

# Why We Know That the Story of Sodom Indicts Homosexual Practice *Per Se*

Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 616 N. Highland Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15206  
gagnon@pts.edu

[posted online in Jan. 2013; written Summer 2010]

[**Note to readers:** This discussion was originally part of a larger essay later published: “The Scriptural Case for a Male-Female Prerequisite for Sexual Relations: A Critique of the Arguments of Two Adventist Scholars,” pp. 53-161 in *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church: Biblical, Counseling, and Religious Liberty Issues*, eds. Roy E. Gane, Nicholas P. Miller, and H. Peter Swanson (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012). It was removed from the essay because of overlap with another article in the same book and to reduce the length of an already long discussion. The articles in the book came out of a Seventh-day Adventist conference held at Andrews University in 2009. My article was more or less completed in Summer 2010, with minor changes made in 2012. I was one of several non-Adventist speakers invited to the conference. I critiqued the articles of two Adventist scholars who had promoted acceptance of homosexual unions, one of whom is a New Testament scholar and mentioned herein: John R. Jones, “‘In Christ There is Neither ...’: Toward the Unity of the Body of Christ” in *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-Day Adventist Perspectives* (eds. David Ferguson, Fritz Guy and David Larson; Roseville, Calif.: Adventist Forum, 2008), 4-42. Jones, who has a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, is an associate professor of religion at La Sierra University. His article makes the same kind of claims that one can find among any biblical scholar who adopts a homosexualist reading of Scripture. I used his article as a foil from which to present my own case.]

John R. Jones’ offhand dismissal of the Sodom story as saying nothing about committed homosexual unions is a common claim but is not supported by the evidence. Jones and others simply *assume* that since the story involves a coercive element the narrator is indicting *only* the attempt at coercion. Yet whether the attempted male-male intercourse constituted a *compounding offense* or merely a *coincidental act* that is incidental to the evil of rape can only be settled by an examination of the historical and literary context. One can easily imagine a story where the theme of multiple offenses conveys how truly bad the perpetrators are. If Jones heard a story about a man who raped his mother or a child, would he assume that the only offense was the rape and not also the compounding offense of incest or pedophilia? I would hope not.

So on what basis can he assume that the Sodom story does not convey multiple offenses: not only attempted rape but attempted rape of visitors; and not only that but attempted same-sex sexual intercourse that dishonors the visitors by treating their maleness as if it were femaleness? After all, Jones has already acknowledged that the Levitical prohibitions have as their implicit motive clause the putting of a male in the position of a female sexually. If the narrator of the Sodom story (typically labeled in historical-critical study J or the Yahwist) held a similar view of male homosexual practice, he obviously would not have regarded consensual man-male intercourse as acceptable, certainly not on the part of a passive-receptive partner. The ancient Near East generally regarded with great scorn a man who willingly offered himself as the passive receptive partner in male-male intercourse.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, for the Yahwist a willing participant in passive-receptive man-male intercourse would be culpable for degrading his own God-given maleness, whereas the angelic visitors at Sodom were not culpable for their own degradation because they did not give their consent.

I think that there is good reason to believe that the story of *Ham's offense against his father Noah in Gen 9:20-27* is a similar instance of a “kitchen sink” story of multiple offenses designed to present the action of the perpetrator as particularly heinous. The arguments for reading the story in this way are numerous:<sup>2</sup> (1) the expression “see the nakedness of” (Gen 9:22) appears elsewhere as a metaphor for sexual intercourse (Lev 20:17); (2) Noah “came to know what his youngest son had *done* to him” (Gen 9:24; the Babylonian Talmud records a debate about the meaning of this phrase in which one rabbi suggests homosexual relations, the other castration; *Sanhedrin* 70a); (3) the severity of the curse and its placement on Ham's son rather than Ham himself better suits an act of sexual assault on Ham's part (note the subtext: the curse falls on Ham's ‘seed’/son because Ham offends with his ‘seed’/sperm); (4) the same narrator subsequently tells a similar story of Lot's daughters having sex with their drunken father (Gen 19:30-38); (5) a similar story of incestuous same-sex rape as a means to establishing familial dominance exists in the Egyptian tale of Horus and Seth; (6) the narrator shortly after links the Canaanites, i.e. Ham's descendants, to the Sodom story (Gen 10:19), suggesting that the narrator understands both stories in a similar light; and (7) there is an ideational link with Leviticus 18 (specifically, 18:6-18, 22) inasmuch as both texts show that incest and man-male intercourse were pivotal reasons why the Canaanites were subjugated or expelled from the

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 44-56.

