

The Real Meaning of Sodomy

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For a book length study of this topic, see Michael Carden

[Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth](#)

"Sodomy" and "sodomite" are some of the ugliest words in the English language. They of course are derived from the Canaanite city of Sodom, whose destruction along with Gomorrah is related in Genesis 19. Most people assume that homosexuality was the grounds for this divine retribution and that this is the reason that gay men have been branded "sodomites." The word itself, used as implying a sexual sin, does not appear until A.D. 395 in letters between Saint Jerome and a priest Amandus, but the details of the act and the nature of the sin are not explained.

A growing consensus about sexual orientation is that it primarily genetically determined, so gays and lesbians may not have any choice in the matter. There are two alternative theological positions that follow from the conservative Christian position: (1) If homosexuals are inherently evil, then that means that God created them such; or (2) more orthodox and acceptable is the view that all humans are created in the image of God and all that God creates is good. Therefore, if God creates gays and lesbians the way there are, then God must intend that they are an integral part of the human community.

(On a personal note, I learned that a gay Christian student who heard me lecture on this very point discovered great solace in this simple message about the Christian view of creation. For a Unitarian with a very low Christology, it gives me great satisfaction that I can offer a Christian student pastoral guidance and new hope for his life.)

Interestingly enough, Jesus did not interpret the sin of Sodom as sexual. First, Jesus says nothing specific about the sin of homosexuality anywhere in the Gospels. He does of course speak of sexual sins, but all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation, commit a few of these. Second, when Jesus instructs his disciples to preach in the towns of Israel, Jesus warns that those who do not receive them peacefully will be judged more harshly than the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10: 5-15).

Jesus joins other ancient authorities in viewing the sins of the Sodomites as the abuse of strangers, neglecting the poor and needy, and the stigmatizing of outsiders. For example, Ezekiel says that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah "had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy" (16:49-50); and the Wisdom of Solomon says that they "refused to receive strangers when they came to them" (19.14). On the other hand, an early Christian book I Clement states that Lot was saved "because of his hospitality and piety" (11.11). It is significant that when Leviticus condemns "men who lie with men," it does not mention the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It is true that other ancient authorities mention sexual sins in Sodom and Gomorrah, but these are usually described in a general way, such as lust, sexual impurity, fornication, and adultery. These again are sins of the many not just as few gays and lesbians. The narrow interpretation known today comes from an ancient minority report from thinkers such as Philo of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo. The former condemned the Sodomites for "forbidden forms of intercourse" and the latter for "lewdness between males."^[2] The odd point about this charge is that the object of Sodomitic lust is not male humans but sexless angels! (Those who object by saying that the Sodomites did not know they were angels miss the point: both Augustine and all of us who read the Bible know that they were angels!)

Today's conservatives appear to follow Augustine's untenable position, struck down in the recent Supreme Court decision, that only sexual acts between people of the same sex is sodomy. The Texas law was particularly insidious because in 1973 the legislature legalized heterosexual anal and oral sex (even including bestiality), but criminalized homosexuals who performed the same acts. Amazingly enough, two Catholic thinkers admit that these acts should be legal even for unmarried heterosexuals, because at least there is the possibility that their relationships might become the basis for a moral and legal marriage and family.^[3]

(Some say that the Supreme Court decision is of only minor significance because sodomy laws were rarely enforced and the effect was therefore minimal. This view ignores the larger impact that these laws have had on gays and lesbians. In dozens of cases judges have used the fact that these people are presumed felons to deny them access to their children in custody battles or to conclude that they are not fit to adopt children. For an exposition of a number of these cases, see Joseph Landau's "Ripple Effect: Sodomy Statues as Weapons" in *The New Republic*, June 23, 2003.)

In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* Thomas Aquinas ranked sodomy as the worst crime second only to murder itself, because it essentially amounted to wanton

destruction of a potential person. As the only proper place for the male seed is the female womb, those who masturbate, engage in oral sex, and, yes, even those who use contraceptives are all sodomites! (Until recently Oregon and Maryland included mutual masturbation in their sodomy laws.) If the sin of sodomy is the practice of nonprocreative sex, then every sexually active human being is a sodomite!

Protestant theologians generally joined Catholics in making sodomy a unique and unredeemable sin. It is interesting, however, to note that John Calvin, in his commentary on Genesis, does not define the Sodomites' sin as homosexual acts. Instead he prefers the social meaning of sodomy, reminding his readers that the Sodomites were "in the habit of vexing strangers," whereas Lot had offered them shelter and a meal. No friend of the freedom of the will, Calvin declares that God himself "impelled [the Sodomites] to their crime," leaving the rest of us to wonder how Calvinists can have any individual moral responsibility.

