

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

AN OBJECT LESSON OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

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The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah have become synonymous with evil and sensuality. At the mention of their names, mental images are invoked of an inferno ignited by a heavenly storm of fire and brimstone. Pastors preach about them from the pulpit and children hear about them in Sunday School. Many archaeologists have set out in search of the charred remains of these cities. However, a serious question must be asked. Why is this account included in the Bible? Does it appear merely because it is interesting or to give archaeologists something to do?

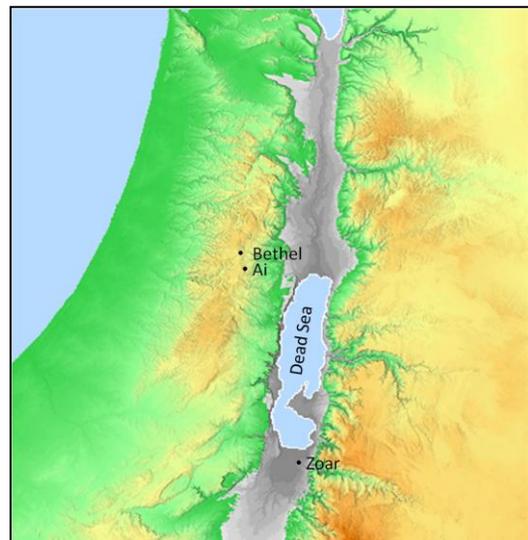
The answer is that God uses Sodom and Gomorrah as an object lesson, showing His involvement in the lives of men by judging sin. A popular misconception throughout history is that God is not involved in the affairs of men, but if He exists at all, is distant and uninterested in His creation. The account of Sodom and Gomorrah prove that God is not only interested in the activities of man, but He is deeply involved in what happens on the earth. Sodom, Gomorrah, and their sister cities were real locations in history and literally suffered the effects of God's vengeance. God leaves no question about His intentions, describing in detail not only the destruction that took place, but the sins for which the destruction was sent. Previously, when God destroyed the earth with a flood, He promised to never do it again. However, when He destroyed these cities with fire and brimstone, He did not promise that it would not happen again. The lesson is clear—God will judge sin and man must expect it if he continues to live in rebellion against his Creator.

THE HISTORICITY OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH

The impact of Sodom and Gomorrah as God's object lesson is strongest if they are historical cities and the account in Genesis is not mythical. Fortunately, even a casual reading of Genesis indicates that the Bible depicts Sodom and Gomorrah as real, historical cities. Although it is not easy to pinpoint the locations of these cities based on biblical data, their general locations coincide with the known layout of Canaanite geography.

Biblical Indications of Location

When the herds of Abraham and Lot expanded to the point where the land could not sustain them, the uncle and nephew were forced to part ways. This took place between the cities of Bethel and Ai (Genesis 13:3), which were located just northwest of where the Dead Sea is today. Lot looked over the "plain of Jordan", which was well watered and beautiful, "even as the garden of the LORD" (Genesis 13:10), and decided to head that direction. He traveled east and pitched his tent near Sodom, one of the "cities of the plain" (Genesis 13:12). A valley known as the "Vale of Siddim" was also close by. How close is a matter of debate. It is possible that the plain where Sodom was located was actually in the valley, which would account for the abundance of available water. Also, when kings from further east later came and fought in the valley of Siddim, they were close enough to Sodom to kidnap Lot who was living there (Genesis 14:11). There are,



however, some details that indicate that the Vale of Siddim could have been a good distance from Sodom. The valley was full of “slime pits” which were probably some kind of bitumen or petroleum wells. This would have made the area inconducive to farming and raising animals as would have been required around the cities. Also, the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fell into these pits while in battle, which may indicate that they were not well acquainted with the area.¹ John Walton views this from a different angle, positing that the kings did not accidentally fall into the slime pits, but hid themselves in these pits, which were actually similar to wells.² However, the biblical text leads one to believe that the slime pits were a hindrance. While the kings fell into them, some of the people escaped and fled to the mountains. While all this was taking place, the enemy was able to kidnap Lot from Sodom. It is possible that the kings from the east, having noticed the predicament of the kings of the plain, felt that they had won the battle, so they turned back home, stopping on the way to ransack the defenseless cities. They simply “took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah...and went their way” (Genesis 14:11). Therefore, it seems likely that Sodom and Gomorrah were on the eastern side of the plain.