<sup>2</sup> See further *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 63-71.

land.<sup>3</sup> Clearly the editors of Leviticus 18 have not limited their critique of incest or of man-male intercourse to coercive forms. If the narrator of the Ham episode is not limiting his indictment of incest to coercive forms, there is little reason to suppose that the same narrator of the Sodom story is limiting the indictment of man-male intercourse to coercive forms.

There are additional reasons to think that the Yahwist is indicting homosexual practice *per se*, besides the evidence from the Levitical prohibitions<sup>4</sup> and the story of Ham's act against Noah. Scholars agree that the narrator of the Sodom story also narrated the description of *the creation of man and woman in Genesis 2*. I argue elsewhere in the fuller article that Gen 2:21-24, along with Gen 1:27, has proscriptive implications for same-sex intercourse.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, *the history of the interpretation of the Sodom story* also supports this interpretation. This is clear enough in two first-century Jewish authors: Philo of Alexandria (*Abraham* 135-37 and *Questions on Genesis* 4.37) and Josephus (*Antiquities* 1.200-201), among other early Jewish texts (e.g., the *Testament of Naphtali* 3.4; *Jubilee* 16.5-6; 20.5-6; 2 *Enoch* 10.4; 34.1-2).<sup>6</sup> Jones follows others in arguing that most, if not all, biblical texts that refer directly to Sodom say nothing about homosexual practice but rather comment on inhospitable treatment of the vulnerable in their midst: the poor, resident aliens, and visitors. The truth is that most texts in the canon of Scripture that refer to Sodom simply mention it and Gomorrah as places of great evil that God utterly destroyed.<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 1:7-17 alludes to Sodom and Gomorrah in the context of discussing social injustice but this merely picks up one theme of the Sodom cycle without excluding other themes. There are a number of biblical texts that allude to the immorality of homosexual practice at Sodom.

(1) **Ezekiel 16:49-50**. According to Ezek 16:49-50, Sodom “did not take hold of the hand of the poor and needy. And they grew haughty and committed an abomination (*to'evah*) before me and I removed them when I saw it.” Is the

---

<sup>3</sup> Both Hermann Gunkel and Gerhard von Rad, the greatest OT scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, understood Ham's offense as sexual assault of his father, as has more recently Martti Nissinen, a Finnish OT scholar who has written the most significant book by a biblical scholar defending homosexual relations (*Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998]).

<sup>4</sup> See “The Scriptural Case for a Male-Female Prerequisite,” 54-65, 144-46 (nn. 8-34).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67, 148 nn. 36-43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89 n. 121; 172, 177.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 79 n. 103.

reference to “committing an abomination” to be identified with “not taking the hand of the poor and needy”? The evidence indicates that it is to be identified rather with man-male intercourse.

- a) The vice list in Ezek 18:10-13, consisting of ten vices, clearly distinguishes between the offense “oppresses the poor and needy” (fifth vice) from the offense “commits an abomination” (ninth vice).
- b) The conjunction in Ezek 18:12-13 of a singular use of *to’evah*, as a reference to a single specific offense, with a plural use of *to’evoth*, as a summary description of all preceding offenses, is exactly what we find in Lev 18:22 (man-male intercourse) and 18:26-30 (summary of preceding offenses).
- c) All scholars of Ezekiel agree that Ezekiel knew, and shared extraordinary affinity with, either the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) or a precursor document. The Holiness Code, as we have seen, treats man-male intercourse as intrinsically sinful. There are no historical grounds for believing that Ezekiel had a different perspective.
- d) The phrase “committed an abomination” in Ezek 16:50 is identical to the phrase in Lev 20:13 that refers to man-male intercourse.
- e) The two other singular uses of *to’evah* in Ezekiel refer to sexual sin (22:11; 33:26).

The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi also understood *to’evah* in Ezek 16:50 as a reference to homosexual practice, as have some modern commentators.<sup>8</sup> The evidence thus indicates that Ezekiel in 16:50 was apparently interpreting the Sodom episode through the lens of the absolute prohibition of man-male intercourse in Lev 18:22 and 20:13, indicating that he understood the same-sex dimension of the rape to be a *compounding* offense.