The brutal inhospitality of people of Sodom and Gomorrah stands in stark contrast with Abraham's generosity to three divine strangers who visit him in Genesis 18. (This, by the way, is not an allusion to the Christian Trinity, as Calvin actually implies, because the original Abraham could not have been monotheist let alone a Trinitarian. See this link for more on [Hebrew Henotheism](#).) After feasting at Abraham's table the angels announce that Sarah shall conceive and that from her son a great nation shall arise. All that the barren Sarah could do in response was to laugh her famous laugh and to protest that it was impossible for her to bear a child. Two of Abraham's guests then proceed to Sodom where they intend to warn the residents of the impending destruction of their city. The fact that Abraham demands that God save the lives of the innocent demonstrates that he again has concern for the welfare of strangers and, ironically, displays more generosity of spirit than his own God.

When the two angels arrive in Sodom, Lot and his family receive them warmly. The men of Sodom come to Lot's house and demand that the two visitors be handed over to them. The Sodomites' intentions were overtly sexual ("so that we may know them"), but these men were no more homosexuals than are the bullies in our prisons who rape newcomers and weaker prisoners on a daily basis. Although sexual in nature, these attacks are essentially acts of aggression against the "other," those who are weaker and those who are different.

Prison rapists are carrying on an ancient patriarchal tradition where the dominant male has the right to penetrate anyone subordinate to him--women, lower men, boys, and slaves. Arno Schmitt states that it was "the right of men to penetrate and their duty to lie on top" and that the raping "of one's slaves . . . was not only sanctioned by public opinion, but by some jurists as well."^[4] Needless to say, medieval Christians

were compelled to declare that the "woman superior" sexual position was also, incredible though it sounds, a form of sodomy.

The same theme of power rape appears in the story of the Levite in Judges 19. One night in the land of Benjamin a Levite and his concubine find themselves in Gibeah, where they were put up by a kindly old man. As in Sodom the men of the city come and demand their assumed right to abuse the stranger. (Alden Thompson follows many traditional readers in assuming, wrongly of course, that this was "clearly homosexual activity.")^[5] The old man offers them his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine, but the Levite insists that only his woman be taken. The men of Gibeah rape her to death and the next day the Levite divided up her body into twelve pieces and sent them to the tribes of Israel.

The Israelite leaders met at Mizpah and decided that the Benjamites should be punished for their "abomination." The fact that Lot also offered his daughters to the mob to save his guests from attack shows that the main issue here is not the abuse of women but the honor of men. (If the mistreatment of women were the issue, then Lot and the Levite were surely just as guilty as the Sodomites and the Gibeans.) In machismo culture a man preserves his honor by being "on top," but he loses it if he allows himself to be the passive partner. As Michael Carden observes: "In this world it is better that women be raped than men, because the rape of men takes away their heterosexuality."^[6]

The point of these stories, however, goes beyond the destructive hierarchy of "top males." The message for our time is that those who embrace those different from themselves, such as Abraham and Lot, are blessed, while those who discriminate against them, such as the Sodomites and Gibeans, should be despised. I will let readers apply this biblical doctrine to contemporary America and discover to which group they belong.

At this point in time it would be futile to reject the sexual meaning of sodomy, but if the word "sodomite" should be reserved, if we should use it at all, for those who use sex to dominate, humiliate, and terrorize others. We should preserve and dignify the word "homosexual" for people who love others of their own sex, and our liberal democracy should protect their right to do so with the same tenacity that we do with any other fundamental human right.

ENDNOTES

1. See Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
2. Philo of Alexandria, *Abraham* 134-135; Augustine, *The City of God* 16.30.

3. See Andrew Sullivan, "Unnatural Law," *The New Republic* (March 24, 2003), p. 22. I'm indebted to Sullivan for references and insights.

4. Arno Schmitt, "Different Approaches to Male-Male Sexuality/Eroticism from Morocco to Uzbekistan" in *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Muslim Societies*, eds. Jehoeda Sofer and Arno Schmitt (New York: Hawthorne Press, 1992), p. 3.

5. Alden Thompson, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Press, 1989), p. 112. Thompson admits that this story is the "worst story in the Old Testament."

6. Michael Carden, "Homophobia and Rape in Sodom and Gibeah: A Response to Ken Stone," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 82 (1999), p. 90. I am indebted to Carden for ideas and references.