Widening the Lens from Genesis 19:5 to Genesis 18 and 19: A Remedy for Transmitted Blindness

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ABSTRACT:

This article is the product of an exercise in scriptural interpretation. The text of Genesis 18 and 19 were chosen due to an awareness of a common theme propagated by culture and the desire to better understand the content of the text using tools of interpretation that connect ancient text with contemporary human experience in hopes to open access to a diverse population that nurtures and elevates creation rather than divide and harm marginalized populations.

Widening the Lens from Genesis 19:5 to Genesis 18 and 19
A Remedy for Transmitted Blindness

by Kelly Olson

Caution: CW // sexual violence, rape, murder. The content of this paper addresses the aforementioned topics and the author would like to caution the reader of the upcoming sensitive content. This warning is meant to provide an opportunity to prepare for this category of content in the hopes of avoiding negative impact and promoting a safe space for engagement with the topic(s).
The narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah continues to rain fire and brimstone as a result of myopic interpretive practices of ancient texts. Exclusive theologies and maltreatment of particular populations have resulted from a tradition of understanding homosexuality to be the impetus for the ruthless destruction of an entire city and its neighbor. This narrow lens overlooks the rich substance of the text that includes ancient cultural influences, textual details, and literary forms revealing revolutionary theological developments. Reviewing diverse critical analyses of the narratives of Genesis 18-19 has exhumed a comprehensive perspective that appreciates an ancient text of retributive action situated in the etiological tale of the formation and propagation of Israel that cannot be excised from the influence of ancient cultural patriarchy. History has allowed for opportunity to discern cultural context from divine revelation however misguided practices have reinforced negative patterns that result in harmful approaches, such as the emphasis on condemning homosexuality, the silent response offered to sexual violence against women and the hierarchical value system based on gender. Humbly interpreting ancient scripture requires informed awareness of identities of ancient cultures, admission of limitations of language barriers, honest recognition of impact of historical interpretations on the lived experiences of humans and an introspection into presuppositions, or assumptions, introduced by the reader. In order to receive the theological and pastoral instruction present in this ancient text we need to recognize the inherent risk of harm in misguided utilization of scripture and approach Genesis 19 in the context of 18 to reduce risk of injury caused by fragmented interpretations overlooking insight offered by textual context, language, narrative form and historical perspective.

The goal of this paper is to review the works of authors investigating the narratives of Genesis 18 and 19 as a part of a larger text in an attempt to pursue a better comprehension of the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah. A more thorough, comprehensive investigation needs to lift the blame from homosexuality by recognizing the greater sin of inhospitable violence to strangers as a symptom of disregard for the authority of God and expose a theological concept of redemption by righteousness imbedded in the
narrative. The body of this paper will include sections divided by themes of interpretations of Genesis 18 and 19 as revealed by different authors and scholars. The conclusion will include a summarized interpretation that draws from the narrative as a whole instead of excising particular fragments and provides guidance in alignment with God’s intention for all of diverse creation.

AS NARRATIVE OF LEVITICUS

Sodom has gained a reputation that, unlike the city’s existence, has survived centuries of tradition and reference. Mention of fire and brimstone conjures images of Sodom succumbing to the wrath of God. Descriptions of sexually violent acts contain words whose etiology references the city (sodomy, sodomize). Cultural reference to the text of Genesis 19 originates in the inclination to interpret the text as a narrative of the city’s disobedience of perceived rigorous sexual moral imperatives outlined in Leviticus 18 and 20. Brian Neil Peterson in his book *What was the Sin of Sodom: Homosexuality, Inhospitality, or Something Else?* relies heavily on the Leviticus text to conclude homosexuality is the grave practice that determined the fate of all of the city’s inhabitants.1 In his book he contends with numerous critical exegetical analyses that develop comprehensive interpretations of Gen 19 in an attempt to sustain an interpretation that blames homosexuality for Sodom’s demise. Peterson’s goal is to strengthen a belief in the immorality of physical expression of homosexuality by asserting weaknesses in approaches to scriptural interpretation that does not commit to strict compliance with the sexual ethics verbatim as detailed in Leviticus. The claims made by this author hinge on a commitment to a specific translation of Gen 19:5 that is influenced by word choice and inference that limits opportunity in applicability of the content of the chapter as a whole.