(2) **Jude 7 and 2 Pet 2:6-7, 10.** According to Jude 7 the men of Sodom “committed sexual immorality (*ekporneusasai*) and went after other flesh.” Jones is correct in thinking that “went after other flesh” refers to sex with the angelic visitors but fails in his assumption that “committed sexual immorality” has the same referent. Jude 7 is an instance of parataxis: two clauses conjoined by ‘and’ where one is conceptually subordinated to the other. Jones follows other homosexualist interpretations in assuming the meaning as “they committed sexual

---

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 289 and *Ezekiel 21-37* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1997), 685; J. A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, Early Jewish and Early Christian Traditions* (CBET 1. Kampen: Kok, 1990), 37, 72-74.

immorality *by going after other flesh.*” But a paratactic construction in Greek can just as easily make the first clause subordinate; in this case, “*by (or: in the course of) committing sexual immorality they went after other flesh.*” In other words, in the process of attempting the sexually immoral act of having intercourse with other men, the men of Sodom got more than they bargained for: committing an offense unknowingly against angels (note the echo in Heb 13:2: “do not neglect hospitality to strangers for, because of this, some have entertained angels *without knowing it*”). This is apparently how the earliest ‘commentator’ of Jude 7 read it. For 2 Peter 2:6-7, 10 refers to the “defiling desire/lust” of the men of Sodom. Since the men of Sodom did not know that the male visitors were angels—so not only Gen 19:4-11 but also all subsequent ancient interpreters—the reference cannot be to a lust for angels but rather must be to a lust for men. So both Jude 7 and 2 Pet 2:6-7 provide further confirmation in the history of interpretation that the Sodom narrative is correctly interpreted when one does not limit the indictment of male homosexual relations to coercive forms.

(3) **Romans 1:24-27.** In Rom 1:24-27 Paul had in view not only the Levitical prohibitions and Gen 1:27 but also the cycle of traditions about Sodom.<sup>9</sup> Romans 1:24-27 is a veritable echo chamber of the most important OT texts impinging on homosexual practice: creation, Sodom, and the Levitical prohibitions. Note the following echoes to the Sodom cycle in Rom 1:18-32:<sup>10</sup>

- a) Romans 1:18 refers to God’s “wrath” being revealed “from heaven” against all “irreverence/godlessness/impiety” (*asebeia*) and “unrighteousness/injustice” (*adikia*). Similarly, Deut 29:23 states that God overthrew Sodom “in his wrath and anger.” According to Gen 19:24, God rained on Sodom sulfur and fire “from heaven.” In Gen 18:23, 25, Abraham pleads with God not to lump the righteous with “the irreverent” or “godless” at Sodom (compare Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.484). Lot implores the men of Sodom: “don’t do this unrighteous/unjust thing to these men” (Gen 19:8; compare Philo, *Abr.* 133; 3 Macc 2:4-5).

<sup>9</sup> For the intertextual echoes to Lev 18 and 20 and to Gen 1:27 see “The Scriptural Case for a Male-Female Prerequisite,” 63, 109-10.

<sup>10</sup> Philip F. Esler (“The Sodom Tradition in Romans 1:18-32,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34 [2004]:4-16) has made a convincing case for echoes to the Sodom cycle (see already my “Response to Countryman’s Review in *Anglican Theological Review*” [2003], 12-13), though at times he overreaches in some alleged allusions and errs both in excluding additional echoes to the creation story and in asserting that Paul’s reference to lesbian intercourse in Rom 1:26 derived from the “daughters of Sodom” in Ezek 16:46-55.

- b) Romans 1:19-23 focuses on the Gentile sin of idolatry, a sin loosely associated elsewhere with Sodom (perhaps implicit in Deut 29:23-28; 32:32; Isa 1:2-3; Jer 27:33-40; *Jub.* 20:5-8; *T. Naph.* 3:3-4).
- c) Romans 1:24-27 refers to same-sex intercourse as a dishonoring of their bodies, an indecent act, and a product of unclean desires (*epithumiai*). Similar descriptions of Sodom appear in both Josephus (*Ant.* 1.201) and Philo (*Abr.* 135). It also refers to same-sex intercourse as an act “contrary to nature.” Philo employs the against-nature theme in his interpretation of the Sodom story (*Abr.* 135, 137). Similar to Rom 1:19-27 *Testament of Naphtali* 3:4 immediately follows an indictment of idolatry with an indictment of Sodom for its unnatural intercourse.
- d) Romans 1:29-31 lists a series of vices characteristic of the Gentile world, some of which factor prominently in the traditions about Sodom: “arrogant/haughty” (*huperēfanoi*: Ezek 16:49; Sir 16:8; 3 Macc 2:5; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.194-95) and “insolent” (*hubristai*: Josephus, *Ant.* 1.194); “wickedness” (*ponēria*: compare Gen 13:13; 19:7; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.199) and “badness” (*kakia*; 3 Macc 2:5).

