prophecy are made more explicit, such as people joining house to house, adding field to field, “until there is room for no one but you ...”, and adds to the list, “living a life of self-indulgence, taking bribes and thus perverting justice.” An even more complete catalogue of the sins of the people of Israel and Judah is given in chapter 57. Though Sodom and Gomorrah are not

mentioned in that chapter, many of the sins mentioned are like the sins related to Sodom and Gomorrah elsewhere in the prophecies.

Similar evils are mentioned by Amos, beginning in chapter and continuing through chapter 5: the cows of Bashan (women of Israel) oppress the poor and crush the needy while they say to their husbands, “Bring us something to drink.” Among them are people who hate persons with authority who try to guide them into a better way of life. There are people who trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, people who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and push aside the needy at the gate (5:10-12). In verse 4:11, the Lord says, “I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah ...”

What Jesus said about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus had a similar emphasis. Matthew and Luke name Sodom and Gomorrah when Jesus sends out his disciples to find people who are worthy of the Kingdom. In their recent study of these texts, Crossan and Reed come to the conclusion that what Jesus was asking these disciples to do is find people who would be willing to join Jesus in his ministry to the poor, the outcast and the sick.² Many people were dispossessed by the economic policies of the Roman overlords, Herod, and the wealthy class of Jews, who managed to find ways of throwing peasants off their parcels of land in order to assemble estates for themselves. Thus many people were ending up on the highways and byways, homeless and hungry. Jesus, according to this study, sent the disciples out looking for people who still had some means of supporting themselves who would be willing to share what they had with the poverty-stricken. As Jesus sent the disciples on their way he said, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.” (Matthew 10:15). Matthew 11:23f. and Luke 10:12; 17:29 have a similar message. Jesus does not mention homosexuality in this connection nor in any other connection. It’s all about hospitality at the very least and, if Crossan and Reed are right, about helping to care for the destitute.

The closest Jesus comes to talking about anything remotely connected with homosexuality is his encounter with the men who had caught a woman in adultery and wanted to stone her (John 8:1-11).

The connection there is, it seems to me, is that the command to stone anyone caught in adultery is a part of the Holiness Code of the Law of Moses, as recorded in Leviticus 18 and 20, which also has the command to stone men who are caught having sex with each other.

Jesus here reinterprets the Law of Moses, as in other places, especially in Matthew 5 and 6, and especially also in places where he teaches about the proper use of the Sabbath. Here he does this by saying, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” With this he overturns the ancient law that commands that persons caught in adultery be stoned. He denies its validity. If the persons involved had been two men having sexual relations with each other, what would Jesus have said about the law in that case, which is also among those in the Holiness Code of Leviticus and says, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination, they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them”? Would he also have said in that case, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at them?” Perhaps we might note that Jesus does not say, “Let anyone among you who has committed adultery ...”, but “Let anyone among you who is without sin ...” We don’t know, of course, what he would have said in the latter case, because it didn’t happen. But since Jesus came to give life and give it abundantly, it seems that he would at the very least have acted to spare their lives.

To the woman he said, “Go and sin no more.” Did that mean that she should never again engage in sexual relations? Surely not. Jesus surely was saying to her not to engage in adulterous relationships in the future. Of course, if heterosexual relationships are the only kind of relationships that are God pleasing, then for homosexual persons this would mean that they may never again engage in a same-sex relationship. On the other hand, for persons who feel fully homosexual in orientation, this could mean that they must not be irresponsible over against their partner in their relationship, that they must be faithful and deny any temptation toward promiscuity.

In any case, Jesus interprets the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as having been the sin of inhospitality and even indifference and heartlessness to the poor and oppressed, as did the prophets before him, since it is these sins, the sins of inhospitality and of indifference to the needs of the poor that he says will be punished by the fate suffered by these two cities.

Genesis 19:1-29

Though the men of Sodom did demand to have Lot's two visitors sent out to them so they could "know" them, which certainly means so that they might engage in sexual relations with them, I am convinced that those interpreters who say this is a story about inhospitable behaviour and not primarily about homosexual behaviour have a point.

That in Genesis 18:1-15 God appears to Abraham (by this time his name had been changed by God from "Abram") as three strangers whom he suddenly sees approaching him at the Oaks of Mamre, and that Abraham receives them with the most courteous kind of hospitality, seems to me to give weight to interpreting the story of the wickedness of Sodom and Gormorrah as a story about inhospitality. The two stories stand in stark contrast to each other in respect to the kind of hospitality/inhospitality that is offered. Significant, too, in another respect, is the fact that the Lord at this time announces to Abraham and Sarah that they are finally going to have the son they were promised long ago and have been waiting for, almost now without hope.

