

ANGELS UNAWARES Sodom and Gomorrah revisited

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. **Hebrews 13:2 (NASB)***

Reference passages: **Genesis 13:1-14:24; 18:16-19:29**

INTRODUCTION

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is probably the most cited Biblical reference used to condemn homosexuality. Based on the interpretation of a single word, the denizens of Sodom have become inextricably associated with homosexuality. But is the connection as clear-cut as it seems? In the pages that follow, we will explore the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as it is found in Scripture, examining several key points along the way:

- The Sodomites, descendants of Ham, are introduced in Genesis as being evil. As part of Noah's curse upon Ham's descendants, the Sodomites were subjugated to descendants of Shem.
- Abraham, a descendant of Shem, freed the Sodomites from their bondage, but the Sodomites did not turn from their wicked ways.
- Well before the incident recorded in chapters 18-19 of Genesis, God had already decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.
- The phrase "to know in the Biblical sense" gets a lot of mileage in our culture, but has very little backing in the actual Scriptures.
- As far back as the third century BCE Jewish scholars did not link the Sodomites' demands "to know" Lot's guests with a request for sexual contact.
- A parallel passage in the book of Judges sheds light on how the Jews understood the intent of the mob in Genesis as humiliation, rape, and murder.
- Many reasons are listed in the Bible for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Homosexuality is not one of them.

SCRIPTURAL OVERVIEW

Abram and Sarai are well known to many in our modern day, though most of the time we prefer to call them by the names that God gave them when he made covenant with them – Abraham and Sarah. In **Genesis 12**, God calls Abram to leave his homeland of Ur in Mesopotamia. He undertakes a journey with Sarai and his nephew, Lot, to claim the land that God has promised will belong to Abram and his descendants in the years to come.

After a short stop in Egypt, Abram and Sarai travel with Lot to Negev. Both Abram and Lot are blessed with much livestock, and it doesn't take long before an argument over pastureland ensues between their herdsman. To end the conflict, Abram

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graciously allows Lot to take his choice of the lands before them. Lot chooses the plain of the Jordan and pitches his tent near the city of Sodom, which the Bible tells us was the home of wicked people.

Meanwhile, a line of Babylonian kings has ruled over the Sinaitic peninsula, Syria, and Palestine. Under the leadership of Chedorlaomer of Elam, these kings launch a campaign and take the area that includes Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain. However, after a 12-year period, the kings of the plain rebel and regain their independence.

In the fourteenth year, Chedorlaomer allies himself with several other kings and wages war to retake the land. Battle lines are drawn in the valley of Siddim, where natural bitumen tar pits cover the landscape. When the battle goes poorly, the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flee, losing some of their soldiers in the pits. The rest run for cover in the nearby hills. Chedorlaomer and his allies despoil the stores of the fleeing armies and return home, carrying off Lot and all of his holdings in the process.

An escaped witness of the battle makes his way to the territory where Abram has settled and alerts him to Lot's abduction. Summoning his trained forces, Abram pursues the abductors. In a surprise attack by night, Abram successfully routs Chedorlaomer's forces, frees Lot and the other captives, and reclaims all of the stolen booty.

The king of Sodom, and Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of *El Alyon* (the most high god), meet Abram in the King's Valley as he returns. Melchizedek supplies Abram's troops with food and wine and then blesses Abram in the name of *El Alyon*. Abram, in his turn, gives a tenth of all that he has to Melchizedek. The king of Sodom suggests a division of the spoils that would give him the recovered people, while Abram would take the material goods. But Abram refuses to take for himself any portion of what he had rescued, requesting only just rewards for the men who had helped him. Abram has sworn an oath to *Yahweh*, *El Alyon* (the LORD¹, the most high God) that he will take nothing from the king of Sodom – not even a sandal strap – lest the king be able to boast that he is in some way responsible for Abram's prosperity.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SHOE LATCHET (*na'al*)

The economy of words in the Torah creates an interesting tale in which every word or phrase brings new layers of meaning to the story. There are no extra words, no details that do not point to some larger context. The same is true of Abram's refusal of reward from the king of Sodom, down to a shoe latchet or sandal thong.

The Torah was written *after* the children of Israel had spent time in captivity in Egypt. They were thoroughly familiar with the customs and religion of the Egyptians and understood that the *ankh*, which appears to have been the symbol for a sandal strap, was the Egyptian symbol of life, used in hieroglyphic symbols such as health and happiness.

¹ It is customary in English-language translations of the Hebrew Scriptures to use LORD in all capital letters to indicate an occurrence of the tetragrammaton, or the four Hebrew letters YHWH or JHVH used to denote the name of God, Yahweh or Jehovah.

Tradition holds that the loop on the *ankh* represents the female reproductive organ, while the cross bar and bottom piece represent the male reproductive organ. The conjoining of the two produces new life.

By refusing to take so much as a sandal strap in reward for his defeat of Chedorlaomer, Abram not only indicates how serious he is about taking nothing. The author of the account is also able to make a subtle polemic against the imagery of the rival Egyptian religion.

