Genesis 19:1-11 (The story of Sodom and Gomorrah)

Genesis 19:1-11
Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. And he said, "Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way." They said however, "No, but we shall spend the night in the square." Yet he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he prepared a feast for them, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them."
But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, "Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. "Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof."
But they said, "Stand aside." Furthermore, they said, "This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them." So they pressed hard against Lot and came near to break the door. But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. They struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway. ? Ge 19:1-11

The Traditional Interpretation

So, the story goes that there were two angels in men costumes who stayed with Lot for the night (because it wasn't safe to stay in the city square) and at some point a mob of homosexuals came beating at Lot's door demanding that he hand over the handsome guests so they could have a homosexual orgy with the visitors. Subsequently, God destroyed them for being homosexual and seeking out other men for sex. Sodomy refers primarily anal sex, then anything traditionally considered "unnatural" sex including oral sex and bestiality.

This story line has been taught for so long that it is rarely questioned and has even impacted our culture today. After all, there is no doubt that the mob at Lot's door wanted to engage in sexual activities with the angel-men. We even have words derived specifically from this interpretation. The actions that are believed to have been portrayed are referred to as sodomy. People who engage in such activities are known as sodomites. Sodomy laws are still in force in many areas of the United States. All of these terms owe their origins to the traditional interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Problems with the Interpretation

Just because something has been the traditional interpretation does not make it the correct interpretation. Even a cursory examination of the text would reveal significant issues with the belief that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because they were filled with homosexual men. In addition, personal experience, modern understanding of human sexuality and behavior along with a little common sense all illuminate the fact that these were not homosexual men. Just because something has been the traditional interpretation does not make it the correct interpretation.

Our first problem comes with Genesis 19:4, where the passage states, "the men of the city, the men of Sodom,...both young and old, all the people from every quarter." Are we really to believe that the entire city of Sodom was made up of homosexuals except for Lot and his family? In a day and age, where communication was limited, where there was no media, no mass marketing, is it really likely that this many homosexuals found their way to this one place? Even today, where large cities are known as places for homosexuals to live in large communities, we know that they are not entirely populated by homosexuals. Obviously, this interpretation is highly unlikely. We would be left to conclude that these were not all homosexuals.
The second problem with the traditional interpretation presents itself in Genesis 19:8. Here, Lot confronts the men at his door and begs them not to behave so wickedly. He then offers to give them his two virgin daughters! Now, I have to point out that this does not seem to be a very righteous act on Lot's part. But, I'll save that subject for a later lesson. Now, here's the problem. If the men at Lot's door were homosexuals, and the sin for which they were destroyed was homosexuality, why then would Lot think that they would be the least bit tempted by the offer of two virgin girls?! They would have to be the worst gay men we have ever known! Obviously Lot, did not think that the men he knew and lived among were homosexuals. He knew they liked women and enjoyed the company of women. Otherwise, he would not have offered his daughters. Again, we are left to conclude that these are not homosexuals. At some point, then we would have to ask, "why then were they destroyed?" If their sin was homosexuality, yet they were not homosexuals, what was the real reason they were destroyed. Obviously Lot, did not think that the men he knew and lived among were homosexuals.

Some may point out that even though they were not homosexuals, they committed homosexual acts and that's what brought God's wrath down on the city. Unfortunately, however, we do not have any record that these men committed any homosexual acts against the angel men or with one another. It doesn't even take a careful reading of the story to see that the mob was struck with blindness and no one was harmed (Genesis 19:10-11). So, were they destroyed for trying to commit homosexual acts? Or, maybe this was just indicative of what they did on a regular basis? For some reason, we are taught the idea that the men of Sodom passed their days in sexual orgies with one another. There is no reason, based upon the Scriptural record, to think that this was the case. A final problem in the immediate context that I see comes in Genesis 19:9. The men respond to the offer of Lot's virgin daughters by citing the fact that Lot himself is an outsider and threatening, "we will treat you worse than them." Now, I ask, what could be worse, what could be more humiliating for a righteous, godly straight man than being subjected to forcible sex by an angry mob of so-called homosexuals? Seems to me that their threat hints at something more sinister even than gang rape. Could this be the case? Is there any evidence that this event was about something more than sex?