Though these two stories are about a hospitable and an inhospitable reception of visitors it seems even more important to note that it is about how God is received. On the face of it, Abraham, it seems, received God with the kind of courteous hospitality he might have shown anyone.

But does it not go beyond that? Abraham greeted the three men by bowing down to the ground. Since he recognized them as God appearing to him, this act of reverence is certainly more than respect shown to another human being. It was an act of worship offered to God, expressed in a very human way, yet an act of worship.

Parallel to this, the story of how the men of Sodom and Gomorrah acted toward the two men whom Lot received hospitably into his house seems, on the surface of it, a story about their inhospitable attitude towards them. Or is it really that? Is it also a story about worship? It may seem at first sight that their intention was to humiliate these strangers by dishonouring them. But was it not actually the desire to engage in a religious act with them, an act of worship?

It bears mentioning, I think, that Lot has lived in the household of Abraham for many years. We know that wherever Abraham went

he built an altar to the Lord God and sacrificed and worshiped him at these altars. When Lot moved to Sodom and Gomorrah, he, it would seem, would also have built an altar to the Lord God and worshiped him. Cities at that time were not large, perhaps about the size of our larger towns. Just about everybody would have known everybody else. The people would have known that Lot worshiped one God, a God who was very different from theirs, and that Lot thought his God was special, greater and more powerful than any of their gods, or even all of them put together. Furthermore, they had seen a demonstration of his power when Abraham had delivered them from Chedolaomer and his allies.

Now they had seen these two men arriving at Lot's house and noticed that they were special. They looked like gods. At the temple of their gods they could have intercourse with their gods only by having intercourse with their human representatives, the prostitute priests and priestesses. Since they sensed that these two "men" were somehow divine, they saw their chance finally to participate directly in the qualities of the divine beings by having sexual intercourse with these real gods, instead of through a human representative of one of their gods.

One aspect of this story that I haven't seen much attention given to is that Lot was going to try to sway these men at his door from their intentions by sending out his two virgin daughters to be used as sexual objects. This indicates that he knew that these men were not really homosexual. How would Lot expect men who were lusting for persons of the same sex to be attracted by these two girls, even if they were virgins? It is reasonable to infer that they were heterosexual but were going to take this opportunity to do what they might have done with priest at the temple of their god, but now with a real divine being.

Far fetched? Maybe. But it could help us understand why some of the Sodom and Gomorrah passages in the prophets talk about blasphemy and the worship of false gods as a reason for God's judgment upon these cities.³

According to the witness of the Hebrew Testament in various places, prostitution was often a part of pagan fertility worship, as mentioned before. From ancient sources we know that this kind of prostitution was seen as a way of bringing about fertility, as was also mentioned before. A man could go to a female temple priestess

prostitute and have sexual relations with her with the intention of sharing in her fertility in order to make his fields fertile when he planted seed in them. Or he might do this in order to make his (perhaps infertile) wife fertile when he planted his seed in her. But male prostitutes were also an option. They were, of course, available to women. But a man might want to share in the qualities of a male god (perhaps his power and strength) and, whether he was homosexually or heterosexually oriented, go to a male priest prostitute and have sexual relations with him for that purpose. At times there seem even to have been both male and female prostitutes with a religious function attached to the worship of Yahweh.⁴

Throughout the times recorded in the Hebrew Testament, God, through the prophets, was engaged in a constant battle with the Israelites and Judahites to motivate them to turn away from the worship of the Baals and the Ashteroths, which seems to have included sexual activity. In this context, the story of the visit of the three men to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre and the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are stories about worshiping God. God accepts and rejoices in the worship that Abraham and Sarah offer. God rejects the kind of worship practiced by the Canaanites.

The readers for whom Genesis was written would have known this context, and they would have understood that this was the background of what happened here without its having been explicitly mentioned. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah thus becomes a horrible example of how God rejects the kind of worship offered by the men of Sodom and Gomorrah to those two angels visiting Lot. The seventh verse of the New Testament book of Jude may also offer support for this interpretation, as well as the fact that a number of the Hebrew prophets include blasphemy among the reasons why God destroyed the two cities.