Abram's testimony to the *Yahweh, El Alyon* would seem a powerful witness of his faith in the awesome power of God, but the king returns to Sodom unmoved, Lot relocates to a home within Sodom's city wall, and the wickedness of the cities of the plain continues.

THE PLAYERS

Previously we have established that the Sodomites were descendants of Ham and his son, Canaan. As such, they fell under the same curse that Noah spoke over all of Canaan's descendants. But who are the rest of the characters in the story that unfolds in Genesis 13 and 14?

Genesis 10:22 tells us that Shem's sons were:

<i>Elam</i>	the "highlander," and father of the <i>Elamites</i>
Asshur	the father of the Assyrians
<i>Arphaxad</i>	the father of the line that gave rise to <i>Abraham</i>
Lud	the father of the Lydians
Aram	the father of the Syrians

While the genealogy gives us much information regarding the origins of the earth's various nations, the emphasized names above are of particular importance to our current discussion.

Genesis 14:1, 2 lays out the sides of the coming conflict:

The Shemite Kings	The Canaanite Kings
King Chedorlaomer of <i>Elam</i>	King Bera of <i>Sodom</i>
King Amraphel of Shinar	King Birsha of <i>Gomorrah</i>
King Arioch of Ellasar	King Shinab of <i>Admah</i>
King Tidal of Goiim	King Shemeber of <i>Zeboiim</i>
	An unnamed king of Bela (Zoar)

The conquering of the Canaanite kings by the Shemite Chedorlaomer is a fulfillment of Noah's original curse on Canaan and his descendants. But Abram, also a descendant of Shem, is able to defeat Chedorlaomer and his allies, indicating his preeminent status as Shem's heir and recipient of Noah's blessing.

Abram shows mercy to Bera and the others by freeing the captives and returning the stolen property. He testifies to the power of Yahweh, who he credits as the ultimate source of his blessing. But the king of Sodom is not swayed and returns home. **It is Bera's rejection of God that ultimately triggers the divine verdict of destruction for the cities of the plain.**

Skipping forward to the middle of **Genesis 18**, God, in the company of a pair of angels, comes to Abraham and Sarah (whose names were changed by God in chapter 17). At the end of their conversation, God tells Abraham that he intends to destroy Sodom. Abraham pleads on behalf of the city, bargaining with God until God agrees that if there are at least ten righteous inhabitants of Sodom, he will not destroy the city. Alas, there are not ten righteous citizens of Sodom and the city is slated for destruction by fire and brimstone (sulfur).

A pair of angels enters the city to retrieve Lot and his family. However, before the family and angels can make their departure, Lot's house is surrounded by a mob of Sodomites who demand that the visitors be turned over to them:

*And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, "where are the men, which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them." **Genesis 19:5** (emphasis added)*

In desperation, Lot begs the Sodomites not to harm his guests. Instead, he offers up his two virgin daughters to use as they see fit if only they will leave the angels alone. The mob, not impressed with Lot's offer, turns on him. The angels reach out the door and pull Lot back inside, as the unruly crowd presses in on him. Then the angels strike the crowd blind, rendering them unable to find the door.

In the confusion that ensues, Lot escapes with his daughters and wife from Sodom as sulfur rains down on the plain and destroys both Sodom and its neighbor, Gomorrah. The story ends with Lot's wife turning to a pillar of salt when she cannot resist looking back on the evil city, while Lot and his daughters escape to Zoar.

A NOTE ON THE HISTORICAL MELCHIZEDEK²

In order to understand the full import of Genesis 14 and Abram's oath to Yahweh, **the** most high God, we must address some misunderstandings generated by a lack of contextual knowledge of the history and culture of the Canaanites among whom Abram lived.

Many have believed over the ages that Melchizedek, priest-king of the city-state of Salem (from *Shalem*, Canaanite god of peace), was a priest of God and that he lived in Jerusalem. Even the KJV translators apparently thought so as they capitalized the g in *most high God* in their translation of **Genesis 14:18**.

It is very likely that the Salem spoken of in the Scripture is the city which David would take many years later, which became Jerusalem – God's holy city and the capital of Judah. However, in this time period, Canaan is still held by various Semitic tribes and Abram's children do not yet exist.

When Melchizedek is introduced as a priest of *El Alyon*, translated "most high god," the modern reader assumes that he is a servant of God (Yahweh). However, *El Alyon* was a common title attributed to the Canaanite gods El and his son, Baal, with whom most students of the Hebrew Scriptures are well versed. Add to this that Melchizedek did not call God by his proper name, Yahweh. If he were a true priest of Yahweh, then he would know his true name, as did Abram, Isaac, Jacob, and others down the chosen

² Two books that shed light on this section are [Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic](#) by Frank Moore Cross and [Should the Church Teach Tithing?](#) By Russell Earl Kelly.

line of God's representatives on the earth.

So why did Abram give a tenth of his wealth to Melchizedek? Abram's actions in dividing the spoils of war with Melchizedek are based on ancient Arab war customs that require that he pay tribute to the local ruler. Melchizedek had established his right to tribute by the aid that he provided to Abram's troops. The king of Sodom's proposition on the division of the remainder of the spoils was based on the same customs.

