

Surviving Fire: Looking Down on Sodom

by John Linscheid

“And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and beheld, and lo, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.”

Genesis 19:27-28

As I lean into elderhood, I join that older man, looking down on the cities that burdened my people with the epithet sodomite. Silently, I join his earlier protest to an even more ancient God, “Far be it from thee . . . to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. . . . Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25).

The legacy of brimstone has cooled lately. When my Gay Old Soulmate and I return to Topeka, Kansas, to visit family, we still drive by the Fred Phelps family, feeding the old fires with their God-Hate-Fags signs on Gage Boulevard. Desperate “family values” spokespersons stir the coals occasionally on 24-hour news channels. But the heat dies down. The smoke recedes that once clouded my past.

I grew up in a land where “sodomy” was largely illegal—at least the kind enjoyed among men. When the Supreme Court upheld that judgment (*Bowers v. Harwick*), I was well into middle age. As recently as May 2012, North Carolina voters banned marriage for people like me. Only with the November 2012 ballot measures affirming marriage for all in Maine, Washington, and Maryland, did my anxiety abate. Until then, I knew (and still fear on some level) that any small shift in the political winds might reheat the embers and whip them into flame.

Will Sodom and Gomorrah finally be obliterated as the home for homophobia as completely as the cities themselves have been lost in the desert? Or will they embody other moralisms?

Ever since Abraham, people have looked down upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Some biblical passages make the cities a metaphors for utter destruction (Isa. 1:9-10; Lam. 4:6). Others, paradigms of wickedness (Isa 13:19; Jer. 49:17-18). Jesus himself insulted Capernaum by comparing it unfavorably to Sodom (Matt. 11:23-24).

“The righteous “ are still slain with “the wicked” by those of us who claim to know the mind of God. Even traditional “gay interpretations” of scripture seek mostly to distance ourselves from the story. We absolve ourselves from responsibility to learn the lessons of the story—even when we understand the story differently from many evangelical detractors.

Sunday school neatly cut out both the story’s beginning and ending. In Sunday school, the story began with Genesis 19, where the angels, hell-bent on destruction, entered the city. It ended with Lot’s wife standing transfixed as a pillar of salt.

Everything about the lesson taught us to defer responsibility to “authority.” Do what you are told, or you will wind up a smoldering ruin or a pillar of salt. God knows best.

Ironically, the story of Sodom begins with Abraham challenging God to reconsider the planned destruction (Gen. 18:22-33). Abraham demands that God face what will happen and who will suffer. The story ends not with Lot’s wife, but with the two daughters who seize their victimization and turn it—as best they can—toward a better future (Gen. 19:30-38).

In the beginning, Abraham demands that God take responsibility. In the end, two women conclude that if God will not do so, they must take responsibility for themselves.

How strange that evangelical Christianity makes unquestioning acquiescence the model of faith. The Hebrew scriptures so often do the opposite. Abraham challenges the God who makes covenant with him. Sarah, who laughs behind God's back, gives birth to a nation. Later in the story, Moses will argue incessantly with God. Jeremiah will protest divine injustice. A Canaanite woman will change Jesus' mind about who can be saved. Jacob was neither the first nor the last to exhibit faith by wrestling with God.

But Sunday school twisted the verses until the moral of the story became compliant obedience to God. Look at what it did with Lot's wife. She "sinned" so innocently. Her home—nearly everyone of the wives and children who made up her social system—was burning. She had watched her husband attempt to throw her daughters to a rape gang. Did she really want to flee with such a man? Only a frozen heart could resist looking back in such circumstances. Yet she was transformed into a pillar of salt.

Do not trust your natural inclinations, the Sunday-school lesson concluded. They will lead you astray. The God of my youth (and of modern evangelicalism) exercises absolute power for the sake of absolute power. "One Way!" We used to say, pointing to heaven. A good heart is no substitute for correct Christian ideology. Beware of detours for compassion. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

In contrast, the early church's Irenaeus found salvation in Lot's wife. He considered her a type of the church: . . . his wife remained in [the territory of] Sodom, no longer corruptible flesh, but a pillar of salt which endures forever; and by those natural processes which appertain to the human race, indicating that the Church also, which is the salt of the earth, and subject to human sufferings; and while entire members are often taken away from it, the pillar of salt still endures, thus typifying the foundation of the faith which maketh strong, and sends forward, children to their Father. (*Against Heresies*, XXXI.3)

Today, Irenaeus's interpretation sounds as odd as the one that made a brief appearance during my late high-school and early college years. My Uncle Clyde, who enjoyed noting the quirky aspects of religion, introduced our family to the writings of Erik von Danniken. Von Danniken's book, *Chariots of the Gods*, hypothesized that the ancient biblical texts were primitive human recollections of visitations from extraterrestrials. Sodom and Gomorrah, the book suggested, had been laid waste with atomic weaponry.