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1 Brian Peterson, *What was the Sin of Sodom: Homosexuality, Inhospitality, or Something Else?* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2016), 36-37. While much of the book builds a case against homosexuality, the quote in “Concluding Comments” for this chapter summarizes the stance of this book: “From this perspective it becomes clear why the author [of Genesis] chose to highlight homosexual activity along with the sexual perversion of incest, two sexual sins particularly abominable before God according to the sexual laws of Leviticus 18 and 20. . . Therefore, it should not be surprising that these sexual sins also brought the judgment of God on Sodom and the cities of the plain.” (Bracketed “of Genesis” inserted by this author.)
In order to blame homosexual sex for the collapse of Sodom, several conclusions need to be aligned. Patterson develops an ethics of sexuality based on the Creation narratives illustrating the creation of male and female. He then emphasizes the sexual ethics set forth in the explicit Leviticus chapters 18 and 20, among which strictly prohibits a man from engaging in sexual relations with another man “as one does with a woman” (Lev. 18:22). Peterson concludes this references any form of same sex genital sexual engagement regardless of relationship context, clearly establishing heterosexuality as the only acceptable, moral sexuality. In this framework he develops the understanding of the wickedness of Sodom (Gen. 13:13, 18:20-33) as sexual deviance which he reduces to homosexuality as the offense. “If the sin of Sodom was only inhospitality and attempted gang rape then the text should make that clear,” Peterson states in defense of his position. Expecting Scripture to explicitly state its meaning seems to negate the need for the practice of interpretation and definitely contrasts the ancient interpreter’s assumption of cryptic revelation. Yet Peterson contradicts himself shortly thereafter by claiming the nature of Sodom’s sin was obviously sexual deviance thus does not need clarification, “It seems clear that long before the angels showed up at Sodom Sodom’s sin was much more than inhospitality. It appears that their sin was sexual in nature. This fact explains why the author of Genesis chose to take note of the homosexual practices of the Sodomites, both young and old.” Peterson quickly moved from mentioning impressions (“it seems …it appears) to incorporating conclusive language (“this fact …“) that transitions loose opinions to a claim of authority.

To help illuminate the clarity Peterson is assuming is present, it is important to note how he interprets Gen 19:5. Specifically the Hebrew word *yada* commonly translated as “to know” is intended to mean “to have
sex with” in Peterson’s interpretation, thus all the men of Sodom come to Lot’s door to demand the overturning of his guests for sex,\(^7\) despite an abundance of the use of this word in the Hebrew Bible without sexual connotation (reportedly only 10 of 943 uses can be described as having “sexual overtones”).\(^8\) *Yada’* otherwise is more commonly interpreted as “to know” as it was used to demonstrate God’s selection of Abraham in Genesis 18:19.\(^9\) Isolating the translation of the word to demand sex versus the nuanced ways of understanding this word’s implications limits interpretation of the intent of the gathering of the young and old. Additionally, it limits the significance of Lot’s response to the mob’s demands and influences the reader’s interpretation of God’s response to Lot as a community in its entirety. Preserving the diverse complexity of the word and acknowledging the common intention of “knowing” elevates a theme of hospitality and a possibility of reference to accessibility of knowing and relating to God as will be developed subsequently in this paper. Although *yada’* contains complexity that aligns with other possible themes of interpretation, the likelihood of this text describing a sexual deviance coincides with the mentioned sins of Sodom relating to sexuality. Still, the depravity does not reside in the condition of same sex sexual behavior but the hostile intent of individuals seeking action against another human’s body in the absence of a loving relationship and without consent, forcefully and violently. The depravity is in the condition of demanding sex disregarding the dignity of the strangers.