But Abram *broke* with tradition when he refused any part of what he had reclaimed from Chedorlaomer. He also challenged the sovereignty of Melchizedek's god when he raised his hand and swore his oath to *Yahweh, El Alyon, Qoneh Shamayim Wa-'ares* (LORD, **the** most high God, Creator of heavens and earth), in effect taking Baal's title as "most high god" and also "creator of heaven and earth," another common appellation to El, and pointing them back to Yahweh as the true God who lives up to those titles.

It is possible that some readers will feel uncomfortable with these facts, as we often confuse the *historical* Melchizedek of Genesis with the *typical* Melchizedek of **Psalms 110** and **Hebrews 7**. The *typical* Melchizedek is a shadow of the Christ as he is both a *priest* and a *king* and he has no lineage, meaning that he cannot trace his ancestry back to Levi and, as such, is not recognized as a priest under Mosaic law. Others point to his offer of *bread* and *wine* as a type of the Lord's last supper. Even though he did not know God, Melchizedek (whose name means "king of righteousness") was still used by God to provide aid to Abram and, as such, did show righteousness. There are many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures which describe people who do not know the one true God but who are nonetheless used by him for his greater purposes. Melchizedek is no exception. The key to understanding the episode in **Genesis 13 and 14** is in recognizing that God was behind Abram's victory and the vindication of Sodom. The king of Sodom nonetheless did not acknowledge the gift that he had received from God, nor did he change his ways. Sodom remained a city without a relationship with God.

GOD HAD ALREADY JUDGED SODOM

It is important to remember that God was already on his way to Sodom to destroy the city even before the city's inhabitants tried to attack the angels sent to rescue Lot. In **Genesis 18:20, 21**, God had already explained to Abraham:

because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know. Genesis 18:20, 21

So how did our culture come to understand that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexual practices?

"TO KNOW" IN THE BIBLICAL SENSE

Examination of **Genesis 19:5** reveals the basis for all accusations of homosexuality against Sodom. When the Sodomites had converged on Lot's house, they demanded 'to know' the visitors. The word used in the Hebrew text is *yada'*, which according to *Strong's Concordance* literally means "to know, properly to ascertain by seeing;" however, there are multiple secondary meanings as well. Using a computer to search the Hebrew text, we find that the word appears 947 times in 873 verses in the

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Hebrew Scriptures. Of these instances, it is clear that 14 times the verb carries a sexual connotation:³

- Five usages refer to sexual intercourse that produces a child.⁴
- Eight references deal with the virginity (or lack thereof) in women.⁵
- One instance, which we will examine shortly, deals with sex between men and a woman that is further characterized in the passage as rape.⁶

The remaining 931 occurrences of *yada'*, which constitute 98 percent of the verb's usage in Scripture, do not carry a sexual connotation. Note that in each of the cases listed above, the word *yada'* refers to heterosexual practices. There are no occurrences of *yada'* that describe homosexual practices. Our central dispute lies in two instances⁷ – one we have just seen and another which we will examine below.

ENTER THE SEPTUAGINT TRANSLATION

The Septuagint is an early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures which was commissioned by Ptolemy of Egypt in the third century BCE, when Greek had become the *lingua franca* of the region and many Jews could no longer read Hebrew. One way to research the meaning behind phrases in the Hebrew Scriptures where the meaning is unclear is to look at these early translations, which were made by Jewish scholars of the time who were familiar with the language, traditions, and culture of both the Hebrew texts and the Greek-speaking world for which their translation was being prepared.

One of the strongest circumstantial arguments for a sexual connotation in **Genesis 19:5** is the close proximity to the offer of Lot's daughters for sexual activity as an alternative to the demands of the mob. The women have never *known* a man. However, examination of the Septuagint will provide another valuable insight.

Genesis 19:5

we may know them (KJV)

suggenômetha (from sungignomai) autois we would acquaint ourselves (reflexive)

Genesis 19:8

have not known man (KJV)

ouk egnôsan (from gignôskô) andra they have not known a man (active)

³ John Boswell's [Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality](#) references a study where only 10 out of 943 instances have sexual connotations. I am happy to share my own research with anyone interested in my count.

⁴ Genesis 4:1, 4:17, 4:25, 38:25; 1 Samuel 1:19

⁵ Genesis 19:8, 24:16; Numbers 31:17, 31:18, 31:35, Judges 11:39, 12:11, 21:12

⁶ Judges 19:25

⁷ Genesis 19:5, Judges 19:22

These passages from the Septuagint show that the translator felt that it was appropriate to use separate words in Greek to convey the separate denotative meanings of the word *yada'* in the Hebrew. In the first instance the translators chose one Greek verb that denotes becoming acquainted, while in the second instance they chose another distinct verb to convey the idea of sexual relations.

It is important to remember that Ptolemy used Jewish scholars to prepare the Septuagint. These men were experts in their field with a good command of both Hebrew and Greek. Their use of separate verbs supports the supposition that as far back as the third century BCE, there were no overt sexual connotations associated with the requests of the Sodomites.

