What Was The Sin Of Sodom?

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Like 11

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It's quite interesting, isn't it, to examine closely not only what Moses saw as the great sin of Sodom, but also how later biblical authors saw Sodom and its sin. To be sure, the biblical texts clearly condemn homosexual activity as sin. The Church I serve in has helpfully, and compassionately, made that plain here, and I am deeply grateful for that clear statement. In addition, I understand that Sam Storms (the pastor of preaching and vision) has also signed the Nashville Statement that aims at even greater clarity. My question isn't whether homosexual practice is sin. I'm convinced it is (see a thorough defense of that claim here). My question is rather specifically about the Story of Sodom, and how it is sometimes employed in the discussion.

Perhaps I could suggest some trajectories for your thoughts?

[Note that some sections of this post remain unfinished.]

The Biblical Authors' Understanding Of The Sin Of Sodom

Moses and the Story Of Sodom

Parallels with Judges 19

Jeremiah's Interpretation of the Sin of Sodom

Jeremiah likened the sin of Sodom to adultery, the horrid sin of deceiving others in the name of the Lord as a false prophet, and general "wickedness." (Jer. 23:9-14).

"9 Concerning the prophets:
My heart is broken within me;
all my bones shake;
I am like a drunken man,
like a man overcome by wine,
because of the Lord
and because of his holy words.
10 For the land is full of adulterers;
because of the curse the land mourns,
and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up.
Their course is evil,
and their might is not right.
11 "Both prophet and priest are ungodly;
even in my house I have found their evil,
declares the Lord.
12 Therefore their way shall be to them
like slippery paths in the darkness,
into which they shall be driven and fall,
for I will bring disaster upon them
in the year of their punishment,
declares the Lord.
13 In the prophets of Samaria
I saw an unsavory thing:
they prophesied by Baal
and led my people Israel astray.
14 But in the prophets of Jerusalem
I have seen a horrible thing:
they commit adultery and walk in lies;
they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
so that no one turns from his evil;
all of them have become like Sodom to me,
and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.""
(Jer. 23:9–14 ESV)

Isaiah's Interpretation Of The Sin Of Sodom

Isaiah saw it as failure to plead the cause of the poor and needy (Isaiah 1:1-17, esp. 1:9-10). He makes no mention of any homosexual activity in Sodom, and instead likens the social injustice of Israel to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, and calls on God's people to repent and,

> *"Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; 17 Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow."*

Ezekiel's Interpretation Of The Sin Of Sodom

Ezekiel likewise saw Sodom's greatest sin as a proud arrogance that caused a failure to care for the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:44-50). He compares the sins of Jerusalem to those of Samaria, and compares the sins of Samaria to those of Sodom.

"Behold, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you: 'Like mother, like daughter.' You are the daughter of your mother, who loathed her husband and her children; and you are the sister of your sisters, who loathed their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite. And your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters. Not only did you walk in their ways and do according to their abominations; within a very little time you were more corrupt than they in all your ways. As I live, declares the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done.

And he specifically highlights what he saw as the great sin of Sodom, that Samaria and Jerusalem had followed in, to even greater degrees;

Behold, 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 an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it."
(Ezekiel 16:44–50 ESV)

He further saw the sins of Samaria in being lifted up in pride as far *worse* than the sins of Sodom (Ezekiel 16:48, 51-53).

"As I live, declares the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done."
(Ezekiel 16:48 ESV)

And the sins of Jerusalem as worse than those of Samaria (and thus, even more worse than those of Sodom);

"Samaria has not committed half your sins. You have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed. Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous."
(Ezekiel 16:51–52 ESV)

Note that in all of this, there is no homosexuality taking place in Jerusalem, or Samaria. Yet the prophet condemns them *more harshly* than he would Sodom.

Second Temple Interpretation Of The Sin Of Sodom

Jude's Interpretation Of The Sin Of Sodom

In Jude 7, Jude picks up Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of sins that involve angelic beings (Jude 6). He speaks to those in his day who disregard the angelic powers (Jude 8-10), and uses Sodom as a penultimate example of the dangers of such an approach, since the men of Sodom "went after strange (Angelic) flesh." He does pick up the note of "fornication," meaning that sexual immorality was at least a *part* of their sin, but seems less concerned with any homosexual dimension than he does the pursuit of copulation with angelic beings. One could use his text I suppose to suggest that fornication was sin (duh), but I think it would be stretching his intent to suggest that he disagreed with Isaiah and Ezekiel in their conclusion that pride and social sins of ignoring the poor and needy was the *height* of Sodom's evil.