Further information about the location of Sodom (and therefore Gomorrah, which seemed to be near to Sodom) comes at the time of her destruction. When Lot was rescued from Sodom, he requested to be able to go to the city of Zoar (Genesis 19:19-23), which was close by. Apparently this city was named Bela before this event (Genesis 14:2), but after Lot’s comment about it being small it became known as Zoar, which means “little” (Genesis 19:20-22). His request was granted, and Zoar was spared for his sake. Its location just south of the Dead Sea (see the map above) is further evidence that the Vale of Siddim and the cities of the plain were located in the area of what is now the Dead Sea and Zoar was on its southern border. The massive destruction that took place when God destroyed the cities and “all the plain” (Genesis 19:25) most likely resulted in the eventual formation of the Dead Sea. This change from a well watered plain to a sea may have been the result of earthquakes,³ possibly caused by the cataclysmic devastation brought on as God rained fire and brimstone on the cities.

Archaeological Indications of Location

While many archaeologists have suggested sites under the Dead Sea or along its southeastern shore as the location of Sodom, Steven Collins has carried out excavations at Tall el-Hammam, northeast of the Dead Sea. This area has evidence of “massive destruction”⁴ that is dated about the time of Abraham and is located in what is known as the “Jordan Disk”, just north

¹ Willem van Hattem, “Once Again: Sodom and Gomorrah,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1981), 87, American Schools of Oriental Research, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3209864> accessed April 15, 2012).

² John Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 57.

³ J. Penrose Harland, “Sodom and Gomorrah: The Destruction of the Cities of the Plain.” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 6, no 3 (September 1943), 42, The American Schools of Oriental Research, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3209243> (accessed April 15, 2012).

⁴ Gordon Govier, "Looking Back," *Christianity Today* 52, no. 4 (April 2008): 15, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 12, 2012).

of the Dead Sea and home to at least fourteen archaeological sites.⁵ Whether the city under Tall el-Hammam or another of these sites is the biblical Sodom is not known, but it is possible that these are at least some of the “cities of the plain” mentioned in Genesis.

Charles Pellegrino argues that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, if they existed at all, were further east in what is today Iraq. Part of his reasoning is that the kings that fought against Sodom and Gomorrah were from that region and would not have traveled a long distance to fight. Also, the names of these cities have a “distinctly Mesopotamian flavor”⁶. This conclusion by a self-proclaimed agnostic cannot be used to prove the biblical account incorrect, as influence from one region may reach to another, and there could have been a good but currently unknown reason to go to battle against these cities. Pellegrino also points out that as he stood in the Jordan Valley, he took note that there was nothing there that even resembled a plain.⁷ However, the cataclysmic disaster that Genesis describes could have easily altered a beautiful plain into something beyond recognition. For those fortunate enough to have never seen it in person, wartime television feeds of cannonballs and hand grenades indicate what kind of damage can be done to a landscape by an exploding object. It is easy to imagine the reconfiguration of a land that would take place under a barrage of brimstone and fire, especially a land rich with flammable minerals.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus unquestioningly places Sodom in the vicinity of the Dead Sea. He describes a place called Lake Asphaltitis, in which it was very hard to sink anything. His description of the lake includes “black clods of bitumen”⁸ that float on it that and were used to caulk ships and as an ingredient in medicine.⁹ This is, of course, a reference to the Dead Sea. Nearby is what he calls “the country of Sodom” which although it previously was fruitful, has been burned, and he claims to be able to see “remainders of that divine fire”¹⁰ as well as traces of the five cities of the plain.