The next clarification necessary to understand Peterson’s interpretation is in his deciphering *yada’* from Hebrew words used elsewhere for rape: ‘*alal* – “to abuse” taken from the narrative in Judges 19 when a “concubine” is repeatedly gang raped until her death.\(^10\) Other words include *laqach* referring to *Shechem* “taking” Dinah and *shakab* “laid” with her by ‘*anah

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\(^7\) Brian Peterson, *What was the Sin of Sodom: Homosexuality, Inhospitality, or Something Else?* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2016), 28


\(^10\) Brian Peterson, *What was the Sin of Sodom: Homosexuality, Inhospitality, or Something Else?* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2016), 31
“force”.\textsuperscript{11} The words ‘\textit{anah} and \textit{shakab} are also used to describe the rape of Tamar by Amnon.\textsuperscript{12} If the sexual connotation of \textit{yada’} is to be preserved for the sake of Peterson’s interpretation, it is important to recognize the way he views the nature of the request despite a sense of hostility developing in the narrative, “We may preliminarily conclude from the grammatical analysis of \textit{yada’} that the suggestion that the men of Sodom were out to rape their guests is not necessarily the case. They may have desired merely to satisfy their sexual urges.”\textsuperscript{13} Contrasted against other words of the Bible indicating rape Peterson concludes this is an invitation versus demand. Such an interpretation betrays a misogynistic approach to sexuality. No matter what word is used to describe requests, demands, intents or actions, assault occurs anytime sex is demanded. Even if a sexual urge is present, assaulting strangers by demanding sex elevates the situation to one of sexual violence regardless of the nature of sexual activity, homosexual or heterosexual. If one is to take Gen 19:5 as a mob of the young and old demanding Lot to release his guests so that they may have sex with them, this is a mob demanding sex without consent. Given the anger of the mob’s response to Lot’s refusal, it is implied the mob was not respectful of the wishes or boundaries of those under Lot’s roof which also demonstrates the malicious nature of the actions of the men of Sodom, again regardless of nature of sexual activity. Malicious intent coincides with the reputation consistent throughout biblical textual reference to Sodom, albeit in diverse forms (Isa. 1:10 and 3:9 identifies injustice, Jer. 23:14 identifies irresponsible actions, Ezek. 16:49 describes pride, gluttony and indifference to others’ needs).\textsuperscript{14} In Peterson’s analysis of the text, I believe he detrimentally overlooks the malice present in the nature of this text to elevate a detail he is striving to make fit.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{11} Brian Peterson, \textit{What was the Sin of Sodom: Homosexuality, Inhospitality, or Something Else?} (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2016), 31.
\bibitem{12} Brian Peterson, \textit{What was the Sin of Sodom: Homosexuality, Inhospitality, or Something Else?} (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2016), 31.
\bibitem{13} Brian Peterson, \textit{What was the Sin of Sodom: Homosexuality, Inhospitality, or Something Else?} (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2016), 31.
\end{thebibliography}
Finally, while there are several weaknesses in the strategies employed by Peterson in the attempt to situate homosexuality as the demise for Sodom, the last point I would like to raise is his effort to dismantle the reference to Sodom’s sins in Ezekiel chapter 16 as anything but sexual deviance. By identifying the Hebrew word *to’evah* in Ezekiel 16:50 as a singular form of “abomination” then the text of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 identify the singular form of *to’evah* as the “abomination” of a male lying with a male is if a woman.15 When Peterson ignores the nuances of language he confines interpretation to a particular agenda which is not faithful to the original author, intended message or implied reader. Peterson repeatedly demonstrates a need to isolate a theme at the cost of a greater message to indict homosexuality, an agenda that has been present for centuries despite progress in biblical exegesis aware of presuppositions, cultural context, and experiences of oppressed populations. I include the content of Peterson’s writings for although the arguments and evidence are weak, unfortunately the impact is strong. Factions of common culture draw inspiration from this inadequate interpretation to propagate the narrative of God condemning homosexuality as the insight gained from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moving forward in this paper I would like to elevate the efforts of other scholars who have worked to engage Genesis 19 in a way that coordinates with other textual references and aligns with the message of scripture in a way that is compatible with the history of the formation of Israel under one God and removes distraction from isolated textual fragments enabling propagation of oppression of vulnerable populations.

