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Genesis 19 and Judges 19

God's Angels and Lot in Sodom and Gibeah's Crime

Homosexuality is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis. Since Judges 19 deals with quite similar events, both passages are treated simultaneously. The chapters in Genesis represent godless circumstances in Sodom, Judges deals with the moral decay in Israel shortly before Samuel.

At its core, the passages tell the following incident: When strangers, two of God's angels, come into the Canaanite town of Sodom, they aren't greeted as hospitably as it is the custom in the Orient. Ultimately, none other than Lot, a foreigner himself, grants them accommodation. In Judges 19, it is a Levite who is passing through Gibeah-Benjamin and can't find a place for the night with any of the townspeople. Here, a descendant of the tribe of Ephraim receives him.

After nightfall, the citizen's mood changes from being indifferent to the strangers to aggressiveness with a clear sexual undertone. In Sodom as well as in Gibeah, a mob flocks in front of the house where the guests are staying and demand that the strangers be given to them so that they can 'know' them – a phrase that in the biblical context doesn't simply mean 'to get to know someone' but that refers to 'sexual intercourse', which is confirmed by the further developments of the story.

In the Ancient Near East, the right to hospitality was holy and the host vouched for the security of his guest with his life. Since surrendering strangers to others would mean an utter violation of this right, Lot as well as the Ephraimite go to the extent of offering their virgin daughters to the mob. In Genesis, the Angels prevent any further escalation of this conflict by virtue of their powers. In Judges, the Levite drags his concubine out of the house where the men abuse and rape her the whole night until she drops dead in the morning.

Both cases primarily center on a homosexual act, even if only intended. Nevertheless, it is a violent (!) sexual act, a gang rape, and no further discussion is needed to justify that this behavior is to be condemned. Then again for this reason, these passages aren't suitable as arguments against homosexuality in general as much as the actual heterosexual rape in Gibeah would never be put forward as arguments against sexuality as such.

And still, these two events are of great interest for our problem. Let us take a closer look: Logically that whole mob cannot merely consist of homosexual men (in terms of a homosexual disposition), not even only a majority of them. It must be heterosexuals who apparently hope to gain some special 'kick' and sexual excitement from a homosexual act, and a violent at that, too. In Sodom, '... the men of the city [...], both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house' (Gen 19:4). In Gibeah, it was 'the men of the city' (Judg 19:22). Later, the Levite tells: 'And the leaders of Gibeah rose against me and surrounded the house against me by night' (Judg 20:4). Both times, a majority of the (male) citizens was involved, but it would be absurd to claim that both towns' citizenships were mainly homosexual. In fact, heterosexual men practiced homosexual acts to gain an extraordinary sensation from it, but in the end they were also 'satisfied' with raping a woman. Lot and the Ephraimite from Gibeah judged them accordingly, which becomes clear when they offer them their daughters as an alternative. The Levite's pitiable concubine would

have probably been a lot safer in a modern gay club than on the streets of Gibeah.

Furthermore, here the Bible provides us with profound insight into one of human sexuality's saddest aspects – its interrelationship with power and violence. Exerting power over another person violently will elevate an otherwise purely sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, sexuality also serves as a pleasurable instrument to exercise power and control over another person, who is thereby subjugated. This corresponds quite well to the angry comments of the Sodomites towards Lot, emphasizing that their actions should serve to show who is in charge in town (Gen 19:9).

It is considered a particularly humiliating act to force a man to take on a woman's role, when a male rapes another male, especially (but not only) in societies with a strong gender hierarchy. As prisoners of war tell us again and again, violent sexual acts of men against men typically belong to the arsenal of torture, harassment and humiliation until today. However, this doesn't have anything to do with homosexuality as an individual's sexual orientation. On the contrary, just as it was the case in Sodom and Gomorrah, these practices often come from a group effect that heats up and evens out all inhibition thresholds.

Sodom and Gomorrah already have proverbial importance in the Bible as Sodom is often used as a comparison when the writer wants to point out extremely serious sins. A thorough look into the Bible confirms that not homosexuality was the reason for God's judgement over Sodom and Gomorrah, but that the events described in Gen 19 constitute merely a specific illustration of general ungodliness and brutalization. Interestingly, the so called 'sins of Sodom' seldom consist in sexual and never in homosexual wrongdoings, but mostly in arrogance and rebellion against God, idolatry and intentional refusal of God. Especially the abuse of power and brutal oppression of the weak we find very often as a typical 'sin of Sodom' (Jes 1:10.17.23; 13:11.19; Jer 3:9.15; Hes 16:49).

On top of that, the incident in Gibeah-Benjamin also shows that homosexual practices must have been well-known. Evangelicals like to claim that homosexuality in Israel was considered wrong in the first place and that it practically didn't occur. In these circles this is commonly thought to be the reason why only very few passages in the Bible deal with this topic at all. It can, however, hardly be assumed that the men of Gibeah were spontaneously thinking of homosexual acts for the first time in the situation described above. Obviously, they already knew of similar practices. Had they been strikingly different from all the other Israelites in this respect, the whole tribe of Benjamin would have scarcely been prepared not only to accept this extreme disreputable behavior but also to show their solidarity with the citizens of Gibeah and to go to war to defend them against the other tribes as happened later.

The events in Gibeah suggest that the Israelites not only knew about homosexual practices from their neighboring peoples, but that they may have adopted them equally and may have put them into practice from time to time. But at least in the examples of these chapters, the actors were heterosexual men.