THE SIN OF SODOM AND GOMMORAH

What was the sin of Sodom that caused God to destroy her and her sister cities in such a dramatic manner? Most people realize that the term “Sodomite” has come to mean in the vernacular “homosexual.” Is this a fair judgment? Did God destroy the cities of the plain for

⁵ Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project, “A Cautionary Word about ‘Biblical’ Sites”, www.tallelhammam.com (accessed April 13, 2012).

⁶ Charles Pellegrino, *Return to Sodom and Gomorrah: Bible Stories from Archaeologists*. New York: Random House, 1994, 178-179.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, in *The Works of Josephus: New Updated Edition*, translated by William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987; reprint 1988), vi. 479.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 479-481.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 484.

homosexuality or some other sin?

The search for an answer to this question must necessarily begin with the Bible. Moses' inspired view of the city was that "the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly" (Genesis 13:13). The extent of the wickedness of Sodom is indicated by how a righteous man such as Abraham viewed it. Abraham's feelings toward this city are revealed through the account in Genesis 14, when the kings from the east attacked Sodom and Gomorrah. When Lot was captured, Abraham stepped in and rescued his nephew as well as everything else that had been taken from Sodom. The king of Sodom was appreciative and offered Abraham an outstanding gift—all the non-human spoil that he had recovered. To the reader, Abraham's response seems curt. He informed the king that he had promised "that I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet...any thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich" (Genesis 14:23). Abraham apparently wanted for the world to know that his riches came because of God's blessings rather than the generosity of the king of a wicked city. Abraham was not just being unsociable, as he was willing to give tithes to Melchizedek, king of Salem. He was just not willing to allow the treasures of wicked Sodom to make him rich.

The Question of Homosexuality

The sin of Sodom (and by extension the other cities of the plain) has been historically labeled as homosexuality. However, not all scholars readily accept this to be a given fact. Morschauser goes against the traditional interpretation, positing that Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom that fateful evening because he was on official duty as the last line of defense for anyone wanting to infiltrate the city.¹¹ Someone was always on guard because the people of Sodom would have been experiencing a heightened sense of security after their skirmish with the kings of the east, described in Genesis 14. The fact that Lot purposely greeted these visitors without the Bible indicating that he knew they were angels lends credence to his view. Morschauser believes that the men's desire to "know" these visitors is merely an opportunity to interrogate the strangers to determine if they were spies¹² rather than an attempt at homosexual behavior. Lot's offer to the men of Sodom to accept his unmarried daughters in exchange for leaving the prisoners alone was, according to Morschauser, not actually a sacrifice of his children, but a temporary hostage exchange that would end when the visitors left the city.¹³ His daughters would serve as collateral until Lot finished being hospitable to the visitors.

At the outset, Morschauser's view seems plausible, especially when he claims knowledge of ancient customs. However, is this interpretation strong enough to cause a rejection of the conventional view? Even Walton, who goes out of his way to question conventional

¹¹ Scott Morschauser, "'Hospitality', Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1-9," *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* 27, no. 4 (June 2003), 467, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 12, 2012).

¹² *Ibid.*, 472.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 477.

understanding of the Bible, accepts homosexuality as the primary transgression of Sodom.¹⁴ Several reasons exist to prefer the traditional understanding. First, the Hebrew term *yada*, translated in the King James Version as “know”, can be used to refer to a sexual relationship. Genesis 4:1 states that “Adam knew [*yada*] Eve his wife; and she conceived...” Whether or not this is the meaning in Genesis 19:5, it is at least linguistically possible. The same term is used three verses later in reference to Lot’s daughters who have never “known” men—an obvious reference to a sexual relationship.

Second, the translators of several major Bible versions have interpreted it this way. The New International Version and the New Living Translation say that the men of Sodom wanted to “have sex with them.” The New King James Version uses the word “know” but adds the qualifier “carnally” in brackets. The New American Standard Bible uses the term “have relations.” Additionally, the rendering of this phrase in the Septuagint is that of sexual intercourse.¹⁵

Third, the context indicates this interpretation. The fact that Lot offered his daughters in place of the angels, explicitly stating their virginity, leads the reader to believe that sexual purposes or at least some sort of physical violence was intended by the mob. Additionally, Lot knew what the men of Sodom who had surrounded his house wanted, and he pleaded with them to “do not so wickedly” (Genesis 19:7). Lot understood that whatever their intentions were, they were evil.