Cultural and Biblical Context

To find the answer to our question, we will turn to cultural context. Oddly enough, we will also discover the cultural context through Biblical context. In this case, it is the Biblical context of a little known, seldom mentioned story that is so similar to the Sodom story you would think they were one and the same...except the ending. This is the story of another city, a city called Gibeah. We discover this city in Judges 19. If we were to apply the same rationale from the interpretation of Sodom to Gibeah, we would find the story of another supposed gay city-made up almost entirely of homosexuals. Could it be? Is it likely that there was not only one but two cities in the Bible that were made up of all of these gay men who magically found themselves living in the same city? Again, it's highly unlikely.

The story is that a man, a Levite, took a concubine. In many ways, she was considered his wife—he is referred to later as her husband. But again, that's another story. Anyway, she leaves him for four months and then he goes to get her and bring her home. On the way home, as he is traveling with his servant and concubine, they stay on the road late in order to get to a Jewish (that's important here) city where they would be safe (as Jews) to spend the night, as opposed to staying the night in a foreign city. When they arrive in the city, it is well after dark and they are going to make camp in the safety of the city square of this Jewish city filled with good, godly Jewish men. After a time, an old man comes through the square and hears their story. He then explains that it is not safe to stay in the square and begs the Levite, his servant and the concubine to come stay in his house. After a lot of back and forth, they finally agree. At this point, the story reads almost exactly like the Sodom story. During the night a mob of men of the city come beating at the door of the old men demanding that he hand over the two men so that they could have sex with them. The old man refuses, of course and begs his fellow citizens not to act so wickedly. They are persistent. So the old man offers up his virgin daughter and the concubine (oddly enough, she is not his to offer), so that they can do whatever they wish to the women and leave the men alone. Just as the men in Sodom, these men insist on having the men. Once again, we encounter the same issues as those we found in Sodom. Could all of these homosexuals have found themselves living in the same city? If they were homosexuals, why would the old man think that they would be satisfied by having two women instead of two men? The answers are the same. It is highly unlikely that these were homosexuals. It is highly unlikely that these were homosexuals.

Here is where the story changes! The old man forcibly grabs the concubine (not his daughter) and shoves the woman out the door into the angry mob. Now, what do you expect happens? Of course, if this is a sexually frenzied mob of homosexual men set on
getting their hands on some fresh meat (as we are led to believe from our traditional interpretation of Sodom), you're expecting the men to be appalled and to refuse the woman. Throw her back! But that is not the case. The men take the woman and "they raped her and abused her all night until morning, then let her go at the approach of dawn" (Judges 19:25). For the purposes of our story, we are going to stop there, but I encourage to read it to the end at another time!

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There are many questions now that arise out of our traditional interpretation of Sodom. If these were homosexual men and God destroys cities of homosexual men who engage in orgastic sex with each other, why then, was this city not destroyed? After all, according to those who hold to the traditional interpretation, that is God's pattern of behavior and it is what we are to expect will happen to homosexual men. Except, Gibeah is not destroyed. As a matter of fact, Saul, the first King of Israel, is from Gibeah (1 Sam. 9:1; 10:26). So, even if the issue did have to deal with homosexual men (which certainly was not the case!), perhaps God doesn't strike all homosexual men dead for being homosexual or for performing homosexual acts. Of course, some could attempt to argue that the men of Gibeah were spared because they accepted the woman that was offered. I'm certain that we all see how sickening that argument is. It is doubtful that God is any less disgusted by a violent gang rape because the victim was a female instead of a male. Besides, we already noted that the men of Sodom didn't have sex with anyone at all that night.

If sex, with men, was the primary goal of both the men in Sodom and Gibeah, why would Lot offer them his daughters and why would the men of Gibeah take the concubine and not only have sex with her but abuse her to the point of death. This was not simply sex. It was certainly not a consensual act between two adults. There was violence at play here. From the textual clues, violence, control, and power were more consistent with the motives of these men than that of sex (with a man or a woman). Consider the warning of the men to Lot; "we will treat you worse than them." (Genesis 19:9) The actions of the men in Gibeah certainly displayed violence more than anything.

Obviously, the actions of the men of Sodom were not unique. We have two stories that are almost identical in the events they portray. Yet, no one mentions Gibeah when discussing homosexuality. Could it be that it is obvious that homosexuality was not at play in Gibeah? Could it be that Gibeah reveals a problem that is much more abhorrent to God than two men engaging in a consensual sexual relationship? Was there some other cultural context revealed by both Gibeah and Sodom? Male sexual violence is, then, all about notions of power and dominance. Power and dominance are linked with masculinity...read more...

