**An interpretive perspective on the meaning of the offenses of the men**

**from Sodom and Gomorrah**

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May 9th, 2020

One of our members had contact with a local Imam who had previously visited Saint Matthew who asked her about our position on the interpretation of the Sodom and Gomorrah, especially the role of Lot. He asked if one of our priests could answer. I thought I would post this on our Bible Study page for others who may be interested.

There are certain aspects of interpreting scripture which we share with our Islamic brothers and sisters. I am in awe that they recite the Koran in Arabic, its original language, and they are less trusting of English or other translations. Without a doubt, there is much that is lost and a much higher risk of mistranslation and missed meaning when moving from one language to another, especially when the languages are ancient, such as Hebrew and Aramaic, in which our Hebrew Bible manuscripts were written. Even when the meaning of some words seems to be known, they still may have been interpreted differently at the time the stories were written down. Even in the Greek of the New Testament, there are some words that had a much different meaning at the time the books were written. I think we share with our Islamic brothers and sisters a strong desire to understand what our sacred texts meant to those who wrote them.

I cannot answer officially as a priest of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion [ECC] or Saint Matthew ECC Church. I am sure that my fellow priests may have some different or additional comments about this issue, but we do stand together in agreement in the ECC that gay people living in committed, faithful relationships are not viewed as wrong or living sinfully: we hold the same sexual standard for monogamy in both gay and straight relationships – we honor those who choose a covenant with one person.

As to the scriptural interpretation, here is a brief synopsis of my own studies. Genesis Chapter 19 begins with an account of how sinful Sodom and Gomorrah were. The story unfolds that two angels, posing as men, were visitors when men in the town threatened violence to them – an attempted gang rape – in stark contrast to the Near Eastern standards of hospitality toward travelers and strangers. Lot offers them his virgin daughters instead, which demonstrates how strong the expectation of hospitality was. Lot later is repaid for this when the daughters get him drunk and have children by him. Wanting to dominate and abuse male strangers was considered a greater violation because humiliating men in this way was what one usually did to women. Violence in the form of homosexual rape was the worst thing you could do to another man.

There are numerous references to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah throughout the Hebrew Bible. Their names became symbolic of depravity. David Gushee (2015), in his book, Changing our Mind, notes: “But never once in… intra-biblical references to Sodom is their evil described as same-sex interest or behavior.” He details interpretations of their evil from other biblical books, and a host of sins are mentioned, e.g. abuses of public justice, adultery, lying and unwillingness to repent, pride, excess food and failure to care for the poor, mocking or oppressing the poor. There is a parallel story in Judges 19, and both of these accounts have important implications for the ethics of gender, violence, rape, prison, and war. But as Dr. Gushee states, “…they have nothing to do with the morality of loving, covenantal same-sex relationships.”

Our Bible Study friend, Dr. Renato Lings, a Hebrew Bible scholar presently living in Spain, has written the most effective and comprehensive research study of homosexuality and the Bible that I have read. We were so fortunate that he visited us and taught at Saint Matthew a few years ago and he stayed here at St. Junia’s House. I have asked him for permission to post a brief handout he provided at a conference in 2017 that nicely overviews the interpretive issues. But if you have a burning interest in this topic, you can obtain his book from Amazon or get the Kindle version very inexpensively: Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible (2013). The two chapters 7 and 8 are the most relevant.

He says that the names referring to Sodom show up some 20 times in the Hebrew Bible and when they appear, it refers to one of four categories of topics: (1) destruction, desolation, ruins; (2) selfishness and arrogance; (3) idolatry and apostasy; (4) social injustice, violence and oppression. Twenty times seems to me to give us a good baseline as to how the ancient prophets viewed the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Dr. Lings goes through each of the instances mentioned and this is most impressive to me as far as how the text should be interpreted because it relies on how it was interpreted across the times in which the Hebrew Bible was written – not later projections or anachronistic interpretations. He says that all of these texts likely appeared in oral or written form sometime prior to the year 500 BCE and that the writers of the prophetic books were in a privileged position for interpreting this drama about Sodom.

Today’s scholarly interpretations in contrast have emphasized sexual violence. Renato Lings patiently sorts through the prophets, Isaiah and Ezekiel, for their witness as to the meaning of Sodom in its own time. Isaiah [1:10-17, Lings’ Table 38]. likens the rulers of Sodom to the corrupt governing establishment in Jerusalem. Ezekiel [chapter 16:46-50] uses Sodom as a metaphor for evil in Samaria and Jerusalem, using the word ‘abomination’ which in prophetic language refers to both cities as being idolatrous: “This was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, excess of food, and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abomination before me; therefore, I removed them, as you have seen [v. 49-50].” As Dr. Lings says, “…notions of homoeroticism are not included in the prophetic interpretations of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Lings then traces how interpretations evolved as the Classical Hebrew was abandoned following the Babylonian exile [587-538 BCE] replaced with Late Hebrew, which came under the influence of Aramaic, and then there was the rise of Greek as a literary language. He patiently goes through the interpretations that unfolded in the Apocrypha where lack of hospitality to vulnerable persons, refusing to receive strangers and making slaves of them, where again discussions of Sodom have nothing to do with sexuality, heterosexual or homoerotic. Dr. Lings also traces the use of Sodom in the New Testament, particularly with the variations in English translations that turn up. Lot is referred to as an immigrant with marginalized status in Sodom where he lived before leaving. There are a few comments reflecting a negative attitude toward his descendants but he is depicted as detached from material possessions he left behind in Sodom in contrast to his wife, who turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back toward her comfortable life.

Please read more comprehensive research from reliable and credible sources to understand the sacred Hebrew texts which deserve to be understood as well as possible in their own world and not misused in ours. I would be very interested to learn how Islamic scholars interpret these scriptures.