My father leaned toward less exotic, more mainstream liberal, explanations. He knew his Bible well. Before state requirements crowded them out, Daddy taught Bible classes at Goessel Rural High School. A staunch pacifist, he considered biblical accounts of God's violence were mistaken human interpretations of events. In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, he suggested several possibilities. Perhaps a volcano erupted near the cities. Maybe an earthquake caused a great fire. People wanted to explain a desert rock that looked like a woman. It was Daddy's answer to Abraham's question. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Yes, God must do right. And God is love; so love is right. Therefore the destruction did not come from God. People just *thought* God did it.

My father's explanations satisfied my young mind. But the popular legacy of a terrorist God still influenced my heart. The conviction that I could not satisfy God held me hostage.

I took that arbitrary, abusive God with me to college. And I served that God well as I awoke to my own homosexuality. I sacrificed my natural inclinations to that God. I hated myself for that God. I prayed without ceasing for that God to transform me from the wretched sinner that I was. I remember screaming at that God for making me homosexual. I screamed louder still that God turned a deaf ear to my pleas for deliverance. I could almost hear God laughing from heaven as God condemned me to everlasting torment. But why should that God change me when that God's authority rested upon my suffering? My every squirm confirmed that God's authority over me. The suspicion that God had destroyed the Sodomites for sexual reasons only compounded my fears. I did not want to be held responsible to "work out my salvation" in the fear and trembling of my own sexuality.

Since Augustine, Christian writers have glimpsed mostly sexual fires through Sodom's smoke. The term "sodomite" implies that gay men are worthy of fiery deaths. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sodom served as a primary theological weapon in the war on my people. The controversies in the churches concerning homosexuality focused Sodom's meaning entirely on the question of "the sin of Sodom."

In 1955, D. S. Bailey challenged the sexual interpretation of the word know in Genesis 19:5 (*Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*). He suggested that the sin of Sodom was inhospitality alone. The men only want to know who the visitors were.

Subsequent scholars continued to focus on Sodom's sin. Some conceded the possibility that "to know" had a sexual meaning. They argued, however, that the inhospitality and violence of the event, not its sexuality, brought down the fire.

Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott noted that the men of Sodom attempted rape (*Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*). In some ancient cultures, victorious men humiliated men they had conquered by "reducing" them to the status of women. (I've yet to read the interpreter who proclaims misogyny to be sin of Sodom.) Wars over the Bible, like more conventional ones, put blinders on us all. Both straight and gay interpreters became obsessed with the detail of Sodom's sin—what it was and what it was not. Salvation was at stake. If the sin was homosexuality, gay and lesbian people must repent to gain God's favor. If the sin was inhospitality, the dominant culture would have to open its doors.

The story itself, to our dismay, appears unconcerned with the details of Sodom's wickedness. God's only rationale for the impending judgment is that "the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave" (Gen. 18:20 RSV). Abraham's challenge suggests that not even ten righteous could be found there (Gen. 18:22-33). In Genesis 19:4, the repeated phrases likewise suggest that every male inhabitant participated in attacking Lot's guests: "the men of the city, the men of Sodom, young and old, all the people to the last man." Does this betray the author's concern to justify God's action? Or does it simply build the drama of the story? Whatever the author's motives, scholars generally agree that our use of the text to discern the actual sin of Sodom arises primarily from the contemporary debate rather than the text itself. Except for a passage in Ezekiel, the Hebrew scriptures (even outside Genesis 18-19) do not emphasize the *nature* of Sodom's sin.

In the Hebrew scriptures' references to Sodom, only Ezekiel outlines any specific sins:

"Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them, when I saw it." (Ezek. 16:49-50).

The rest simply make the cities paradigms of wickedness or benchmarks for destruction (Isa. 1:9; 3:9; 13:19; Jer. 23:14; Lam. 4:6; Ezek. 16:53-54). New Testament authors follow suit (Matt. 10:15; 11:23-24; Luke 17:28-30; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7).

Those of us who want to settle what sin prompted God to destroy Sodom will not be answered easily by texts of Scripture. They leave us to debate such questions among ourselves. But if Scripture does not focus on the nature of Sodom's sin, why have we come to focus so heavily on it today?

John J. McNeill, a psychotherapist and former Jesuit priest who has long had a ministry with gay and lesbian people, notes that every child would "rather be a devil in a world ruled by a good God than a saint in a world ruled by the devil." Maybe that's why we need to believe that God's hands were tied—the Sodomites brought their destruction upon themselves. God was not responsible.

But does our preoccupation with Sodom's sin betray a deeper discomfort? Why is it not enough to simply state that the Sodomites were wicked? Why do even gay and lesbian interpreters spend so much time discerning the "real" wickedness of Sodom (though we do it to argue that it was not homosexuality)?

Do queer theologians, who note the rapacity or inhospitality of the city's inhabitants, unwittingly pitch camp

with right-wing theologians who preach Sodom as the homosexual archetype? In both arguments we seek refuge by emphasizing our difference from those who were destroyed. Both theologies arise from our fear of destruction. We must reassure ourselves that the voice is wrong which whispers, "you too deserve the fire." Formula evangelism plays on this fear: "For all have fallen short . . ." "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked . . ." Then it offers a magical trip (all expenses paid by God) to the realm of righteousness. Once there, we look down, reminding ourselves that now we really aren't like them. We are not responsible—at least, not for anyone beyond ourselves.