USAGE NOTES ON MEN VS. PEOPLE

Aside from the usage of *yada'*, there is one other point in the Hebrew text that should be examined. In the English translation of both verses 4 and 5, the KJV (as well as many other translations) uses the word *men*. In verse 4, we find "the *men* of the city, even the *men* of Sodom." In verse 5 the Sodomites ask where the *men* are that came to Lot's home. However, the Hebrew word used in both passages is *'enowshim*, which means "people," without specific indication of gender. The Hebrew word for men is *'iysh*, as found in other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as **Genesis 32:6**, where the gender of the subjects is actually a matter of importance. Based on the linguistic evidence, there is no basis for concluding that the crowd outside of Lot's house was composed only of men, or even knew the gender of Lot's visitors. These facts cast further doubt that the crowd intended to commit a specifically homosexual act. Further we are told in verse 4 that "all the *people* from every quarter" encompassed the house. The word for people used here is *'am*, which refers to an entire tribe or nation of people – in this case, the entire population of the city, which would include women and children. The traditional picture painted for us in which men on the prowl encircle Lot's home does not hold true. Instead we are presented with a mob composed of men, women, and children.

WHAT DID THE SODOMITES WANT?

Before we try to answer this question, let's look at another biblical passage, paying particular attention to the parallels shared with the Genesis account. The following story appears in the nineteenth and twentieth chapters of the book of Judges. Examine the text below and compare their development. Commentary provided in brackets indicates where gender is specified in the text and where English grammar rules assume the masculine form.

Genesis 19

Scene: Abraham and Sarah have just received God and two angels with warm hospitality. They washed the visitors' feet and fed them bread, curds, and meat.

Judges 19

Scene: A Levite priest has traveled to Bethlehem in Judah to the house of his concubine's father. The father receives the Levite gladly and detains him for three days during which they eat and drink and enjoy his lodging.

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- 1 And there came two angels to Sodom at even; 14 And they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down upon them *when they were* by Gibeah, which *belongeth* to Benjamin.
- 15 And they turned aside thither, to go in and to lodge in Gibeah: and when he went in, he sat him down in a street of the city: for *there was* no man that took them into his house to lodging.
- And Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: 16 And, behold, there came an old man from his work out of the field at even, which *was* also of mount Ephraim; and he sojourned in Gibeah: but the men of the place *were* Benjamites.
- And Lot seeing them rose up to meet *them*; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground; 17 And when he had lifted up his eyes, he saw a wayfaring man in the street of the city: and the old man said, Whither goest thou? and whence comest thou?
- 18 And he said unto him, We *are* passing from Bethlehemjudah toward the side of mount Ephraim; from thence *am* I: and I went to Bethlehemjudah, but I *am now* going to the house of the LORD; and there *is* no man that receiveth me to house.
- 19 Yet there is both straw and provender for our asses; and there is bread and wine also for me, and for thy handmaid, and for the young man *which is* with thy servants: *there is* no want of any thing.
- 2 And he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your ways. And they said, Nay; but we will abide in the street all night. 20 And the old man said, Peace *be* with thee; howsoever *let* all thy wants *lie* upon me; only lodge not in the street.
- 3 And he pressed upon them greatly; and they turned in unto him, and entered into his house; and he made them a feast, and did bake unleavened bread, and they did eat. 21 So he brought him into his house, and gave provender unto the asses: and they washed their feet, and did eat and drink.
- 4 ¶ But before they lay down, the men [**people**] of the city, *even* the men [**people**] of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people [**nation**], 22 ¶ *Now* as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men [**people**] of the city, certain sons [**children**] of Belial, beset the house round about, *and* beat at the door, and spake to the master of the

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- tribe]** from every quarter:
- 5 And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where *are* the men **[people]** which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them.
- 6 And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him,
- 7 And said, I pray you, brethren **[kin people]**, do not so wickedly.
- 8 Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man **[gender specified]**; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men **[people]** do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.
- 9 And they said, Stand back. And they said again, This one *fellow* **[added for clarity in English, Hebrew says only “one”]** came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them. And they pressed sore upon the man **[gender specified]**, even Lot, and came near to break the door.
- house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man **[gender specified]** that came into thine house, that we may know him.
- 23 And the man, the master of the house, went out unto them, and said unto them, Nay, my brethren **[kin people]** *nay*, I pray you, do not *so* wickedly; seeing that this man **[gender specified]** is come into mine house, do not this folly.
- 24 Behold, *here is* my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man **[gender specified]** do not so vile a thing.
- 25 But the men **[people]** would not hearken to him: so the man **[gender specified]** took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go.

“THE MEN OF SODOM” AND “CERTAIN SONS OF BELIAL”

Before we proceed, it is important to note a parallel in the above-cited passages that could easily be lost on the modern reader. We are told in the both accounts that while each host provided for his respective guests, “the men (people) of the city” beset their homes. However, examine closely the subsequent phrase in each account:

Genesis 19:4
the men [people] of Sodom

Judges 19:22
certain sons [children] of Belial

Genesis 13:13 introduced the Sodomites as wicked sinners. Personified by King Bera in the **Genesis 13, 14** account, they had rejected God and continued to worship their own local gods.

