Introduction

Thus, the several authors of the chapters of this book have examined, successively the passages in the Book of Genesis and of Leviticus in the Old Testament and the Letters of Paul to the Romans and to Timothy in the New Testament, which together provide the textual foundations for the worldwide animosity and even hatred towards sexual minorities. These essays are understandable to me because they approach the tasks in hand in ways that seem more consonant with the developments of approaches to interpretation that we now follow in courts of law throughout the English-speaking world. The old literalists are, largely, dying off. Though some of them remain to do mischief in the law, as certainly they still do in Scripture.

I do not really regard these chapters as 'Uneasy Pieces.' I regard them as full of ease and grace. We should feel uneasy about the translation of words that cause cruelty and unkindness to vulnerable minorities. Surely we have learned enough in the last century about the error of those approaches to Scripture: including the source in St Matthew's Gospel which was the textual origin of the anti-Semitism, that fuelled the hatred of the Jews in Hitler's Germany.5

Eyes to see and ears to hear

The journey we are taking in this matter will not be completed quickly. It is a long journey because it comes after long held earlier understandings about the direction that we should take. But science today requires us to rethink the past Christian position. The essays in this book afford new light on how this may be done, with the legitimacy, integrity and the authenticity of true scholarship.

For those who contribute to this new enlightenment, in harmony with at least this Anglican's understanding of the New Covenant, I express thanks. I hope that this little book will be sent to bishops and archbishops and others of the Faithful in the Anglican Communion everywhere. And to those others too who have eyes to see and ears to hear the message of kindness and inclusiveness that lie at the very centre of this spiritual endeavour.

Michael Kirby  
Sydney  
1 October 2011

5. Matthew 27:25: ‘Then answered all the people [the Jews] and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.'

Chapter One

Were the Sodomites Really Sodomites?  
Homosexuality in Genesis 19

Megan Warner

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' Genesis 19:4–8 (translation from NRSV)

It has become a commonplace for contemporary readers of the book of Genesis to assume that the wickedness against which Lot counsels the men of Sodom in the excerpt from Genesis 19 above is homosexuality. This entirely understandable assumption is almost irresistible, given the link between the name of the city, 'Sodom' and the English word 'sodomy'. However, the text itself never explicitly identifies sodomy as the crime of the residents of Sodom, and interpreters of Genesis 19 have not always made this link. Early interpretations of Genesis 19 tended to favour sins such as hubris, abuse of the weak or inhospitality to strangers, as the wickedness for which God found it necessary to punish the city of Sodom by means of its complete destruction.

This essay revisits the grounds for interpreting Genesis 19 as Scripture that compels its readers to conclude that the expression of sexuality between persons of the same gender is sinful. It addresses the text itself as well as notable interpretations of it, both early and contemporary, in
posing a series of questions: What does the text of Genesis 19 itself say about the sin of Sodom? What features of the narrative have led readers to interpret Genesis 19 as indicating divine opposition to homosexuality? Is it necessary to interpret Genesis 19 in this way, or are there other ways to read the story?

The wickedness of Sodom

The first indication of problems in Sodom comes in Genesis 13:13, where the narrator informs the reader, 'Now, the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.' The comment is entirely opaque, and it is not until Genesis 19 that the reader is offered any clues as to the nature of Sodom's wickedness. A further, similarly opaque comment intervenes. In Genesis 18:20 the LORD says, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!' Once again this statement raises more questions than it answers. For example, who is crying out against the two cities and what is the nature of their grave sin?

Unfortunately, the text of Genesis 19 itself offers no express answers to these questions. In the story the men of Sodom surround Lot's home, where Lot is sheltering two mysterious visitors to the city, and demand that Lot bring out his guests, in order that they (the men of Sodom) might 'know' them (19:5). The Hebrew verb, 'to know', is 'ybd'. It possesses a range of meanings, just as in English, that sometimes have sexual overtones and sometimes do not. Often it is clear that the verb 'ybd' is being used in the sense of knowing someone sexually. This is the case, for example, in Genesis 19:8 where Lot says 'I have two daughters who have not known (ybd) a man.' At other times it is clear that a sexual sense is not intended, as is the case in Genesis 18:21: 'I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know (ybd).'