Given the fact that Sodom was widely regarded in ancient Israel and early Judaism as a byword for God’s terrifying wrath against human iniquity, it is not at all surprising that Paul alludes to it in his description of divine wrath against human unrighteousness in Rom 1:18-32. Indeed, Paul refers to Sodom as just such a byword in his citation of Isa 1:9 in Rom 9:29. The big difference, of course, is that Paul in Rom 1:18-32 is describing a preliminary stage of that wrath: the “handing over” of human beings to their controlling, self-dishonoring desires (1:24, 26, 28)—a handing over that heaps up sins and leads to a Sodom-like, cataclysmic judgment on the Day of (ultimate) Judgment (2:6). *Since Paul in Rom 1:24-27 does not limit his indictment of same-sex intercourse to rape,<sup>11</sup> his series of intertextual echoes to the Sodom tradition in 1:18-32 indicate that he understood the Sodom story as an indictment of homosexual practice per se.*

Another element that confirms the intrinsic indictment of homosexual practice in the Sodom story is the related story of *the Levite at Gibeah in Judg 19:22-25*, a story within what scholars refer to as the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through 2 Kings). Since the story of a Levite at Gibeah in Judg 19:22-25 is in many respects a carbon copy of the Sodom narrative in Gen 19:4-11 (there are even some

---

<sup>11</sup> That Paul is not thinking in the first instance of coercive same-sex intercourse is apparent from his references to lesbianism in 1:26 and men being “inflamed with their yearning for one another” in 1:27.

verbatim agreements in the Hebrew), how the narrator of Judg 19:22-25 interpreted the attempt of the men of the city to have intercourse with a male visitor provides our earliest commentary of how the Yahwist would have interpreted the similar event at Sodom.

In fact, we have strong evidence from within the Deuteronomistic History that the narrator would have regarded even consensual acts of man-male intercourse as abhorrent. The evidence comes from a string of references in Deut 23:17-18 and the Deuteronomistic History to persons known as the *qedeshîm* (pronounced k<sup>2</sup>-day-'sheem; 1 Kgs 14:21-24; 15:12-14; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7; cf. Job 36:14). The word literally means “consecrated men” but refers in context to male cult figures who sometimes served as the passive receptive sexual partners for other men. The narrator appears to have been especially repulsed by the consensual, receptive intercourse that these figures had with other men. How do we know this? The reference to such figures as “dogs” (Deut 23:18) matches the slur made against parallel figures in Mesopotamia (the *assinnu*, *kurgarrû*, and *kulu'u*), called both “dog-woman” and “man-woman” because of their *consensual* attempts at erasing masculinity and being penetrated by other men (compare Rev 22:15, “dogs,” to Rev 21:8, “the abominable”). It will thus not do to dismiss the references to the *qedeshîm* as irrelevant because of the cultic associations, the exchange of money, or the absence of orientation.<sup>12</sup>

Since the Deuteronomistic Historian’s attitude toward the *qedeshîm* makes it clear that he would have been repulsed by a *consensual* act of man-male intercourse, it is evident that in telling the story of the Levite at Gibeah the Deuteronomistic Historian was indicting man-male intercourse per se and not only coercive forms of man-male intercourse. Since too the story is in many respects a carbon copy of the Sodom narrative, it lends significant support for concluding that the Yahwist too viewed the man-male dimension of the attempted act as a *compounding* factor in underscoring the depravity of the inhabitants of Sodom.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Three additional points are worth noting. First, the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic description of their behavior as an “abomination” (*to'evah*) links these texts ideationally to Lev 18:22 and 20:13, where the same tag is applied absolutely to all man-male intercourse and not limited to intercourse in a cultic context for pay. Second, despite the revulsion with which such figures were held in the ancient Near East, this was still one of the most accepted forms of homosexual practice (not the least), because it was believed that their androgynous demeanor was beyond their control (i.e. due to a goddess figure with androgynous traits). This has links to today’s claim that homosexual attraction is beyond a person’s control. Third, the Deuteronomistic revulsion toward men who feminized themselves to attract male sex partners continued well into the first century A.D. in the disgust Jews felt toward what Paul and others referred to as the *malakoi* (“soft men”) in 1 Cor 6:9.

<sup>13</sup> See further *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 48-49, 100-10.

In sum, *every piece of historical and literary evidence that can be brought forward to assess the attitude of the narrator of the Sodom story toward man-male intercourse per se suggests a sense of abhorrence.* In fact, there appears to be an interconnected ideational nexus in the OT as regards the issue of man-male intercourse, linking the Yahwistic material in the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, the Levitical sex laws, and Ezekiel. These links are picked up also Paul and the authors of Jude and 2 Peter.