AS NARRATIVE WITH GENESIS 18

Developing an improved understanding of Genesis 19 requires inclusion of Genesis 18 to capture the narrative more completely. Recognizing similarities between the stories helps elicit the differences by contrast which can provide meaning for the sequence of events. Theologian Brian Doyle utilizes strategies to observe an engagement of the text that does not rely on determining the nature of sexual sin but rather looks closely

at relationships of characters and plot. He describes three particular approaches he utilized: reading a narrative with attention to characters and narrators considering the content is by and for people; attending to the plot and how it is delivered; and “since ‘Words create the narrative world, and words hold the key to the significance of that world’ one must be on the look out for words and how they are used to establish character and plot.” Applying these strategies to Genesis 18 and 19 develops an exercise that allows the reader to enter the narrative to experience the content in human behavior and interaction rather than merely descriptions of actions of distant characters.

Doyle begins with the demonstration of the parallels with contrasting details between Genesis 18 (Abraham and his visitors) and Genesis 19 (Lot and his visitors). Abraham is visited during the day by visitors he immediately recognizes and swiftly serves lavishly whereas Lot is visited near dark when he meagerly greeted his unfamiliar guests by offering shelter and bread. With the awareness of the characters Abraham and Lot, Doyle develops the understanding that the visitors are angels that represent the visitation of “divine will” in the form of promise to Abraham and judgment to Lot. With this context in mind, the request of the men of Sodom “to know” (yada’) the guests of Lot, sexual connotation does not come to the forefront. Recalling the ease in which Abraham saw (knew) the divine guests, Lot’s blindness to the true identity of the visitors is shared by the attendant mob outside of his home demanding to know (to see) the guests.

In his article, Doyle illustrates the multivalent use of yada’ and the need for contextual clues in order to appropriately interpret the text. He demonstrates the usage of the word for God knowing Abraham

19 Understanding “to know” as “to see” is compatible with the understanding of the ability “to see” as “to understand” the divine presence and the path of truth as is evident in a well-known NT parable, John 9:25.
(Gen 18:19), God **knowing** the devastation of Sodom (18:20), the men of Sodom requesting to **know** the visitors (Gen 19:5) and Lot’s reference to his daughters who have not yet **known** a man (Gen 19:8).²⁰

The first three usages are representative of a knowledge referred to in an understanding or a recognition. Lot, because he does not **know** God’s covenant in the same way as Abraham, he does not **recognize** divine activity thus does not **see** his guests for the angels they are. In his blindness and obliviousness, he misunderstands *yādā’* and offers his virgin daughters to the men of Sodom. Lot’s inability to grasp access to the understanding of the divine presence clouds his ability to recognize the situation at hand. When the mob demonstrates an inability to **know** and recognize God’s will, the divine presence smites the mob with physical blindness preventing them from finding a door in thus rendering them without access to ever know God. “While blindness as such in the Bible is often used to represent spiritual imperceptiveness and the inability to discern and heed the will of God (Isa. 42:16-17) it would appear that as a physical condition or a divine punishment it has no sexual connotations whatsoever.”²¹ Reviewing language in context situated within a larger narrative with character development and purpose, it becomes clear the people of Sodom were far removed from the ability to know God and as a result of their misaligned, wicked ways the population was extinguished regardless of sexual orientation.

Another approach to the study of Genesis 19 in the context of Genesis 18 developed an understanding of the significance of hospitality. The Ujama Centre’s Contextual Bible Study (CBS) has been focusing an embodied form of practical biblical scholarship on the understanding of this narrative from the perspective of lived experience in South Africa following the attention drawn to homosexuality in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the continued forms of gender-based violence. “CBS as a methodology is itself a heterotopic site within which, in the language of *The Kairos Document*, ‘people’s theology’ becomes ‘prophetic theology’.