The key to understanding the parallel in the Judges account is in knowing the significance of the phrase “children of Belial.” In the Christian Scriptures, Belial becomes a proper name for Satan. However, in the Hebrew Scriptures, belial is not a proper name, but a designation of being worthless, good-for-

nothing, lawless, or wicked. The idea is one of turning away from relationship with God.

The author of the Genesis account has directly described the Sodomites as pagans. The author of the Judges account, by invoking the term “children of Belial” and alluding to the Sodom account has subtly done the same thing, calling into question the relationship of the Benjamites with God. In fact, the first appearance of the phrase “children of Belial” in **Deuteronomy 13:13** goes on to explicitly state:

*Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, **Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known;** (emphasis added)*

In the Judges account, the traveler, a Levite priest, goes to the Jewish settlement of Gibeah. The locals are his fellow Israelites of the tribe of Benjamin. As the scene unfolds, we are reminded of the events of Sodom. However, this story ends quite differently. The mob outside the door takes the Levite’s concubine and rapes her all night long. The next morning, she is found dead at the door of the house. The resulting feud between the Benjamites and all the other tribes of Israel nearly destroys the entire tribe of Benjamin, a judgment passed on them by God for their sin, which was apparently grievous before this incident.

The importance of this account is in the use of the verb *yada’*. In verse 22, the Benjamites make the same demand that the Sodomites had made earlier. Left at this, the same two sides of the argument would stand as in the first. However, reading further into chapter 20, we see at verse five the Levite’s explanation of what has happened:

And the men of Gibeah rose against me, and beset the house round about upon me by night, and thought to have slain me: and my concubine have they forced, that she is dead.
Judges 20:5

The Benjamites said they wanted *to know* the visitors that the old man had brought into their midst. In the end, they *forced* (raped) the Levite’s concubine and left her to die. It is important to note that the rape of the Levite’s concubine is conveyed through the word *forced* rather than through the word *knew*, which does not convey the nature of the sexual act (assault).

It would be possible to assume from this that the mobs in both stories had sex on their minds. However, the Levite’s own perception of the Benjamites’ intent is different. Note that he says they “thought to have slain [him].” As the Levite understood the situation, the people who were demanding that he be turned over to them were not after sex. Rather they intended to kill him. If this story is indeed meant to parallel the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was already well-known at the time that the account in Judges was written, then the Sodomites’ intention seems also to have been to murder the strangers in their midst.

A BRIEF FORAY INTO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GIBEAH ACCOUNT

Why would the author of Judges want to compare the Benjamites to Sodomites? Why would an old man from Ephraim and a Levite priest be cast as the heroes in this tale? Who wrote this book and what

was the motivation? Let's look at the requirements:

- Someone wanted to vilify the Benjamites (Southern Kingdom).
- Someone wanted to endorse the Levites (housed on territory of each tribe).
- Someone wanted to compliment Ephraim (the home of Samuel).

Traditionally, the book of Judges is attributed to the prophet Samuel. However, recent evidence tends to point toward the priests of Shiloh.⁸ The Shilohites had once been central to worship of God under Saul. The priests lost their prominence under Solomon when his kingdom divided into Israel and Judah. Solomon's temple was set up in Jerusalem and used priests who traced their lineage to Moses (Mushite priesthood).

The Northern Kingdom set up its religious centers in Dan and Beth-el and used its own Levite priests of Aaron's ancestry (Aaronid priesthood). As a result, the Shilohite priests were left out of the religious life of both kingdoms.

Why vilify the Benjamites?

As noted above, the Benjamites were absorbed into the kingdom of Judah. They were a small tribe with one distinguishing fact: Saul, first king of the Hebrews, was from the tribe of Benjamin. When Saul stepped out of line with Samuel, Samuel responded by supporting David as the new king. Saul's response was to massacre all of the Shilohite priests except for one who escaped.⁹

Why support the Levites?

While not able to trace their ancestry directly to either Moses or Aaron, the Shilohite priests were still Levites. Thus, the hero of their story is one of them.

What is the significance of Ephraim?

The city of Shiloh was located in the region known as Ephraim and is the home territory of Samuel, head of the Shilohite priests. Ephraim was also a region controlled by the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

What good does it do to bring Sodom and Gomorrah into the picture?

By alluding to the evil behaviors of the Sodomites, the priests were able to play on deeply seated aversions and justify the near complete destruction of the tribe of Benjamin in the civil war that ensued after the incident described in **Judges 19**. If the reader accepts the references to idolatry buried within the mythos surrounding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (see further passages), then it can be argued that the author of Judges was insinuating the same was true of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

It is important to remember that the Shilohite priests were out of work and out of influence. Part of their agenda was to declare the illegitimacy of Judah. Though the Aaronid priests controlled Israel's religious functions, the priests of Shiloh still viewed King Jeroboam of Israel, on whose territory they lived, as their greatest political ally in their quest to return to their former position of power. By promulgating the idea that the only true worship of God was in Israel, the legitimacy of Judah is subtly called into question. This pattern is repeated in many places in the Shilohite writings.

⁸ For more information on current thought on Biblical authorship, [Who Wrote the Bible?](#) by Richard Elliott Friedman is an excellent resource.

