INTERPRETING THE STORY OF

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

A brief summary of five chapters of the book

**Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible**

By K. Renato Lings (Trafford Publishing, 2013)

**7. SODOM IN THE BIBLE**

By far the most important text in the Bible in relation to the history of persecution of same-sex relationships is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The reception history may be divided into four paradigms A, B, C, and D. Paradigm A is found in the prophetic writings, where the name of Sodom is used as a metaphor for idolatry, political corruption and shocking social injustice. Examples are Isaiah 1 and Ezekiel 16. In general terms, Sodom signifies a society on a collision course with the commandments of YHWH, God of Israel. Within paradigm A, the victims of the transgressions of the city are found among oppressed inhabitants or sojourners.

In Hellenistic times, the focus changes from oppressed inhabitants to visitors who are assaulted or molested (paradigm B). This is evident in the *Book of Wisdom* (*Wisdom of Solomon*) and the four gospels. Many Hellenistic writers depict the sin of Sodom as inhospitality. Beginning in the first century BCE, paradigm C appears on the scene. It focuses on “problematic sexual relationships”. Particularly, it is indebted to the pseudepigrapha. For instance, the letter of Jude suggests that the inhabitants of Sodom were “promiscuous” and violated the boundary between the divine and human spheres as they felt tempted by “other flesh”, which is an allusion to celestial beings. The Second Letter of Peter comments on the “dissolute” lives led by licentious people.

Historically speaking, paradigms B and C jointly form the early basis of later Christian perceptions of Sodom and Gomorrah. Over time, the original paradigm A disappears or is mostly ignored.

**8. SODOM YESTERDAY**

The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (1st century BCE) became decisive for Christian perceptions of the drama of Sodom and Gomorrah. Philo used the Septuagint and took the story in Genesis to be an indictment of pederasty. The church fathers developed Philo’s views further, adopting a wholesale rejection of homoerotic relationships. This specific twist on paradigm C may be called paradigm D. During the Middle Ages, human sexuality came to be regarded as a driving force to ensure procreation. All other kinds of sexual pleasure were classified as sinful or “unnatural”. In the eleventh century the Bible was read in Latin. The Italian monk Peter Damian coined a new term “sodomy”, which specifically referred to sex between men. As from the thirteenth century, “sodomy” included sexual relationships between women.

The Protestant Reformation abandoned a large part of the Catholic heritage, particularly by emphasizing the principle of *sola scriptura*. However, the medieval definition of sodomy as a deadly sin was accepted unexamined. Thus, paradigm D has lived on for centuries and to this day the term sodomy exists in the penal codes of numerous countries. Only during the second half of the twentieth century the concept has been challenged by the new word “homosexuality”, which came into existence in the late nineteenth century.

**9. SODOM TODAY**

The hermeneutical uniformity in Christian approaches to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is now a thing of the past. Paradigm D still exists but occurs in two variants. In one variant Sodom is presented as a hotbed of vice in the form of “homosexuality”. In the other many exegetes are pointing out that the biblical story says nothing about intimate relationships between two persons of the same sex. The latter scholars describe the problem of Sodom as attempted gang rape. Among today’s commentators, Lot has many detractors and few defenders. Most regard him as a hopeless, immoral father.

Several queer theologians define the destruction of Sodom as genocide, pointing out that this crime clashes with the image of a deity of justice. Postcolonial exegetes draw attention to the fact that all biblical texts, including Sodom and Gomorrah, were written for a purpose. Given that Sodom was founded by Canaanites, the story may be viewed as part of a lengthy, literary polemic against the native population of the land of Canaan. Furthermore, a few scholars argue that the popular sexual interpretation of the story overlooks several ambiguities in the Hebrew text. One example is the key word *yadaħ*. Until very recently, the legal aspects of this essential verb have been ignored, despite the fact that the language of the Sodom narrative bristles with legal concerns and phraseology.

**10. TRANSLATING SODOM**

In Genesis 19 the populace assembling outside Lot’s house is described in detail regarding age groups and social status. Yet many translators focus exclusively on age. In the final passage the verb *shakhav* (“lie down”) carries the sexual action throughout the incestuous intermezzo between Lot and his daughters. At the same time, the two occurrences of *yadaħ* are negated. Viewed in context, *yadaħ* is clearly a non-sexual verb. The literary style of the Hebrew prose reflects the pen of a sophisticated, skilful narrator capable of telling a dramatic story with a minimum of linguistic effects, including at the culminating moments of narrative tension.

In the Hebrew text, *yadaħ* is the cornerstone in the story’s structure, occurring twice at the beginning, twice in the middle, and twice towards the end. In this manner, the three incidents become connected thematically and stylistically. The popular sexual interpretation of the story of Sodom (paradigm D) exclusively focuses on *yadaħ* in Gen. 19:5 and 19:8, ignoring the other four occurrences at 18:19,21 and 19:33,35. This flawed approach leads to stylistic inconsistencies in many English versions of the Bible as they tend to render *yadaħ* with a different English term in each case. Some translators use as many as five different renderings of this verb whereby the structural coherence of the original text is lost. There are precedents in the Septuagint and the Vulgate, and Martin Luther’s German translation follows the pattern set by the Vulgate. In Greek and Latin prose, the relevant verbs for “knowing” sometimes have sexual connotations. Most Christian translators inappropriately take the same view of Hebrew *yadaħ*.

**11. THE VICTIM OF SODOM**

Lot the foreigner and his family are victims of the injustice committed in Sodom. Lot’s life differs radically from that of his uncle Abraham. While the latter is blessed, Lot suffers gradual decline from the moment he chooses to settle in Sodom. His fate may be interpreted as a warning to those Israelites who abandon the way of YHWH. Lot marries a local woman with whom he fathers two daughters, but no sons. He never achieves full integration. The moment he offers overnight hospitality to two wayfaring strangers, a conflict erupts between him and the townsmen who demand the travellers to be handed over for interrogation (*yadaħ*). Lot rejects their request but, given his low social status, he is aware that he must necessarily muster a token of his loyalty. Therefore, he suggests a compromise. If they will let him perform his hosting duties, Lot is willing to hand over his two unmarried children as a pledge. This situation mirrors the social status of women and children in antiquity and their concomitant vulnerable condition as bargaining chips.

As previously mentioned, the legal aspects of this text are remarkable. A significant element is the noun *zaħaqah* (“complaint”, “outcry”). The three occurrences of *zaħaqah* resonate with Exodus 22 where the Israelites are sternly warned against mistreating foreigners. A major translation mistake occurs in Gen. 19:9 with respect to the two occurrences of the Hebrew verb *nagash* (“come forward” or “draw near”, e.g. appear before a judge). In one case the verb is rendered correctly (“move forward”, 19:9b) but, surprisingly, in the other position most translators change the meaning completely (“stand back” or “get out of the way”, 19:9a). This major translation error can be traced all the way back to the Vulgate and the Septuagint.