Fourth, the Bible itself leads one to believe that homosexuality was one of the sins of Sodom. Ezekiel said that those in Sodom “committed abomination” (Ezekiel 16:48-50) before God. The committing of abomination may be linked to Leviticus 18:22, which uses the same word to describe homosexuality. The pride found in the men of Sodom is “closely related to a willingness to twist even the most basic and fundamental aspect of our being, our sexuality, and to flaunt this in the face of God.”¹⁶

The circumstances of Sodom are strangely similar to another account related in the book of Judges and lends support to the view that homosexuality was one of the primary transgressions of Sodom. In this account, a Levite’s concubine ran away from him and he went in search of her. On their return trip, they stopped in Gibeah and were welcomed into an old man’s house for the night. Soon after, the men of the town began beating the old man’s door asking him to release the traveler to them. The intention of this group was obviously not merely interrogation, as the old man offered his daughter and the concubine of the traveler in exchange for the safety of the Levite. All night, they “knew” (*yada*) and abused these women. The concubine barely made it back to the house by morning and was found dead on the doorstep when the sun came up. If the people of this town were “knowing” their visitors by taking part in

¹⁴ Walton, *NIV Application Commentary*, 489.

¹⁵ James White and Jefferey Niell, *The Same Sex Controversy: Defending and Clarifying the Bible’s Message About Homosexuality*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2002), 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

a benign ancient custom similar to doing background checks, then this woman should have lived. The similarities between this event and that of Sodom lead one to believe that both involved physical (and sexual) abuse.

The question that may arise is if the men of Sodom are homosexual, why would Lot offer his daughters to them? No less than three possibilities exist. First, at least some of the men were also interested in women, or there would have been no children in the town. Toensing, writing from a reader-response and feminist view, argues that the presence of women and obvious heterosexuality in Sodom prove that homosexuality was not one of the downfalls of the city.¹⁷ However, honest evaluation of the text does not require that *every* man in town was *solely* homosexual. Second, Lot may have been attempting to buy time by his offer, knowing that these men were not interested in his daughters.¹⁸ Third, Lot may have been merely intending to “prick the conscience of the mob”¹⁹ by making an offer that he knew they would not accept, just to stress the point that they should not treat strangers worse than they would treat the daughter of a citizen. The first of these views, that at least some of the men of Sodom were not solely homosexual, seems the most valid when the gravity of the situation and the depravity of the men of Sodom is understood from the text.

The men of Sodom, guilty of homosexuality, did not want anyone to tell them that they were wrong. They complained that Lot, a visitor in town, would attempt to be their judge (Genesis 19:9). The same attitude is seen today. Organizations have been founded to fight against those who are considered “anti-gay”. One of these, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), invests “countless hours of media advocacy to send important messages against homophobia and discrimination.”²⁰ The use of such negative terms cannot be coincidental—the message they desire to send is that homosexuality is normal and those who stand against it are out of touch and judgmental.

Other Sins of Sodom and Gomorrah

Although the sin of homosexuality is the most widely known in Sodom and her sister cities, there were many other acts that angered God. A very clear indication of how God felt about Sodom is found in Ezekiel’s prophecy to Jerusalem. Because Jerusalem had rebelled against God, she was compared to Samaria (an insult in itself) and to Sodom. In fact, the sins of Jerusalem exceeded those of Sodom. What were the sins of Sodom? A sample list is provided.

¹⁷ Holly Joan Toensing, "WOMEN OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH: Collateral Damage in the War against Homosexuality?" *Journal Of Feminist Studies In Religion (Indiana University Press)* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 61-74. *Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 19, 2012).

¹⁸ White and Niell, *Controversy*, 35.

¹⁹ Walton, *NIV Application Commentary*, 477.