In modern times interpreters have generally read the word 'know' in Genesis 19:5 ('Bring them out to us, so that we may know them') as having a sexual sense, although this is a less clear case than either of the previous two examples. The general thrust of the resulting interpretation is that the men of Sodom want Lot to bring the visitors out of his home so that they (the men of Sodom) can have sex with them. The great sin, or the wickedness, of Sodom, so the argument goes, is therefore homosexuality, which God punishes by means of the destruction of Sodom and every person in it. An example of this interpretation is found in the influential commen-

tary of Gerhard von Rad, 'One must think of the heavenly messengers as young men in their prime, whose beauty particularly incited evil desire.'

However, there is some need for caution here. Even if von Rad and the majority of modern scholars are correct in their view that the verb 'ybd' should be understood as having a sexual meaning in the context of Genesis 19:5, it does not necessarily follow that Genesis 19 should be read as a proof-text against homosexuality. On the contrary, on close inspection it becomes apparent that the story has nothing of any note to say about consensual sex between men. First, what appears to be being contemplated by the men of Sodom in Genesis 19:5 is not homosexual sex per se but pack-rape. The simmering anger and violence in the narrative do not support an idea that the men of Sodom were seeking an opportunity to seduce the visitors, but rather suggest that they sought to exert power over them. Secondly, any sex that might have occurred in this context would not have been sex between men. Although Lot's visitors are in some places in the text termed 'men' they are elsewhere called 'messengers' (malakim). This Hebrew word is sometimes translated as 'angels'. The up-side of that rendering in this context is that it at least makes it clear to the reader that the visitors are not, in fact, men but divine beings. This story, then, if it is about sex at all, is not about consensual sex between men, but about the pack-rape by human males of divine beings.

Nowhere else in the book of Genesis is any concern expressed about homosexual activity. However, sexual activity between humans and divine beings is a pervasive theme. In Genesis 6 the wickedness (r') of humankind, apparently manifesting itself in sexual congress between 'daughters of humans' and 'sons of God', so grieves God that God decides to blot out all humans and living things from the face of the earth. Interestingly, the same Hebrew root is used by Lot in his exhortation in Genesis 19:7, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly (r') and by the narrator in Genesis 13:13, 'Now, the people of Sodom were wicked (r')...'. This strikingly consistent use of the language of wickedness (r') supports an argument that, had the men of Sodom gone on to have sex with the visitors, their crime would not have been homosexuality but hubris—the pursuit of divinity by means of intercourse with divine beings. This same sin of hubris, expressed through a different form of behavior, is also at the root of the problems related to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

Some scholars, however, have raised serious questions about whether the word ‘know’ (yd) in Genesis 19:5 should be understood as having any sexual meaning at all. For example, one of the senses of the word yd is judicial. It has been argued that yd is used in Genesis 19 in a judicial sense, in order to draw a parallel between the intentions of the men of Sodom in Genesis 19 and those of God in Genesis 18. In Genesis 18 God sends messengers to assess the reports he has heard coming out of Sodom, so that he will ‘know’ whether the reports are true (Gen 18:21). Similarly, it can be argued, the men of Sodom want to assess and ‘know’ the mysterious visitors to their city. The men of Sodom are, on this interpretation, acting judicially and not as sexual predators. Lot, for his part, misunderstands the intentions of the men of Sodom, interpreting their request as being of a sexual nature, and responds by offering his daughter for their sexual use. The presence of other legal and judicial language in both chapters 18 and 19 supports this interpretation.

So far we have seen that Genesis 19 does not expressly identify homosexuality as the sin of the men of Sodom. Does the text say anything else expressly that might assist the reader to identify their wickedness? Mostly the text is elusive, but there is a clue in the words of the Sodomites in verse 9, ‘This fellow (Lot) came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal with you worse than with them!’ The cause of the Sodomites’ anger seems to be that Lot, himself an outsider in Sodom, has taken upon himself the responsibility of determining whether the visitors are appropriate recipients of the city’s hospitality. We have already seen a suggestion that the role of judge is one that the men of Sodom wanted to reserve to themselves. At this point in the narrative the threatening attentions of the men of Sodom are transferred from the visitors to Lot, another outsider. The fear engendered by the unexpected arrival of two mysterious visitors turns into anger that Lot has presumed to decide that these two particular strangers pose no threat to the city and that it is appropriate that they be offered safe-haven with the city’s walls overnight.