⁹ 1 Samuel 22:6-19

A FLY IN THE OINTMENT?

In the interest of fully examining all aspects of this issue, it is necessary to draw attention to a linguistic point in the Judges passage that could, if stretched, give some credence to the idea that the Benjamites besieged the Levite with the express intent of sexual relations. In the passages below, the translator used the same word to translate *yada'* in both instances.

Judges 19:22

we may know him

gnômen (from *gignôskô*) *auton*

that we may know him (active)

Judges 19:25

they knew her

egnôsan (from *gignôskô*) *autên*

they knew her (active)

When we examined **Genesis 19:5**, we found that the Sodomites had requested to be allowed to *acquaint themselves* with Lot's visitors. Due to the reflexive nature of the grammatical construction, it is not possible to infer a sexual connotation.

In contrast, the Greek translation rendered in **Judges 19:22** is linguistically open to either interpretation. Without examining the context, the phrase *gnômen auton* can be understood as either making an acquaintance or, possibly, as a sexual act. However, while it is *grammatically* possible to understand the Benjamite request to know the Levite as having sexual connotations, the context established by the Levite's own words in **Judges 20:5** does not corroborate this interpretation.

BUT WHAT ABOUT RAPE?

The preceding sections have dealt with age-old arguments that suggest that "to know" carries a sexual connotation. Up to this point we have, with reasonable assurance, established that *yada'* is used in a sexual sense only in reference to heterogenital contact. But there is still one possibility that we must explore.

If in fact the crowds in both the Genesis and Judges accounts intended to have sexual relations with the respective visitors to their cities, then the two passages would not be dealing with consensual sex, but rather with rape.

Rape is characterized as forcing a person to submit to sexual acts, especially sexual intercourse. However, rape is not about sex or love or even attraction. Rather it is about power – the power of the perpetrator(s) to violate and subjugate the victim, thereby inflicting emotional and psychological pain and proving physical dominance.

Rape remains the same today as it was then. Even now our headlines tell of incidents in which victims of hate crimes are raped or sexually molested as part of the violence that they suffer at the hands of their attackers. It may be soldiers in an armed conflict, prisoners behind bars, or a lynch mob that suddenly appears in an otherwise

peaceful neighborhood, but the outcome is the same. We are a species capable of perpetuating extreme sexual violence against each other.

In cultures of this time, it was not uncommon for a defeated leader to be raped as a sign that he had been utterly brought down. King Saul feared this very treatment when he asked his armor bearer to kill him when the Philistines struck him down in 1 Samuel 31. In verse 4, Saul demanded, “draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me.” The word *abuse* here is the same word that is used in **Judges 19:25**. We may easily imagine that rape could have figured into the potential actions of the mobs in both the Genesis and Judges accounts.

But we must be careful to observe the distinction between the rape and other sexual relations. Hebrew Law condemned rape, just as we do today. However, while Judeo-Christian beliefs hold that the rape of the Levite’s concubine recorded in the Judges account was a sin, this act cannot be generalized to prove that all sexual acts are sinful. The difference lies in the moral context. In the accounts recorded in the books of Genesis and Judges the potential for rape is a symptom of a deeper problem. Both the Sodomites and the Benjamite “children of Belial” have rejected relationship with God. As a result their actions reflect the wicked state of their hearts.

Later, as we explore other passages of the Hebrew Scriptures that appear to condemn male same-sex relations, we will examine the Jewish paradigm through which all homogenital contact was characterized. For now, it is only important to establish that forced sexual relations – regardless of the sex of the victim – are categorically wrong and that the prohibition against them cannot be generalized to apply to all sexual relations.

THE SINS OF SODOM

The Bible is very clear in its teachings about the alien in the land.¹⁰ Times were very different from our own. There were no hotels, no gas stations, and no nice restaurants along the way. A traveler could *die* if he was unable to find hosts to take him in. Hospitality to strangers was a principle that spanned all of the peoples of the ancient Near East. In fact, to this day many of the Semitic peoples still hold these traditions.

The parallels given above between Sodom and Gibeah seem to point in the direction of inhospitable treatment of strangers. In the first story, we find that the unruly mob intended harm toward the angels who had come to Lot. In the second story, the Levite priest was the target. Add to this the special status of the guests in each story. In Genesis, the guests were of divine nature, while in Judges, the traveler was a Levite priest – a man whose job in life was to minister to God.

One might speculate as to whether this mistreatment of the stranger in their midst would be enough to condemn the Sodomites, but this is not necessary. The Bible has many other passages that describe the sins for which Sodom was destroyed. While forming an opinion, we should take the following passages into account:

¹⁰ See Exodus 22:21, 23:9.

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*For Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen: because **their tongue and their doings are against the LORD**, to provoke the eyes of his glory. The shew of their countenance doth witness against them; and **they declare their sin** as Sodom, **they hide it not**. Woe unto their soul! for they have rewarded evil unto themselves. **Isaiah 3:8, 9** (emphasis added)*

Here, the prophet Isaiah is clear that the Israelites have taken on attributes of Sodom in their fallen state. Their words and their deeds have blatantly gone against God. They are brazen in their sin and are so hard in their hearts that they openly defy God.