In view of all these considerations, the word *abomination* cannot refer only to homosexual activity, as it is often interpreted. Abominations in the Hebrew Scriptures are acts of worship directed to false gods, which, as has been mentioned, at times, or possibly even often, included homosexual as well as heterosexual activity. It is the worship of the gods, the Baals and the Ashteroths, which constitutes the abomination. The inclusion of the prohibition of a male having intercourse with another male in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 19 and 20, since it is part of the Holiness Code, could

possibly stem from the prohibition of forms of worship that included the practice of male same-sex activity, so that all forms of male same-sex activity was prohibited because it was so closely attached to the worship of the false gods that Yahweh was trying to wean the Israelites and Judahites away from.

A most interesting aspect of the two stories (Genesis 18 and 19) is that on the occasion when God appears as three men, Abraham and Sarah receive the gift of fertility. They become fertile by grace, and that son whom God had promised again and again, is actually born to them during the following year. God finally gives them the fulfillment of his promise through this gift of fertility. Fertility comes from God as a gift. In contrast, he utterly destroys the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who tried to achieve greater fertility by having sexual intercourse with the angels of the Lord God. These two stories seem to me to contrast the way in which God's gifts are given and not given and thus are about not only hospitality and inhospitality but even more about true worship and perversion of worship.

There is another instance in Genesis of how God acted to differentiate the worship to be given him from the forms of worship offered to pagan gods. I refer to the sacrifice of Isaac, related in Genesis 22:1-14. Though God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was a test of Abraham's faith, it was certainly also at the same time a strong admonition to Abraham not to see human sacrifice as an appropriate way to worship Yahweh. This stands in contrast to the Canaanites and often other peoples around 1800 B.C.E. and in Canaan at least until the time of the exile of Judah to Babylon, among whom human sacrifice, especially of children, was seen as most pleasing to their gods. It would seem that God's prohibition of human sacrifice was emphasized by the Law which required parents to dedicate their firstborn son to Yahweh and at the same time not to sacrifice him but an animal in his stead.

It seems to me that one of things the Book of Genesis is intended to do is to demonstrate to Israel and Judah what is the appropriate way to worship God. It begins with chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis, in which mythical elements still show up but are intended to differentiate the true God from the gods of the mythologies. This is followed by the command of God to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to obey him in regard to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and not eat any of its fruit. Then comes God's affirmation of

Abel's worship and rejection of the worship offered by Cain. In Genesis 18 we read of God's and Sarah's courteous and hospitable reception of God when the three men come to visit, while the attempt of the men of Sodom to gain God's gifts by uniting themselves with the two messengers of God sexually is punished, a strong rejection of Canaanite forms of worship. In Genesis 22 God rejects the sacrifice of the firstborn of Abraham. The narrative continues with Jacob's vision of the angels ascending and descending on the ladder that reached to heaven (Genesis 28:10-22), that conveys the message that God accompanies the believer, that God is not confined to any single holy place. The story of Jacob encompasses Rachel's adherence to her family gods, while the whole message of the story of Jacob is her husband's faithfulness to Yahweh (Genesis 31:34). Of course, the stories of Joseph also tell about God's gracious power to save and to inspire forgiveness (Genesis 37 – 50).

Judges 19:16-27

Another text that is very similar to Genesis 19 is Judges 19:16-27. At first glance it, too, seems to be aimed at persons engaging in homosexual activity. The circumstances are rather different, but what happens is much the same as in Sodom and Gomorrah.

In Judges 19, a Levite who lived in the region belonging to the tribe of Ephraim had gone to Judah to bring his concubine back from her father's house. She had gone there in a fit of anger and stayed for four months before her husband decided to try to persuade her to come back to live with him. On the way back to Ephraim they stopped to overnight in Gibeah, a town in the region belonging to the tribe of Benjamin. At first they found no one who would take them in, a sign of the inhabitants' inhospitality. But later in the evening an old man, coming home from work in his fields, saw them and invited them to stay in his house. He said, "You are welcome. I shall supply all your wants, you must not spend the night in the open." He then bathed their feet and they all ate and drank.

As they were enjoying the evening some "depraved scoundrels" in the town surrounded the house, threatening to beat the door down. They called upon the host to send out the old man, his guest, so they might have intercourse with him. Could they have wanted this because he was a holy man serving the Lord God? The host refused and offered to send out his virgin daughter and the concubine of his

guest. The men objected to this substitution. Then, to save the house and himself, the husband of the concubine thrust her out the door for them to do with as they liked, which says something about the Levite's attitude toward his concubine and which may be at the root of her having gone back to her father's house.