The Sodomites’ words in verse 9 are the most explicit indication given by chapter 19 of its own theme. They suggest that the theme of the story may be hospitality to the stranger, and that inhospitality may be the men of Sodom’s crime. Hospitality is undoubtedly the theme of the opening verses of both chapters 18 and 19. Each of these chapters opens with scenes in which first Abraham and then Lot presses hospitality upon the divine visitors. The consensus of scholars is that in each case the quality of hospitality offered is entirely adequate, if not exemplary, in the circumstances. It is entirely possible that the authors, or editors, of chapters 18 and 19 meant to contrast the extreme hospitality of Abraham and Lot with the extreme inhospitality of the men of Sodom. Lot’s extraordinary, even obscene, offer of his daughters to the baying crowd could, on this view, be considered ‘hospitality’, designed to stand in contrast with the extraordinary inhospitality of the Sodomites.

If we look to other Old Testament texts that speak of the reputation of the city of Sodom we find some support for the idea that the sin of the Sodomites may have been inhospitality of some form, rather than sexual perversion. Even Gerhard von Rad had to concede that his interpretation (in which the men of Sodom were motivated by sexual lust for the strangers) was at odds with ‘the popular Israelite conception of Sodom’s sin’, which can be perceived in Isaiah 1:9; 3:9, Jeremiah 23:14 and Ezekiel 16:49. Not one of these passages betrays any interest in the ‘evil desire’ that von Rad attributed to the Sodomites. Australian scholar Mark G Brett, whose own view is that the theme of Genesis 19 is the abuse of foreigners, writes:

If there is a common theme in these prophetic allusions to Sodom, it would be oppression of the weak. The texts in Isaiah and Ezekiel are concerned with matters of justice, while Jeremiah 23:14 condemns the abuse of prophetic power . . . the common thread is the perception of the Sodomites as people who abused power.

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There is no text in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), other than Genesis 19 itself, in which the populace of Sodom is connected with a reputation for homosexuality or any other kind of sexual behaviour. This suggests that, at least until a century or two before Christ, there was no ‘popular Israelite conception’ of Sodom as a city of sodomites. There is one passage in the New Testament that associates the city of Sodom (as well as Gomorrah and the cities surrounding them) with unconventional sexual practices. The author of the brief Letter of Jude, however, appears to have been of the view that the citizens of Sodom and its neighbors were guilty of sexual activity with divine beings, rather than with same-gender partners:

Now I desire to remind you, though you are fully informed, that the Lord, who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who kept their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the Great Day. Likewise, 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. (Translation from NRSV, incorporating the NRSV’s own critical note—indicated with italics—from the Greek text.)

At least in one place in the biblical text, then, Sodom is associated with sexual crimes. However, the Letter of Jude was written centuries after Genesis 19 and the prophetic books mentioned above and, further, the words ‘went after other flesh’ can not readily be understood as having been intended to refer to same-gender infractions.

A Parallel text—Judges 19

There is one final text that should be considered in this context. Judges 19 does not mention Sodom, but there are so many parallels between its narrative and that of Genesis 19 that Judges 19 appears to be another telling of the same story. There visitors to a city are offered hospitality and protection in the home of a benefactor who is himself an outsider. The men of the city surround the house, demanding to ‘know’ the male visitor.

The host offers them two women, including his own daughter, in place of the visitor. There are no divine beings here, but nor is there any clearer indication in Judges 19 than in Genesis 19 that the story indicates a divine stance against sex between men (whether consensual or otherwise). The text of Judges 19, like that of Genesis 19, is nearly free from evaluative statements from its narrator. The householder, like Lot, certainly reacts negatively to the men’s demands but the text does not offer a reason for his negative reaction, leaving open the possibility that the householder’s opposition is not to the same-gender aspect of the men’s demand, but to the fact that a demand of a threatening nature has been made to a visitor under his protection.

One interesting feature of the Judges story is that the householder’s initial offer to the men of two women, his own daughter and the visitor’s concubine, as substitutes, is declined. However, his subsequent offer of the concubine’s daughter alone seems to satisfy the men. They accept it and go on to rape and abuse the woman all night. This ‘awkward’ plot development suggests two things about the motivations of the men of the city. First, it suggests that they may not have been originally seeking sex specifically with men. Secondly, the men’s rejection of the host’s daughter, but subsequent acceptance of the visitor’s concubine, may lead to the conclusion that their particular target was the visitor—denied the opportunity to exert power over him directly they were content to humiliate him through the abuse of his concubine. Once again, this may be a story about the use and abuse of power. Ultimately Judges 19 is no more successful than is Genesis 19 at conveying an explicitly anti-homosexuality message.