Peter's Interpretation Of The Sin Of Sodom

In II Peter, probably following Jude, Peter picks up a similar theme. He too is speaking of angelic/demonic sins (II Pet. 2:4-5), and he too is addressing those that would speak lightly of angelic beings (II Pet. 2:10-12), and in this context uses Sodom as one example of how God punishes sin, but preserves the righteous in the midst of it (II Pet. 2:6-8). He specifically mentions ungodly lives, and the "unlawful deeds" of Sodom. But like Jude, nothing in his use of the text suggests that he saw the homosexual intent of Sodom as being in a different class than their other sins (and he seems certainly not to have thought their homosexual actions a greater evil than their potential rape of Lots daughters, or their intent to rape angels, both cases that involve the heinous intent of forceful rape).

Jesus' Interpretation Of The Sin Of Sodom

But what of Jesus? How did he view the sodom story?

In Luke 10:1-20, Luke takes up the account of the sending out of the 70/72. Jesus explains to those sent that, on the one hand, if a house receives them with hospitality, they should stay there (not looking to upgrade to better lodgings -10:7). This hospitality (Luke 10:5-8) will be blessed (Luke 10:6). This is in keeping with the standard eastern custom, so foreign to us, of caring for the traveler. As part of concern for the poor and needy, it was standard social procedure to take in any traveler who came by one's home. We think this odd to do for a total stranger, but it is a basic part of eastern culture and their concern for the needy.

But, Jesus notes, on the other hand if the house *doesn't* receive the traveling guest, they will be cursed (Luke 10:10-12). They have broken social custom, and refused to care for the needy traveler, who brings the tidings of the kingdom. Then, perhaps surprisingly to us, Jesus compares their act to the Sodom story. Why? Because Sodom was, to Jesus, an ultimate example of *failing to care for the needy* by providing them hospitality. To Jesus, such a rejection was an even greater example of this injustice than that of Sodom. Thus, their judgment would be even worse than that of Sodom (Luke 10:12). Note that these towns rejecting the 70/72 aren't practicing any homosexual activity (they are Jewish towns!). But Jesus doesn't seem to see the homosexual element of the Sodom story as prominent (which doesn't mean of course that it isn't present at all). Rather, (likely from the high view of Scripture he consistently promoted), he has picked up and continued the interpretation of Ezekiel and Isaiah, which saw *failure to care for the needy* as Sodom's *greatest* sin. A sin made all the worse when the "needy" being ignored were the messengers of God's kingdom.

One might suggest that what Jesus really is referring to is how rejecting the message of the Gospel is like Sodom rejecting the message of Lot. I might come to the same conclusion if I read only the Mathean version of the saying. There, an emphasis can be seen on the message itself in Matthew's retention of the words "or listen to your words" (Matthew 10:14). Further, in Matthew 11:20-24, Matthew includes the saying as part of the denunciation of cities who have rejected Jesus, whose sin is worse than that of Sodom.

In Luke though, with his characteristically greater concern for social issues, he removed the Mathean phrase "and your words" from his source, and has only "not receive you" (Luke 10:10). His account focuses more on the acceptance into the house for lodging (Luke 10:5, 7) or rejection from it. Both elements are present in the different passages. But in either case, it wasn't the *homoerotic* element that Jesus found most repulsive about Sodom. It was neglect to care for the needy and perhaps rejection of the message of God that Jesus saw as the *greatest* sins of Sodom, sins which he believed many commit to worse degrees without any homoerotic element.

So What Should We Say About Sodom?

All of which gives one at least some pause in regards to using Sodom and Gomorrah as some kind of paradigm to suggest that homosexual sins are somehow in a "worse" class than other sexual sins. Or at least, it gives me such pause. I would humbly suggest it should give you such pause as well.

