

“Screwed Up Scripture” -- a bible study for thinking people

(prepared by Rev Dr Deborah Conrad, for Woodside Church, Flint)

Text #1. Sodom & Gomorrah Genesis 19

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²He said, ‘Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.’ They said, ‘No; we will spend the night in the square.’ ³But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

⁴But 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; ⁵and they called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.’ ⁶Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷and said, ‘I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸Look, 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.’ ⁹But they replied, ‘Stand back!’ And they said, ‘This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.’ Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

¹² Then the men said to Lot, ‘Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. ¹³For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.’ ...

²⁴ Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; ²⁵and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

How we Screw it Up

1. From this passage, anti-gay fundamentalists claimed that the “sin of Sodom” is gay sex, and assigned the word “sodomy” to anal sexual intercourse.
2. We also see in this passage the “scorched earth” response to all things gay. God *clearly* hates gay people and will *clearly* destroy everyone in God’s path when anyone is found engaging in same-gender sexual activity. We should, too.

The Real Story

It is evident – even from a literal reading – that the problem in this passage isn’t loving, same-gender relationships or even casual hook-ups between men. (And there is no female sex going on at all until the hints of rape in v 12.)

The issue is that visitors came to town and the men who lived there wanted to assert power over them, to show them who was in charge. They demanded the visitors be sent outside, where the men could rape them, since the best way to humiliate and overpower was to treat them like women.

Further, they became more angry that Lot protected the men, since Lot himself was a relative newcomer.

And if you really want something to hate about this text, check v8, where Lot offers his young daughters as a distraction for the seething crowd of men intending gang rape. I’m not sure why literalists aren’t taking this part literally.

In scripture, offering hospitality to strangers is a constantly reiterated value. One scholar maintains that the word we translate “hospitality” in English isn’t just having coffee ready if someone drops by, but loving strangers, immigrants and enemies like you would your own brother or sister. You can see why it is easier to hate gay people.

Bottom Line:

It is way easier to blame gay people for God’s anger and our self-destructive world, than to take responsibility for things the prophets and Jesus tell us God cares about: resisting oppression, defying empire, taking care of vulnerable people, including orphans, widows, immigrants, strangers.

Other References

I. Ezekiel 16: in a chapter about Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant and its self-absorption, the prophet says God is pissed.

⁴⁸As I live, says the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. ⁴⁹This 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. ⁵⁰They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.

II. Matthew 10: Jesus sends the disciples on a mission trip, tells them to expect hospitality along the way.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 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.

III. Deut 29: entering the covenant, Moses reminds the people of the consequences of going their own way.

I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the Lord our God, but also with those who are not here with us today. You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. You have seen their detestable things, the filthy idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, that were among them. It may be that there is among you a man or woman, or a family or tribe, whose heart is already turning away from the Lord our God to serve the gods of those nations. It may be that there is among you a root sprouting poisonous and bitter growth. All who hear the words of this oath and bless themselves, thinking in their hearts, 'We are safe even though we go our own stubborn ways' (thus bringing disaster on moist and dry alike)— the Lord will be unwilling to pardon them, for the Lord's anger and passion will smoke against them. All the curses written in this book will descend on them, and the Lord will blot out their names from under heaven. The Lord will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the law. The next generation, your children who rise up after you, as well as the foreigner who comes from a distant country, will see the devastation of that land and the afflictions with which the Lord has afflicted it— all its soil burned out by sulphur and salt, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, unable to support any vegetation, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord destroyed in his fierce anger— they and indeed all the nations will wonder, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?' They will conclude, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt. They turned and served other gods, worshipping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; so the anger of the Lord was kindled against that land, bringing on it every curse written in this book.

IV. Deut 32. A "perverse generation" is one that forgot the covenant and tended to its own gluttonous ways.

A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he; yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and senseless people? ...He set him upon the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field; ... Jacob ate his fill; Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked. You grew fat, bloated, and gorged! He abandoned God who made him, ... God said: I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness. ... They are a nation void of sense; there is no understanding in them. ...Their vine comes from the vine-stock of Sodom, from the vineyards of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters are bitter; their wine is the poison of serpents, the cruel venom of asps.

V. Jude. Perhaps this is where it started. Like anyone else who co-opts a story for his own use, the letter-writer threatens the fate of Sodom for whatever vague "sins" are going on in the community to which he writes.

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, afterwards destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgement of the great day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.