The answer to these questions is, "YES!", there most certainly is more to the story than homosexual relationships or identity. They reveal a practice documented outside of the Bible through many ages and in many different cultures. It is the practice of exerting power, control and dominance over another person by sexual assault. It has nothing to do with love or relationship. As a matter of fact, this behavior is specifically known to have been commonly used by men in positions of power over other men in order to establish their dominance and control. It was a way to shame those defeated in war and to humiliate those who were considered a threat. We are talking about hatred, abuse, murder, and gang rape. I would hope that we would all agree that God is disgusted by such behaviors regardless of the gender of the perpetrator or the victim.

You can read more about male on male rape and see sources cited on Wikipedia.

Some of the most commonly documented cases of male-on-male gang rape occurred in the context of war and in prisons. Roman law recognized the issue and even addressed it to make sure that men were protected. Such occurrences are not limited to ancient history. They are still with us today in war torn areas and in our prisons. We may not talk about it. We may like to pretend it doesn't exist. But it is there. Perhaps this is the dark secret of Sodom and Gibeah?

Scriptural Commentary

We can see now that there is a more likely explanation of what happened in Sodom than the traditional interpretation claims. Still, is there some other commentary in Scripture that attests to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the reasons behind it? Surely, if such a drastic act were taken for the clear reason of homosexuality, commentary in Scripture would bear that out. Repeatedly, Sodom and Gomorrah are used as examples of what happens to wicked cities that refuse to repent and follow God. Are we to believe that there was such a rampant problem with homosexuality in ancient times, that God needed to make an example? Or, again, was there something else at work here? We need to know what the Bible says, one way or the other. Three verses answer our question.
"Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it." ? Ezekiel 16:49-50

**Abomination**: noun
1. anything abominable; anything greatly disliked or abhorred.
2. intense aversion or loathing; detestation:
3. a vile, shameful, or detestable action, condition, habit, etc.
dictionary.com

According to this passage from Ezekiel, the guilt of Sodom had more to do with arrogance and a failure to help those in need. Instead of helping those in need (say, strangers passing through and needing a safe place to stay at night), they would abuse, injure and rape them. I would say that such actions certainly qualify as "abominations" or detestable acts before God. Some might say that the word "abominations" refers specifically to homosexual acts. Unfortunately, that would not be consistent with the meaning of the word in the original language or in English. The word was much more general and was used throughout the Bible to reference people, places, acts events or things. In addition, if Ezekiel meant to say specifically that Sodom was destroyed because of men having sex with men, he certainly didn't come close! He said everything but that.

"...and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds),..."-2 Peter 2:6-8

Peter only alludes to the issues of what was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah. He uses the phrase "the sensual conduct of unprincipled men." While it would be quick and easy to simply say that "sensual conduct" is homosexuality, that would impose a specific definition on a general term with a much wider use. The Greek word that is translated "sensual" is explained by one source in this way, "behavior completely lacking in moral restraint, usually with the implication of sexual licentiousness??licentious behavior, extreme immorality... In some languages the equivalent of 'licentious behavior' would be 'to live like a dog' or 'to act like a goat' or 'to be a rooster,' in each instance pertaining to promiscuous sexual behavior." Obviously, this is an accurate description of what happened at Sodom but does not specifically or exclusively reference homosexuality. It could equally describe behavior between straight people as well as homosexuals.

"...just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." -Jude 7

Our final Scripture commentary comes from Jude. Again, we see very general terms related to sexual behavior. We don't see a specific mention of homosexuality. Could that be included? Absolutely. However, given all that we have looked at and discovered about the behavior of the people of Sodom, these were straight men, not homosexuals, who were attempting to gang rape other men. They were attempting to use sex to violently, brutally exert power and control. That certainly seems to qualify as immoral and unnatural. Such people and their behaviors would definitely be fit for making an example of; regardless of whether the acts involved people of the same gender or not.

Conclusion

The men of Sodom (and Gibeah) were not homosexuals. Homosexuality is never specifically mentioned as the reason for Sodom's destruction. The terms that are thought to refer to homosexuality are general and could include homosexual and heterosexual behavior. The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were sensuality, gang rape, greed, pride, and failure to help those in need. These conclusions are consistent with the Bible story, the Bible context and the cultural context of the times.