²⁰ Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, “GLAAD As a Watchdog”, www.glaad.org/about (accessed April 15, 2012).

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)

Other than the abomination of homosexuality, the inhabitants of Sodom were guilty of having so much prosperity and idle time that they were lifted up with pride and didn't help those in need. Because of this, God destroyed them.

Some believe that the most prominent sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was that they were inhospitable to their guests. Often this is stressed to the exclusion of homosexuality. Part of the argument is that in the New Testament Jesus refers to the destruction of these cities without mentioning homosexuality. In addition to the fact that the men of Sodom mistreated Lot's visitors, Jesus says, "And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city" (Matthew 10:14-15). Although the Sodomites did indeed mistreat their visitors, it must be noted that Jesus did not here or in any other place label Sodom's sin as inhospitality.²¹ Jesus was comparing the intensity of the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah to what would come upon the inhabitants of other cities who would reject the message of the gospel.

DISASTERS AND THE PURPOSES OF GOD

As a result of the sin of the "cities of the plain", God caused it to rain fire and brimstone, which destroyed the cities. To the uninformed eye, the cities were destroyed by a very rare natural disaster rather than a specific act of God. This brings up the question of whether many of the catastrophes taking place in the world today could be God using natural disasters to work His will and mete out judgment. The biblical account of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain indicate that this is the case. The flood in Noah's day serves as another example, as well as the disruption of languages at Babel. Job also experienced great suffering at the hand of what may be labeled as natural disasters. Beside the murderous assault of the Sabeans and Chaldeans that killed his children, fire, wind, and disease rocked Job's life. If all of these took place to fulfill God's will, it opens the possibility that modern disasters have the same purpose.

When faced with this possibility, Fretheim prefers to see God as using disasters to "judge" rather than "punish." Punishing means that God is initiating a penalty on someone, while judging refers more to an effect brought on a person because of his own actions.²² Therefore, it would be preferable to think of such disasters as the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the various earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes of all times as repercussions of man's sin rather than an anger-driven act of God. Although God allows these, man is at fault

²¹ White and Niell, *Controversy*, 46.

²² Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 48.

because of his rebellion. In a prophecy to Jeremiah, God stressed this fact when He said, “I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto my words, nor to my law, but rejected it” (Jeremiah 6:19). God is not at fault when punishment is meted out—the blame rests squarely at the feet of men.

Moses understood the judgments of God’s wrath and warned the Israelites under his care that if they turned away from serving God strangers would come from other lands and see that the land of Israel has turned to “brimstone, and salt, and burning...like the overthrow of Sodom, and Gomorrah...which the LORD overthrew in his anger...” (Deuteronomy 29:23).

Although God promised to never again destroy the earth with a flood, He will destroy it with the largest disaster in history. Peter prophesied that “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10). In the very next verse, Peter offers the response man should have to this warning with his admonition that “seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness” (2 Peter 3:11). God’s involvement with man through the use of what may look like natural disasters should elicit a response of repentance and obedience that affects the way he lives.

CONCLUSION

Rather than the account of Sodom and Gomorrah being a fable made up by Moses as he wrote Genesis or a legend propagated by the storytellers of Israel, these are actual cities that were destroyed by God because of the sin of their inhabitants at a specific moment in history. The swift and thorough judgment that God pronounced on the “cities of the plain” shows that He is actively involved in the affairs of His creation. This account has been recorded in the Scriptures for a purpose—it serves as a reminder to man that he is responsible to God for his actions. When God turned “the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes” He was “making them an ensample unto those that should after live ungodly” (II Peter 2:6). Just as God could not overlook the sins of homosexuality, pride, and idleness that He saw in those cities, He will not be able to ignore these in the world at large. He will destroy the earth in much the same way as He destroyed Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities in the region. The ungodly would do well to heed the warning, and the godly should be thankful for the grace of God that will allow them to escape the destruction just as He delivered Lot, who “vexed his righteous soul” (II Peter 2:8) with the wickedness that he saw around him.

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