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The embodied incipient theology forged within marginalized bodies becomes an organized marginalized group’s public theology. Such local public theologies become additional resources within a movement’s social struggle for change.”22 CBS utilized a method of group reflection of current experiences, a reflection of the experiences in the context of faith and continued reflection to discern opportunity for social change. The facilitators of the process applied biblical scholarship including literary-narrative analysis to identify the author as well as the implied reader and current reader to observe the reception of the visitors of Abraham and Lot thus allowing space for the very different outcomes of each encounter. By a process of deliberate questions and textual analyses the goal is to transform a transmission history of Genesis 19 by “enabling textual (and socio-historical) detail neglected by ‘church theology’ to deconstruct dominant interpretations.”23

The exegesis performed to formulate provocative questions intended to stimulate thoughtful engagement in contrast to readily accepted homophobic interpretations. Considering the contemporary cultural context it was anticipated the focus would redirect to male rape. The powerful movement of this approach is in the organic process of group study and reflection. “The Ujamaa Centre serves social movements with biblical scholarship not primarily as a form of ‘research’ but as a contribution to potential social change (as praxis). ‘Research’ within the work of the Ujamaa Centre takes two forms. First, ‘research’ is the reflection dimension of praxis. The primary focus here is praxis, with reflection as a constitutive component of that praxis.”24 An example of the process of inspiration that moves a dedicated community to increased awareness precipitated out of a workshop consisting of church leaders and members of an LGBTQ+ activist group. At the time the

22 Gerald West, Sithembiso Zwane, Charlene van der Walt, “From Homosexuality to Hospitality; from Exclusion to Inclusion; from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 168 (2021), 6.

23 Gerald West, Sithembiso Zwane, Charlene van der Walt, “From Homosexuality to Hospitality; from Exclusion to Inclusion; from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 168 (2021), 18.

24 Gerald West, Sithembiso Zwane, Charlene van der Walt, “From Homosexuality to Hospitality; from Exclusion to Inclusion; from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 168 (2021), 7.
homophobic interpretation of Genesis 19 was strong in faith-based circles and the goal of the workshop was to deconstruct the platform against homosexuality and recognize the wickedness of violent rape. Instead, themes of hospitality surfaced in the slowed process of literary-narrative and contextual analyses of Gen 19 and subsequently Gen 18. What surprised the researchers was the impetus to shift the emphasis from sexuality altogether to the greater theme of hospitality. Not only was the content a surprise, but the source of this transformed interpretation surfaced from the church-leaders, “not from the emerging inclusive understanding of this text by the Gay & Lesbian Network’s constituency.” Moving forward the group adjusted workshops and focus groups not only to deconstruct the attachment of the sins of Sodom to exclusively sexual deviance by using other scriptural references but to also further elevate the revelation of hospitality. The organic movement of the group to recognize a theme forming from the integration of holistic biblical scholarship with lived experience demonstrates a process of informed scriptural interpretation that engages knowledge accumulated over the years while not denying the experiences of the incarnate that transcends time and cultural barriers. Lessons learned from this approach cannot be ignored.

DEEPENING AWARENESS OF HOSPITALITY IN HISTORICAL CULTURAL CONTEXT

In a study on the legal background of Genesis 19:1-9, Scott Morschauser illuminates the historical legal factors that may offer insight to develop an understanding of the events. The circumstances as would have been experienced at the time of the text would be understood differently than the understanding of a contemporary reader. For example, consider the positioning of Lot at the gate of Sodom. An unmentioned understanding, based on ancient customs, was that Lot was elevated to a position of

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25 Gerald West, Sithembiso Zwane, Charlene van der Walt, “From Homosexuality to Hospitality; from Exclusion to Inclusion; from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18,” Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 168 (2021), 11.

authority for the city. The prosperity of Abraham and Lot as described in Gen 13 can corroborate the possibility of Lot achieving reputable status on arrival in a new city. Noting the gate of the city is likely a defensive structure barricading the city for safety reinforces the concern of risk and infiltration percolating in the concept of visiting strangers in these ancient narratives. The risk of taking in foreign visitors is compared to Rahab’s hospitality provided to Israelite spies in her home in Joshua 2. Providing shelter for strangers within the city gate potentially provides opportunity for malicious intent from unknown visitors. In a historical period fraught with warfare, it is then not a distant conclusion to empathize with the Sodomites suspicion. For the men of the city to approach Lot’s dwelling inquiring “to know” the foreign visitors reveals heightened paranoia in a time of real risk of threat. Morschauser suggests the “young and old” refers to the authorities of the city, not just all the male population which would indicate an inquiry of civil nature versus sexual conquest. Assuming the “young and old” was reserved for authorities versus all males may feel presumptive, but not negated in Lot’s guests asking if he has “anyone else here – sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you?” (Gen. 19:12). Such an inquiry suggests not all males of the city were truly believed to be present in the mob.