*I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: **they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers**, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah. **Jeremiah 23:14** (emphasis added)*

Jeremiah goes further to define the sins of Israel in his comparison with Sodom and Gomorrah: they commit adultery, they live a life of deception, and they condone open sin. In fact, their disregard for God's law is so unashamed that they strengthen the resolve of those who continue to sin.

But Ezekiel wins the prize. In his condemnation of Israel's sinful state during his lifetime, he also makes a comparison to Sodom. But he goes on to list all of the sins for which Sodom was destroyed:

*Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, **pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness** was in her and in her daughters, **neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy**. And they were **haughty, and committed abomination** before me: therefore I took them away as I saw good. **Ezekiel 16:49, 50** (emphasis added)*

Ezekiel says that arrogance, overindulgence in food, and a lack of concern for the poor and needy were what brought condemnation on Sodom. And finally, they committed abomination or, in modern translations, did detestable things. "Abomination" and "detestable" are key words that we will study in the next chapter. For now, I will simply say that they deal with idolatry.

These are the passages of the Hebrew Scriptures that deal with Sodom. It is worth noting that the only sexual practice listed in the detailed outline of Sodom's transgressions is *adultery*. An argument can be made for the case of "abomination," but we'll have to study the next section to see why.

In addition to references in the Hebrew Bible, we have the benefit of Christian Scriptures as well. The most notable references in the Christian Scriptures to Sodom and Gomorrah deal with inhospitality. Check the references in **Matthew 10:15, 11:24; Mark 6:11; and Luke 10:12**. These passages deal with two issues:

*Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha¹¹ in the day of judgment, than for that city. **Matthew 10:15***

¹¹ While Gomorrah is the spelling in the KJV used for Hebrew translations, Gomorrha is used for all translations from the Greek.

Here Jesus has commissioned his disciples to go out and make new followers. His instructions are to travel without any money or provision, but to depend on the *hospitality of those to whom they travel to supply all their needs*. Any house or city that did not receive the disciples with their message would be condemned. This commission is repeated in the gospels of Mark and Luke. To Jesus, an allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah in reference to a lack of hospitality seemed natural. The fact that he chose this expression also indicates that his disciples would clearly understand what he meant.

In **Matthew 11:20-24**, Jesus denounced the cities where he had traveled along his journey. He had performed many miracles along the way, but the cities were hardened in their sinful condition and would not repent of their sins. In verse 24 the city of Capernaum is berated for its flagrant rejection of Jesus. He warns the city that their fate will be worse than that of Sodom who also flaunted its sin openly (go back and review the above passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah).

But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee. Matthew 11:24

Again, Jesus alludes to historical example that would be clear to his audience.

And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; 2 Peter 2:6

In this passage Peter refers to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah as “ungodly.” The original Greek word here is *asebes*, which means “not reverent or worshipful.” In the first sense, this indicates a lack of fear of God. But by implication one can also infer worship or activity associated with false gods or idols. In the next chapter, the connection with abomination will become clear.

Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire. Jude 1:7

In this penultimate book of the Bible, Jude references Sodom and Gomorrah again and provides more language which advocates of the sexual perversion theory use to prove that the Sodomites had unsavory sexual proclivities. Fornication is added to the list of sins indulged in by the cities of the plain. Also added is a propensity to go after “strange flesh.”

In light of the associations our modern society holds with the word *flesh*, one might come to the conclusion that Jude was berating the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah for trying to satisfy their sexual urges with the angels that had come to rescue Lot. However, this theory doesn’t hold up in the light of linguistic examination.

The same construction of “go after” is used in **John 12:19** to refer to the world following after the teachings of Jesus. The expression means “to change course and follow after or pursue.”

The word for fornication used here is *ekporneuo*. This is the only time that the word appears in the entire collection of the Christian Scriptures. The *ek-* prefix (or, in the form more familiar to native English speakers, *ex-*) has several root meanings including “beyond,” “through,” and “away from.” Two common English words using this prefix are *example* and *extreme*. In the case of *ekporneuo*, it implies that what follows (*porneuo*) has been carried out beyond the normal limits or to a high degree.

Porneuo comes from the same root from which we get the modern word *pornography*. It is a verb form meaning “to prostitute.” So what we have is sex for hire, as well as lechery (excessive sexual indulgence) and idolatry. Is there a theme developing here?

But the real interest comes with the reference to *strange flesh*. *Strange* as translated here shows an interesting bias on the part of the translators. The Greek word used here is actually *heteros*. It is the same root used in English today for the prefix in words like *heterogeneous* or *heterosexual*. *Hetero-* simply implies “other” or “different.” Of the 94 occurrences of this word in the Christian Scriptures, the instance in **Jude 7** is the only one translated as “strange.” Further, if the men of Sodom were after other men, then the word *heteros* is not appropriate, as they would be the same, not different.

