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Applying Biblical Hermeneutics to Important Issues Facing the Church

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Homosexuality and the Bible - Part III

"Homosexuality-neutral" Interpretations and Genesis 19

by Dave James

Many who defend homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle for Christians attempt to do so by reinterpreting passages which have been historically understood to condemn homosexual behavior as being at most "homosexuality-neutral" (my term).

According to an April, 2009 article on MSNBC, a Washington Post/ABC poll released that month became the first to indicate that the number of Americans supporting same-sex marriages (49%) is now greater than those who oppose it (46%).¹ Although the two numbers are within the typical margin-of-error of each other ($\pm 3\%$), there does seem to have been a significant shift in attitudes over the preceding 5-year period, when a Post/ABC poll put the percentage in-favor at just 32% in 2004.

Between 1982 and 2007, Gallup reported a significant shift in attitudes toward the acceptability of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. In 1982, only 34% indicated that homosexuality "is an acceptable alternative lifestyle" with 51% indicating that it is not. However, in 2007 the numbers had more than reversed with 57% of Americans stating it is acceptable and only 40% indicating their belief that it is not.²

On the other hand, one encouraging statistic is that over 80% of evangelicals still oppose gay marriage, with a statistically negligible shift since 2004 (according to a 2008 Pew Research Center poll).³ However, the pressure is on evangelicals because in the mainline churches only 40% oppose same-sex marriage - essentially the same as the Post/ABC poll results for the general population.

The "Homosexuality-Neutral" View of Scripture

Coinciding with the increasing social pressure to accept the homosexual lifestyle, is additional pressure by those who take this a step further by seeking to defend their views on biblical grounds. In most cases, the passages which have been historically understood to condemn homosexual behavior are interpreted as being at most "homosexuality-neutral" (my term). In other words, it is argued that these passages were not intended to address the issue of loving homosexual relationships, but rather inappropriate sexual behavior in general, that in some cases simply happened to involve homosexual acts.

The following quote, from the *ReligiousTolerance.org* website, seems to capture this view of homosexuality in

the Bible as commonly held by the average liberal / progressive Christian.

To many -- not all -- liberal/progressive believers, the Bible is silent on loving, consensual same-sex sexual behavior. God accepts persons of all sexual orientations and approves of sex that is consensual, non-manipulative, safe and within a loving, committed relationship. Liberals and progressive have a range of beliefs concerning save, consensual, and casual sex by heterosexuals, bisexuals or homosexuals.

However the Bible condemns:

- *Male rape of other men.*

- *One of two behaviors:*

- *Either men engaging in ritual sex in Pagan temples, or*

- *Men having sex in a woman's bed.*

- *People having sex that violates their sexual orientation.*

For example:

- *Heterosexuals having sex with a member of the same sex.*

- *Homosexuals having sex with a member of the opposite sex.*

- *Men sexually abusing children. The passage also condemns young victims of sexual molestation.*

- *People engaging in bestiality: having sex with non-humans.⁴*

The Homosexuality-Neutral View and Genesis 19

In dealing with the exegesis of 19:5, the author of an article titled "Bible Abuse Directed at Homosexuals" makes the following argument:

The key verb here, transliterated ya,da (or yadha'), is usually translated as "know." This verb appears

943 times elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, where it generally means “to know a fact” or “to know a person well.” It has an obvious sexual connotation in only ten of these cases, all of which involve heterosexual relationships.

The translation, then, could have the following meanings:

- Gang rape the angels (a common way to humiliate men – especially enemies – at the time);
- Engage in consensual homosexual sex with them (possibly what the NIV translators intended with “have sex with them”);
- Interrogate them. (The city had in the recent past been sacked, and the strangers might have been spies sent to check out the fortifications which provided some protection for the trade routes that passed the city.)

In choosing the proper meaning, consider this. In Biblical times, travel was slow and dangerous, and safe places to rest were few. Travelers could only pray for the hospitality of strangers – an important theme in the Bible. And Jews, having been ill-treated travelers in Egypt, had particular reason to be hospitable, and emphasis on it permeates Jewish law. For many reasons, hospitality, once offered, could not be breached.⁵

Gay Christianity 101 also endorses the inhospitality view:

*For almost 1800 years after the events in Sodom, Jewish prophets in the Bible and Jewish authors outside the Bible, understood this story to be about inhospitality, not homosexuality. Sodom is mentioned 48 times in the Bible and never in those 48 passages is homosexuality given as the cause of God's judgment. Isn't that interesting? Have you given that astounding fact the weight it deserves in your thinking about this true story?*⁶

Some contend that rather than the sin of the Sodomites being homosexuality in general, it was that they intended to homosexually rape the angels (who appeared as men) as a means of humiliating them as their enemies:

Most feel that Genesis 19 is totally unrelated to consensual same-sex behavior.

*It is obvious that Lot wanted to protect the angels from the city mob. The people of Sodom, having recently been under attack by foreigners, might have been worried that the angels were really military spies. Alternately, the mob might have wanted to humiliate the strangers with homosexual rape which is as abhorrent as heterosexual rape.*⁷

Furthermore, concerning Sodom, Gay Christian 101 states what it calls "six surprising facts":

1. Genesis 19 never mentions homosexuals in Sodom.
2. Genesis 19 never mentions a homosexual act being committed in Sodom.
3. Scripture never mentions a same sex relationship in Sodom.
4. Scripture never tells us that the inhabitants of Sodom were homosexuals.
5. Scripture never tells us that God destroyed Sodom because of homosexuality.
6. Sodomite, in scripture, never refers to homosexuals. Every time sodomite is used in scripture, it refers to cult, shrine, temple prostitutes who worshiped the Canaanite fertility goddess.⁸

A Biblical Response

Sodom and Gomorrah are first mentioned in Genesis 10:13, with the second reference in chapter 13:10-13, where the men of these cities are characterized as being "exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord." In other passages in Genesis (7:19; 15:1; 16:10; 17:2, among others) where the Hebrew is translated "exceedingly" by the NKJV the context indicates that the word carries the force of "beyond measure." That the lack of hospitality, even to the point of actual ill-treatment, would be described as "wickedness beyond measure" seems very unlikely.