At this point, Morschauser also takes on the variable form of yada’ and agrees with Doyle. The context of the Sodomite’s inquiry ‘to know’ the guests leans away from a sexual encounter and into investigative interrogation. While he admits Lot’s response to the men of Sodom “unduly influences” the interpretation due to “literary proximity”.

Morschauser proceeds to present an interpretation that entirely removes the sexual connotations from Gen 19:5 and 19:8 by proposing Lot offers his daughters as a socially responsible hostage collateral for the respectful privacy of his guests.\(^{33}\) While it may be true hostage-exchange is not an unfamiliar practice in the ancient Near East, the examples provided by Morschauser all include male hostages.\(^{34}\) Morschauser attempts to claim the hostage-exchange intention of Lot aligns with a safe, legal transaction by comparing to similar situations however the situations that actually resulted in protection of the hostage were male hostages. Morschauser differentiates the Levite concubine from Lot’s daughters by somehow insinuating the crowd from Gibeah is obviously malicious. Given the warnings of the wickedness of Sodom in Genesis 18 prompting the visit to the city there is no reason to believe the residents of Sodom will comply with good will toward a hostage. The context of the narrative tends to persuade the reader that Lot’s daughters had a very real risk of an outcome similar to the fate of the Levite’s concubine thus rendering Morschauser’s theory of a reliable hostage-exchange protecting the women as weakened.

Holly Joan Toensing in her article “Women of Sodom and Gomorrah” also acknowledges the unlikely scenario that Lot’s reply is strictly legal without anticipation of risk to his daughters, “Lot’s counteroffer offer brings the sexual meaning of “to know” more to the forefront than did the men’s initial request. Even if a juridical context is assumed, I cannot agree that a sexual meaning is completely avoidable in this scene, as Morschauser claims.”\(^{35}\) The assumption of women’s safety in the wicked city of Sodom in ancient patriarchal societies undermines the real reality of injustices to women and silence in acknowledgement of this reality propagates the injustice which leads me to an inclusion of a feminist hermeneutical approach to Genesis 19.


\(^{35}\) Holly Toensing, “Women of Sodom and Gomorrah: Collateral Damage in the War against Homosexuality?” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 70.
DIAGNOSING SODOM’S SIN AS HOMOSEXUALITY FORTIFIES SILENCE REGARDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Conditions of violence against women are not unfamiliar in ancient biblical text. Examples mentioned previously in this paper include: Dinah, Tamar, and the victim of the men of Gibeah. These narrative details unambiguously describe malicious violence against women yet are not seared in the collective memory of our tradition as examples of wickedness exacting God’s nondiscriminatory punishment as a consequence, such as Sodom. To reduce the sin of Sodom to merely the act of homosexual sex accepts violence against women as a condition of humanity not worthy of attention by God or correction by society. Additionally, holding the belief that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because the men of Sodom desired sex with the male guests implies the cities may have been spared had they accepted Lot’s offer and raped his daughters instead. Transmitting this practice of interpretation continues to degrade the dignity of women and endanger the bodies of women.

The history of interpreting Genesis 19:5 as an intent for homosexual sex with the visitors subsequently causing the incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah has inspired certain communities not only to act against and expound the evils of homosexual persons but also demonstrates the unwillingness to advocate against the violence against women that persists in a way that is accepted as “regrettable and yet ultimately excusable.” Rape becomes an expression of sexual desire or means to an end that is separated from the destructive action against an unwilling human created in the image of God. When ancient text are engaged with rape ascribed to cultural traditions, patriarchal societies, expressions of desire or means to an heir the injustice against a human of the bible is overlooked which is expressed in how society then manages similar contemporary circumstances, “From a feminist perspective, it could