The book of Jude is filled with references to many Jewish legends and extra-biblical writings. One such legend contends that the *women* of Sodom had sexual relations with angels. This accounts for the strange flesh reference.¹²

The NIV provides a dynamic translation for this passage rather than a word-for-word equivalent, stating that the Sodomites “gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.” While the first part is certainly accurate enough, the supposition regarding perversion assumes knowledge of the situation that is not provided in the original Scripture. However, knowledge of the Jewish myth above would lend credence to this interpretation.

ON ENTERTAINING ANGELS

When trying to understand the significance of the account of Sodom and Gomorrah, we must look far more widely than the townsfolk banging at Lot’s door. When the Hebrew Scriptures were compiled in their present form, great pains were taken to create an interwoven narrative whose disparate parts augmented one another. We have already explored how, beginning in **Genesis 13-14**, the groundwork was carefully laid to show that the Sodomites were wicked. When given a chance, their king was not willing to turn from his wicked ways. Instead he returned home and continued as he always had with no appreciation for the deliverance that God had provided. From a macro level, it is clear how these events fit together with the ultimate demise of the city.

But more than just recounting ancient history, the Hebrew Scriptures instruct us through *action*. The lessons are often subtle, as no narrator comments on the significance of each recorded act. But in its economy of words, the Scriptures often teach just as much through juxtaposition or the absence of explanation as they do through direct commentary. The juxtaposition of the accounts described in

¹² See [Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition](#) by Derrick Sherwin Bailey.

Genesis 18-19 provides valuable lessons on the importance of hospitality.

In chapter 18, Abraham displays hospitality to his visitors by bowing before them and then inviting them to be his guests. He provides water for washing their feet, food for them to eat, and a place to rest from their travels. Lot's own treatment of the angelic visitors in chapter 19 corresponds to Abraham's display. Lot also bows to the ground and then makes arrangements to wash the feet of his guests, to feed them, and allow them to rest.

But the stories diverge at this point. Abram has shown respect for his visitors. In contrast, the people of Sodom show disrespect as they surround Lot's home and threaten violence against Lot and his visitors. Their actions serve as a death knell. The city that was first described as "wicked" and filled with sinners in **Genesis 13:13** has come to its final judgment.

The parallels resume at this point. When God reveals that Sodom is to be destroyed, Abraham immediately begins to bargain for the lives of the city's inhabitants. This portion of the narrative establishes that God has not acted unjustly. Rather, the sins of Sodom are so severe that not even 10 righteous people can be found in the city. Lot also negotiates for the safety of those who are under threat. In an attempt to mollify the crowd, he uses his own daughters as bargaining chips to secure the safety of his guests. In both instances, bargaining fails and the inevitable progression toward destruction continues.

Finally, a parallel is drawn between those who hear God's words and do not believe. First, Sarah laughs (Hebrew *tsachaq*) when God tells Abraham that she will have a son in her old age. In the same way, Lot's sons-in-law do not believe when Lot conveys the warning that Sodom is to be destroyed, thinking that he is joking (the same Hebrew *tsachaq*).

These twin accounts offer valuable instruction without comment. Later in the *Torah* **Exodus 22:21** and **Exodus 23:9** both admonish that we are not to oppress or mistreat strangers. But it was the author of Hebrews who would finally expand on this theme many years later, encouraging us to always treat strangers with kindness. After all, one never knows when strangers may be angels in disguise.¹³

A FINAL INTERPRETATION OFFERED

In the end, it appears that the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah were actually idol worshippers who practiced adultery and fornication and devotion to other gods. They had a general disregard for the poor and they did not provide the proper hospitality to strangers. We derive this from the account of the destruction of the city, as well as the references to the city and its sins throughout both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. But to stop here is to fall short of utilizing the full text at our disposal.

In this chapter, we began our study with an examination of **Genesis 13-14**, in which King Bera of Sodom, was conquered by Chedorlaomer, regained independence, and was subsequently conquered again. Had it not been for Abram and his men, Sodom would have been lost again under the subjugation of the greater king. But Abram was able to confront a force superior in numbers and regain what Bera had lost. Abram's only boast was in the power of God Most High, which should have been a persuasive witness before the king of Sodom. But Abram's testimony swayed neither the king nor his subjects.

¹³ Hebrews 13:2

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Sodom is introduced in Genesis as a city filled with wicked men who sinned exceedingly. Through Abram they were offered the opportunity to turn to God, yet they chose to take their recovered booty and continue on their way. In the end, it was the grievousness of their continuing sin that caused God to pass judgment on Sodom and its neighbor, Gomorrah.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is of particular relevance to us today. As citizens of the world's most powerful country, we have a great responsibility to care for those who are less fortunate. But who is our god today? Who or what do we worship? Does our nation stand blatantly against Yahweh, the Most High God? Have we committed spiritual adultery and turned from our God? Do we stop to help those in need? We are certainly full of pride, we have more than enough to eat, and our idleness in the face of the needs to which we could be ministering is enormous. Every day that we do not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy is another day that we commit the same sins as Sodom. Perhaps this accounts for why we so easily dismiss the story of Sodom as a moral play about the depravity of a group of homosexuals. Is it not much easier to cast blame on a minority group than to look in the mirror and compare our own behavior with that of the Sodomites?