Richard Hays, in one of the most influential treatments of ethics to be written in the last century, contends that the Bible has a clear and consistent position that homosexual activity is sinful and displeasing to God. He concludes that, "the New Testament offers no loopholes or exception clauses that might allow for the acceptance of homosexual practices under some circumstances. Despite the efforts of some recent interpreters to explain away the evidence, the New Testament remains unambiguous and univocal in its condemnation of homosexual conduct" (Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (p. 394). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.). But he also notes that we can go wrong in emphasizing the Bible's teachings on homosexuality loudly while only whispering (or being silent) about things that the Bible all but shouts about;

> "The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen brief references to it in all of Scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern—in contrast, for example, to economic injustice. The paucity of texts addressing the issue is a significant fact for New Testament ethics. What the Bible does say should be heeded carefully, but any ethic that intends to be biblical will seek to get the accents in the right place, not overemphasizing peripheral issues. (Would that the passion presently being expended in the church over the question of homosexuality were devoted instead to urging the wealthy to share with the poor! Some of the most urgent champions of "biblical morality" on sexual matters become strangely equivocal when the discussion turns to the New Testament's teachings about possessions.)"
> - Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (p. 381). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

He goes on to discuss the question of the Sodom story in particular, and concludes;

> "The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. The "men of Sodom" come pounding on Lot's door, apparently with the intention of gang-raping Lot's two visitors—who, as we readers know, are actually angels. The angels rescue Lot and his family and pronounce destruction on the city. The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse. Indeed, there is nothing in the rest of the biblical tradition, save an obscure reference in Jude 7, to suggest that the sin of Sodom was particularly identified with sexual misconduct of any kind.5 In fact, the clearest statement about the sin of Sodom is to be found in an oracle of the prophet Ezekiel: "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" (Ezek. 16:49)."
> - Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (p. 381). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

His footnote explains of the mention in Jude;

> According to Jude 7, "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and went after other flesh, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." The phrase "went after other flesh" (*apelthousai opis sarkos heteras*) refers to their pursuit of nonhuman (i.e., angelic!) "flesh" The expression *sarkos heteras* means "flesh of another kind"; thus, it is impossible to construe this passage as a condemnation of homosexual desire, which entails precisely the pursuit of flesh of the *same* kind.
> - Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (p. 404). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

I think there is a great error often made by the church today in regards to homosexuality, and to those who either give in to, or struggle against, same sex attractions. The error is made in two different directions. One the one hand, (what Keller calls "the liberal error"), there is a large push in society today to simply ignore what the Word of God says clearly about homosexual and lesbian activity (e.g., in Lev. 18 and Rom. 1:24-27). Churches heading this direction decide that cultural winds should shape their attitudes rather than Scripture, and they thus declare homosexual activity pleasing to God. This is to ignore God's Word, and to shape our values based on culture. The Bible is unambiguous in its condemnation of homosexual activity. (See at length the work of Robert Gagnon, who would disagree with some of what I've written here). And those faithful to to the Bible as God's revelation must honor and defend the sexual ethic which it presents, however unpopular.

On the other hand, in many corners of the church, what the Word of God actually says (or doesn't say) has become unimportant. Religious culture has elevated homosexual activity to the place of "the worst" of sins, misusing stories like the Sodom one to suggest that "this is how much worse God thinks homosexuality is than heterosexual sins." They want to place this sin in a separate class, and thus place those guilty of it in a lower class than themselves. In so doing, they often downplay their own heterosexual sins as relatively unimportant, while they harp with an ungodly anger against "those homosexuals." Believers who love Jesus and want to serve him faithfully and in purity, but who struggle with same-sex attraction (because like you and me, they are born into a broken world, with desires broken just like yours and mine are) are often kept at arm's length, or just flatly rejected. Sometimes even hated. Far too often the church has ostracized such men and woman.

Further, those who don't believe, and who experience same-sex-attraction, often hear the message from the church that their sin is "worse," or that somehow their sin is unforgivable. Many I suspect would yearn to follow the call of Jesus to repentance, forgiveness, grace, and help in their struggle. But they often hear only hate from the church, and so they stay away.

Here is the same error of the church, only in a different direction, and with more devastating consequences. Instead of letting the Word of God set their values, they are following the values of "traditional" religious culture. And in the same way (only a different direction), the Word of God is ignored.

I would urge us to love the Word of God, to treat it carefully, checking our religious, cultural, and traditional bias at the door. And to love people, and listen to them well.

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