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36 Of note: this does not represent an exhaustive list but rather a brief list of examples illustrating the significant presence of a phenomenon extending beyond individual events.
be argued that the concept of women being used as commodities, to be raped, abused by fathers, or treated as property, is neither a distant cultural oddity nor anything new in the experience of women. We are hardly facing a completely foreign understanding of violence against women.”39 What has failed to surface in common interpretations of events of rape in ancient text is the chaos that ensues. Even if interpretation fails to convey the vengeful response in the narratives of rape, scripture demonstrates a pattern of retribution following the interpersonal violence despite common blindness to the connection. Following Dinah’s rape was Shechemite bloodshed (Gen. 34), after Bathsheba’s rape was the death of Uriah (2 Sam. 11:14-17) and David’s firstborn (2 Sam. 12:13-18), following Tamar’s rape was the death of Amnon (2 Sam. 13:28-29) and following the rape and murder of the Levite’s concubine was war with the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20). Elevating the punitive response to horrific action against women should contribute to a societal reform in improved responses of intolerance toward violence against women.

By reading Genesis 18 and 19 as an integrated narrative the character of Lot demonstrates an inability to comprehend the divine counsel with a series of decisions contrary to offered guidance. Sodom was identified as a city of wickedness which includes but is not limited to sexual deviance. Lot’s inability to see and know his guests is consistent with his inability to effectively manage his interaction with the men of Sodom. Lot was a blind host, a blind father and a blind brother to the chosen Abraham. Genesis 18 and 19 reveals the negative sequelae of his shortcomings and inhospitable nature. The demolition of Sodom and Gomorrah was not for specific sexual activity but the forewarned management of a city of wickedness and rebellion against God’s covenant and the outcome of a patriarch’s inability to serve and protect.

In accordance with the trend of responding to accounts of sexual violence with retaliation and retribution, Lot’s daughters rise in the end of the narrative as characters who decisively act to protect themselves and their future. Lot’s daughters were betrothed to men of Sodom (Gen. 19:4).

Following the witnessed betrayal of their father to protect them and the destruction of the city of their future grooms, the girls no longer had futures guaranteed. They each had a son, Moab (‘from my father’) and Ben-ammi (sounds like Hebrew for Ammon, ‘son of my relative’). Incest has strong admonishment against in the laws of the OT (Lev. 18:6-17, 20:11-21 and Deut. 27:20). Despite the obvious rebellion of their tradition regarding this sexual activity, Genesis 19 does not negatively portray the characters of Lot’s daughters and it can be suggested that Lot’s daughters redeem Lot’s weaknesses by securing him offspring. Genesis 19:30-38 thus becomes an etiological tale of enemy tribes of Israel, the Moabites and Ammonites, as a result of the situation conjured by Lot’s ineptitude and misguided actions with his daughters redeeming themselves in the only way presently available to them.

AS A NARRATIVE OF HOSPITALITY, ACCEPTING DIVINE COUNSEL AND THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

The following is a summarized interpretation drawn from the insights of the previously reviewed scholarships balancing the influence of the narrative behind the text with the historical conditions contained within the text that provides relevant revelation accessible to the modern reader in front of the text.

The texts of Genesis 18 and 19 present the narrative of two brothers, Abraham and Lot. Abraham has been called by God and accepts the calling and covenant. Abraham knows, recognizes God’s presence and reveres the covenant with immediate hospitality and selfless, gracious offerings. Lot does not know, does not see the activity of God and continues to make uninformed, ignorant decisions seeking to protect his self by means he can only see with his myopic vision focused inward. Abraham warmly accepts his divine visitation while Lot cannot see it therefore does not receive what is presented. While Abraham is promised

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offspring despite circumstances that seem prohibitive, Lot offers his offspring to appease a discontented crowd. The chosen Abraham will multiply, the blind Lot submits his generation to the will of a city known to be deviant and wicked. Lot does this also knowing his daughters have been betrothed to men of Sodom. Abraham seeks to engage God in the selfless consideration of sparing Sodom’s destruction if there are but a few righteous to be found. Lot does not exemplify, nor seeks, the righteous nature in humanity. After submitting his own family to the wills of the unrighteous, the divine visitors render the townsmen blind subsequently relinquishing hope of seeing the presence of the divine in the foreign visitors. Lot is saved by the visitors before the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed, but his blindness continues to impact his future. After initially ignoring the location offered by his divine visitors for safe refuge, Lot ends up in a cave where he is raped by his daughters and the resultant offspring become tribes later known to have been enemies of Israel.