And while it is true that the author of Hebrews writes, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels" (Hebrews 13:2), it seems immediately apparent that the problem in Sodom was not simply one of not being hospitable. Even if their treatment of strangers went so far as to warrant a rebuke in that Near-Eastern culture, the suggestion that God would have utterly destroyed these cities for this reason just does not seem to merit serious consideration. The Bible consistently portrays such destruction as God's judgment on persistent gross sin—which is usually a combination of sexual sin and idolatry.

The suggestion that the passage could possibly refer to the men of Sodom simply wanting to interrogate the angels just doesn't seem plausible as a cause for inviting God's judgment. For a country on a war-footing, having genuine concerns about the motives of foreigners who just showed up, could hardly have been considered outrageously wicked behavior. Also, there is nothing in the text that indicates there was concern that these foreigners might be spies in the first place. And of course they had made no

initial attempts to hide as seen from the fact that they planned to spend the night in the town square (19:2).

Furthermore, the men of the city threatened to treat Lot worse than they intended to treat these strangers, which is clearly a threat of violence (19:9). But even if the treatment that the strangers would receive as captives under interrogation would have been sufficient to warrant judgment by God, this is ultimately a moot point. God had already determined to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah prior to the angels entering the city.

The passage certainly rules out the possibility that the men of Sodom were hoping for a consensual same-sex encounter with the angels (who were obviously thought to be men). But even though gang-rape is fairly clearly in view, neither was this intended detestable act the reason for their coming destruction. Again, God's stated intent, prior to their arrival, was to wipe out the entire society - because of a lifestyle so wicked and so prevalent that fewer than even ten decent people could be found.

Sodom and Gomorrah were apparently Canaanite - a culture known to be one of the most morally reprehensible in history. The Canaanite fertility cult involved both heterosexual and homosexual encounters with male and female shrine prostitutes. With this in mind, consider this question: Is it reasonable to think that the "beyond-measure" wickedness of these cities could have somehow excluded sexual debauchery as at least a significant part of the basis for their annihilation?

Additionally, the overall flow of the narrative seems to suggest a direct connection between the incident with the angels and Sodom's societal wickedness. What they were demanding was not something new to them. And certainly it must be asked if such an utterly wicked warfare tactic like gang-rape could even be considered if sexual debauchery were not already characteristic of the entire culture. And, as we know, all the men of the city came out and surrounded Lot's house.

At this point, it could be argued that we're still not talking about loving, monogamous same-sex relationships - but about a culture that was characterized by adulterous relationships, both hetero- and homosexual. However, I think there is one more element of the story that specifically pinpoints homosexual behavior itself as the ultimate trigger for the execution of God's wrath (independent of whether or not it was occurring in a "loving, monogamous" relationship).

The inescapable problem with the homosexuality-neutral view of Genesis 19 involves Lot's daughters. No one on either side of the debate would defend rape of any kind as morally acceptable. So, whether the rape would be against Lot's daughters or against the

angels (again, who were thought to be men) is another moot point in and of itself.

This means that there had to be some incredibly significant reason why Lot would be willing to allow even his own daughters to be brutally raped by an out-of-control mob rather than turn over the two angels to them. (And nothing indicates that Lot had any reason to think his guests were not men.)

So, what was this additional factor that struck terror in Lot's heart as he contemplated this no-win situation? Could it be that Lot so clearly understood that homosexuality is such a detestable abomination in the Lord's sight that he was unwilling to allow the sin of a homosexual encounter to be added to the sin of rape?

Earlier it was noted that not even ten righteous people were to be found in Sodom. But the obvious implication is that there was not a single person in Sodom who was not guilty of whatever specific sin (or category of sin) was in view. Given the overall wickedness of the Canaanite culture - which even included child sacrifice - what could have been the unique sin of Sodom and Gomorrah among all of the Canaanite cities?

And there is yet another factor that hasn't yet been noted concerning Genesis 13:13 ("But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord.") The word translated "men" does not simply mean "people" in the generic sense - it literally means "men," i.e., "the males of Sodom."

So, it appears that the "exceedingly" wicked sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was uniquely committed by the men of those cities - and it involved all of the men. As bad as it would have been for the men to gang-rape their enemies, or worship their gods through encounters with male shrine prostitutes - the overall situation was worse than that. The society was dominated by male homosexuality. And the seriousness of this situation brought the complete destruction and utter desolation of those cities as God hurled fire and brimstone - annihilating every man, woman and child - and everything that had life. Only the judgment of the Flood exceeded the judgment that God brought upon Sodom and Gomorrah on that day.

In the next article in this series, we will examine other passages to see if the biblical record as a whole supports the view that homosexual behavior was the sin that incurred God's wrath in Genesis 19.

(Endnotes on next page)

1. http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2009/04/30/4436216-poll-shows-support-for-gay-marriage
2. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/108115/Americans-Evenly-Divided-Morality-Homosexuality.aspx>
3. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/868/gay-marriage>
4. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/homglance.htm>
5. <http://stjohnsmcc.org/new/BibleAbuse/Genesis.php>
6. <http://www.gaychristian101.com/Sodom.html>
7. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/hombibg191.htm>
8. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/hombibg191.htm>