The text tells us, "They raped and abused her all night till the morning; only when the dawn broke did they let her go." This would seem to be strange behaviour for men who were truly homosexuals. But aside from that, did they accept this woman because they thought they could benefit anyway from sexual intercourse, with a person closely connected with the holy man, if not with the holy man himself? "The woman came at daybreak and collapsed at the entrance of the man's house where her husband was, and lay there until light." When her husband got up, he found her, lying with her hands on the doorstep.

The Levite then picked her up, put her on his donkey and took her home. He then cut her in pieces and sent the pieces everywhere throughout Israel as a call to arms against Gibeah. He commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelite, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.'" The leaders of the army that gathered demanded of the Benjaminites that they hand over the men of Gibeah who had committed the crime against that woman, but they would not. That resulted in a war between the Benjaminites and the rest of Israel.

On the surface of it, what happened in Gibeah seems very similar to what happened in Sodom and Gomorrah. But the message intended by the inclusion of this account in the Book of Judges is, I think, different than the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis. If the story in Judges 19 is a story about false worship it seems to me to be so only tangentially. God is in no way directly involved in this story. God does not send destruction upon the men of Gibeah and Benjamin, who protected the Gibeonites from the rage of the rest of Israel. Also, this incident is not alluded to either by the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures or Jesus and other writers of the New Testament.

The emphasis in this story seems to me to lie more strongly on how the people of Gibeah and Benjamin are seen by the rest of Israel. There is evidence here and there in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures

that the rest of Israel often had no great love or even respect for the Gibeonites and the Benjaminites.

An aspect of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and of the Levite and his concubine in Gibeah that is not given much attention is that in both stories the men contemplate saving themselves by throwing their women out to the mob to do with as they please. The two divine messengers spare Lot's daughters this horrible fate, while the Levite's concubine is actually forced out of the house to suffer being raped all night long by the (heterosexual?) men of Gibeah.

If it was a custom in those times to turn over the virgins and other women of the tribe to attackers as a way of appeasing them, could these stories have been included to life up the horror that such women faced, with the intent of putting a stop to such practices? The *NRSV Harper Study Bible* offers the following comment on Judges 19: "The moral of this episode is ambiguous. Why did the Levite fail to protect the concubine with his own life? Why did he wait until morning to open the door and see her dead? Would not the second table of the law have required him to act differently, even if it meant the loss of his own life? Would a believer today not have a moral obligation to preserve the integrity of a mate, even if it meant resorting to the use of violence in such a contingency? This story certainly shows the effect of no central moral leadership – a society in which all people do as they please."⁵ Perhaps that is what this story is principally intended to convey.

Conclusion

I believe that none of these warnings of punishment for sins, such as that visited upon Sodom and Gomorrah, are about the kind of same-sex relationships in which the persons involved love and care for each other.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the story of the men of Gibeah are, at the least, stories about the misuse and the brutalization of sexual intercourse. The story of the men of Gibeah, however, seems to me to be more a story about inhospitality and the attitudes of the rest of Israel towards two tribes that were not highly regarded by the other ten tribes. As I have tried to demonstrate, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, on the other hand, is more about a blasphemous attempt to worship God in a way that includes sexual intercourse than it is about inhospitality. When the prophets threaten

with the punishment God wreaked upon Sodom and Gomorrah, they often are talking about punishment of such sins as the sin of breaking the Covenant, of idolatry and blasphemy by the worship of the Baals and Ashtaroths of the Canaanites.

Jesus joins the prophets in warning of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah upon cruelty, inhospitality, inhumanity, arrogance, violence, indifference to suffering, neglect of any who are poor, neglect and exploitation especially of orphans and widows and others who are powerless or weak, living in excessive luxury while not being concerned about the plight of the hungry, the poor and the oppressed, etc.

Notes

- ¹ This quotation and all other are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
- ² John Dominic Crossan & Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001).
- ³ See Isaiah 1 and 2; Jeremiah 23:1-13; 50:25,29; Ezekiel 16:15-19; Deuteronomy 29:23; 32, 27.
- ⁴ See Deuteronomy 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; especially 2 Kings 23:7.
- ⁵ *NRSV Harper Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), p.362.