Framing one’s mind to the conditions within the text recalls transient tribes struggling to exist and achieve power in a time and landscape of finite resources. Cities were fortified with access to inhabitants through gates. Unfamiliar visitors demanded guarded reception due to the risk of espionage and infiltration. The patriarchal customs supported a hierarchy of gender valuing men’s lives and safety over that of the women. Virgin women, or girls, were assigned value and betrothal was civic commitment requiring honoring. Israel was a forming community united by a faith in one God who has entered into covenant with Abraham demanding the relocation to new lands and a promise of prosperity. Abraham and his family have become transient migrants themselves seeking to understand and commit to the covenant offered by God. The multitudes of gods and cultic practices of the time involved retribution, vengeance, punishment and mysterious ways of dabbling deities.

As the article reviews have rendered previously in this paper, rich content is to be gleaned from this narrative that does not conclude in a condemnation of homosexuality. The contrasting receptions of the visitors between Lot and Abraham reveals value in hospitality that is echoed in later scripture of Israel’s formation (as they themselves become
slaves, exiles and refugees seeking a location) as well as in the New Testament with Jesus’ preaching on love of neighbor, caring for strangers and the Beatitudes. For a modern reader, recognizing the compassion with which foreigners are received by Abraham can resound in the calling to the care of refugees, migrants and immigrants. Acknowledging the historical structure that contributes to the housing of the strangers by Lot and the piqued interest of the Sodomites steers away from the focus of homosexual desire as the sole motivation for demanding “to know” his guests. Developing understanding of context removes perceived authority to condemn homosexuality as a reason to eradicate life. All violence, polemical and physical, in the name of this narrative needs to cease. Focusing on homosexuality as sexual deviance ignores the violence against women that occurs in Hebrew Scriptures. Condemning the practice of sexual assault and sexual violence against any person or body should be stressed in accordance with the scriptures. Interpretation has overlooked the needed attention to the tales of women offered as property and abused as sex objects despite narratives that, when read in whole and not in fragments, relay retaliation following such injustice. Silent interpretation demeans the integrity of women and provides room for misinterpretation of texts such as Gen. 19:5 to harmfully target sexual identities.

Walter Brueggemann offers fruitful theological consideration for the conversation between Abraham and his visitors. When Abraham learns of God’s discontent with Sodom and Gomorrah he understands the likelihood of vengeful destruction and pleads with God to consider sparing the city if righteous are found among the wicked (Gen 18:20-32). Brueggemann highlights the ancient understanding of retributive theology to underscore the significant transition to a God of grace and compassion.\footnote{Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Genesis, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 166.} Morality shifts in this moment from a system of disobedience demanding punishment for all to the consideration that obedience by some spares others. Hope stirs in the recognition that even Sodom has a possibility of salvation.\footnote{Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Genesis, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 168.} Brueggemann explains the
abrupt end of the conversation between Abraham and God as an actively evolving theological consideration regarding the salvation of all as a result of some in a conversation that has not yet reached conclusion. The insertion of the text prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah preserved text likely of more ancient resource (Gen. 19:1-28) that could not be altered. For the modern reader the topic of redemptive righteousness continues to provide engagement with the New Testament and consideration of eschatological consequences of faith, works, and grace.

Drawing from scholarly sources, engaging historical-critical method, and applying a liberation hermeneutic to the reading of Genesis 18 and 19 allows the modern reader to expand awareness to move from blindness caused by a distracted focus on Gen. 19:5 to a perspective that can widely see a narrative including more characters than the men of Sodom, more dialogue than the demand ‘to know’ and more impactful behaviors than sexual deviance. Hopefully this paper has provided an opportunity to inform this vision so that a reader may ‘know’ a more informed understanding of this narrative confirmed by its removal from contributing to harm or injury of persons and toward a restoration of hospitality, the ability to see the divine and the awareness of redemptive righteousness.

Bibliography