In all the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, who takes responsibility?

Not Lot. He bows to convention. (In our culture the righteous man would save his daughters and throw out the strangers; that culture's social code demanded the opposite.) Lot takes no initiative. He has to be dragged from the doomed city. Even then, he complains (Gen. 19:15-20).

Lot's wife takes more responsibility than he does. She does not deny her connection with those being destroyed. The place might well have murdered her daughter, had the visitors not intervened. (That is how the story goes in Judges 19.) Is it for the other wives and daughters left behind? She looks back—and takes the consequences.

As a middle-aged pacifist, trained since birth to idealize the love of enemies, I find this compelling. I have not always been so ready to acknowledge my connections. But the idea fits my mythology and I find it easy to praise the faithfulness of Lot's wife. I find the responsibility of Lot's daughters more troubling (Gen. 19:30-38). In a strange ending, Lot takes his daughters to the desolate hills to dwell in a cave. As readers, we know that Abraham lives and that the destruction was limited to one valley. However, no one has informed Lot and his daughters.

These two daughters have narrowly escaped gang rape. They have seen their mother die and their world go up in flames. By their knowledge, only they and their father survive on earth. The elder daughter says to her sister, ". . . there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth" (Gen. 19:31b). They appear to have become earth's last victims.

The story disturbs me. I can envision two scenarios. In the first, Lot commits the incest but reports it as his daughters' responsibility. It would not be the first or last time a man said, "she got me drunk and seduced me." In the second, the two daughters take stock of their situation. What will it take to insure the survival of humanity? The only man available is taboo. He has proven himself willing to risk their lives for the sake of social convention.

The daughters do what the powerless must do. They act within the limits of their power. They use the terrible resources available to them: some wine and a weak-willed Lot. Thus they "preserve offspring" (RSV) for themselves and—as far as they know—for all humanity. They become mothers to two nations (Gen. 19:37-38).

We recoil in disgust. We know that they are not the last people on earth; we can judge them unworthy. I expect that is what the editor of Genesis intended. The editor had the luxury to leave an audience titillated by the shameful illegitimacy of two of Judah's rival nations.

Today, the trend (well it feels like a trend) is toward legalizing marriage for all. But I wonder, does it redraw one boundary of shame and legitimacy only to erect another? For many gay marriage normalizes us by putting us on the same plane with our heterosexual neighbors. See! We are not just kinky and promiscuous. But I hear with mixed emotions the suggestion that society sanction one form of gay or lesbian family or relationship. Like many, I fear we will forget the wisdom of those who worked out their own salvation with fear and trembling. For I have also heard the voices of men who took the circumstances given them in parks and public toilets, in bars and secret bedrooms, and sanctified with love what they discovered there. It was taboo. It will not be celebrated by history. (If society legalizes same-sex marriage, it may even be denounced by the gay and lesbian mainstream.) But those men knew a truth that Lot's daughters knew. They made a sacrament of

what was given them. And they gave rise to a lavender nation.

For years I stood with Abraham, in silent judgment on the story of Sodom. I accepted the patriarch's question as the ultimate question. I wanted to make God responsible. I wanted to blame the difficulties I encountered as a gay man on God. I wanted to scream over and over, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" But perhaps the text poses a more significant question. Shall not the oppressed of all the earth do our best? Will we do what good we can with what we've been given?

Where does our responsibility as queer people lie? Shall we take the risk that Lot's wife took and admit the connections we have with other oppressed people—and recognize that some have it even worse than we do? Will we admit the connection if it threatens to leave us paralyzed with horror?

Will we take responsibility like Lot's daughters? Shall not we, who do not always possess great power, take responsibility to preserve our own and others' humanity?

That may mean fleeing to the hills in league with former oppressors, as the daughters did with Lot. Sometimes survival is all we can manage. It may mean manipulating boundaries of taboo and tradition as the daughters also did. Sometimes the oppressed do not have the luxury to contemplate systematic or even situation ethics. Finally, we are responsible. No amount of victimhood takes that away. It may limit our options and determine some choices. It will not assure a good name in history. Lot's two daughters bear children, Moab and Benammi (ancestor of the Ammonites), who will be scorned and excluded from Israel to the tenth generation (Deut. 23:3). or now, their mothers imagine them to be the world's hope—not entirely without consequence. A Moabite woman, Ruth, will become an ancestor of King David and, in Christian tradition, the ancestor of Jesus, the Messiah (Matt. 1:2-16).

As I look through the smoke with Abraham, a different vision emerges from the valley. Yes, I trace an epithet to a city on that plain. But I also trace a Savior there, one who took responsibility. He looked back at the world's pain. He took the rough circumstances given him: a few short years, a peasant world, a cross. And he brought me into the presence of God.

I stand here, a sodomite in the flesh. And I trace my spiritual roots to Sodom as well.

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