This should not be taken to mean, however, that Judges 19 betrays no value-judgment at all about the men’s demand for sexual knowledge of the male stranger. There are some significant differences between Judges 19 and Genesis 19 that suggest that the question of the apparent attitude of the narrative to homosexual sex is more relevant here than there. In Judges 19, for example, the visitor is definitely a man and not a divine being, so this story does at least address the possibility of sex between males (although not consensual sex). Further, in Judges 19 the men of the city do accept the householder’s offer of a female victim in place of the male they sought. The text says that the man ‘knew’ (ydh) her (Jud 19:25) and this use of the verb ydh (unmatched in Gen 19) would tend to support an

9. Ibid.
argument that the men's original demand was sexual in nature. Further, Stone has argued that the householder's offer of his daughter and the visitor's concubine leads to the irresistible conclusion that his objection to the men's 'knowing' those two women was inferior in degree to his objection to the men's 'knowing' his male guest. It is certainly possible that this is indicative of a particular distaste on the part of the householder for the male rape of other males. However, Stone does not acknowledge the alternative possibility that this difference of degree may have been due instead to the respective ranks of the male guest, on the one hand, and the two women, on the other, and the householder's own assessment of his responsibilities as host.

It would be wrong to insist that Judges 19 is a narrative that does not touch on the subject of sex between males, and any interpretation of the story needs to consider the impact of prevailing attitudes towards sexual activity (of whatever nature) between males if it is to deal adequately with the issues of power and sexuality that are unquestionably present. However, that is by no means the same thing as saying that Judges 19 is Scripture that compels a particular view about homosexuality. The story is troubling on many levels and notoriously difficult to interpret. It offers no explicit interpretation or identification of its own themes. Although issues of sexuality are certainly present, there is no unequivocal or even readily apparent 'moral' message and the final result is that it is no more appropriate to regard Judges 19 as a proof-text about the sinfulness of homosexuality than is the case with Genesis 19.

Early interpretations of Genesis 19

If Sodom's crime was not popularly understood, at least until a century or two prior to the birth of Christ, to be homosexual sex, then when did the identification of the Sodomites as sodomites first arise? Scholars do not agree on the first instances of extra-biblical interpretation of Sodom's sin as homosexuality, or the influence of such early readings. Some suggest that Genesis 19 was first associated with homosexuality in the first century after Christ, and that this can be seen in the writings of Philo and some of the apocryphal writings. Others point to the work of the church fathers, noting that Origen did not link Sodom with homosexuality at all, while Augustine and John Chrysostom did so only once each, instead placing emphasis on the theme of hospitality, suggesting that the association between Genesis 19 and homosexuality had not become widespread prior to the fifth century at least.

The earliest interpreters of Genesis 19, then, did not regard it as self-evident that the crime of the men of the city of Sodom, punished by the divine destruction of the city, was homosexuality. In recent years a growing number of scholars have begun to revisit the question. They have looked again to the early interpretations of Genesis 19 that identify themes other than homosexuality, exploring the idea that the narrative may have been setting out to highlight the sins of hubris, inhospitality or abuse of power rather than sins of a specifically sexual nature. These scholars have found evidence in the text of Genesis 19 itself, in other biblical texts and in extra-biblical sources to suggest that Genesis 19 is a story that offers not one single clear message but rather a spectrum of possible meaning.

Conclusion

This brief survey has set out to challenge the intervening 'traditional' view that includes Genesis 19 among the small number of Biblical texts that address the subject of homosexuality. It has found that a close reading of the text does not support a conclusion that Genesis 19 demonstrates a divine stance against homosexuality, and that in fact this biblical story can quite properly be read as having nothing to do with homosexuality, as currently understood, at all. Further, it has pointed to evidence that biblical writers before Christ did not associate Sodom's crime with homosexuality, and that other readers of the story did not begin to do so until well after the time of Christ. In the circumstances, it is suggested, contemporary readers may properly consider themselves at liberty to identify within this complex and intriguing piece of Scripture other themes and motivations that do not of themselves compel the holding of any particular view about homosexuality.

10. Ibid.