

## The Clobber Verses, Part 2 “The Sin of Sodom”

*Genesis 19:1-29      Judges 19:1-30*  
*Isaiah 1:10-17 [and Is. 3:9, related]*  
*Jeremiah 23:14*  
*Ezekiel 16:49*

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We've all heard someone refer to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah being homosexuality, and this scripture account being the basis for considering Homosexual practice and LGBTQ+ people as sinful. All of us likely reject that idea, but we still find these same words in our own Bibles. So what are we supposed to make of them? How are we supposed to understand them?

### **First Things First: What We Believe about Scripture**

“It’s plain and simple – just read your Bible!” It’s a common expression. The problem is that most of the Bible can’t just be understood by simply reading; it has to be read contextually – understanding the writer’s intention, point of view, cultural/historical location, etc. The truth is, when people say “The Bible clearly says...” it actually rarely does. And when someone says that, they’re often not stating “what the Bible clearly says,” they’re actually stating “what someone told them the Bible means.”

From the outset of any Bible study, we need to remember that as Presbyterians, we do not believe in the concept of biblical “inerrancy” or “infallibility.” In other words, we do not believe that the words found in the Bible were essentially dictated by God to the person, or people, doing the writing. They are the words of the writers themselves, who were indeed inspired by God to write, but who nevertheless remained fallible human beings inextricably bound by the limitations of their own time and place. So while we place a very high significance to the scriptures, we do not believe the Bible “literally,” in the sense that every word comes directly from God.

Here's how our “Confession of 1967” explains what we believe about the Bible, and how it needs to be understood and interpreted:

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9.27 The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

9.28 The New Testament is the recorded testimony of apostles to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The Old Testament bears witness to God’s faithfulness in [their] covenant with Israel and points the way to the fulfillment of

[their] purpose in Christ. The Old Testament is indispensable to understanding the New, and is not itself fully understood without the New.

**9.29 *The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of [humans], conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken [the] word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that [God] will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.***

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So to be sure – it is perfectly acceptable within our tradition of biblical interpretation to say “Based on our current knowledge of science and the world, I just think that the ancient writers just got this one wrong, and it doesn’t apply to us at all today.” But we’ll still quite possibly have acquaintances who have a different, more literal or inerrantist view of scripture who will want to hold up these “clobber verses” as operative. So we should understand that even if they want us to play on their turf, as it were, there are serious scholarly reasons why these texts do not mean what they think.

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### **The story of Sodom and Gomorrah (versions 1 and 2)**

Begin the study by re-reading the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. Then, read the less-known, even more gruesome, story found in Judges 19, which is often thought to share the same origin story as the Sodom/Gomorrah account.

Note the commonalities between the two stories:

- Both involve an outsider traveler who needs and is seeking hospitality
- In both cases, a local resident extends hospitality, asking, even begging, the strangers not to stay in the town square out of fear
- In both, the host’s home is surrounded – but with a difference; see below
- Both stories involve the threat of sexual violence; in one the violence actually occurs

In the Genesis account, many English translations say that Lot’s house is surrounded by “men.” Actually, the more accurate Hebrew translation is “all the townspeople;” great and small, young and old, and by extension, male and female. In the Judges account, the crowd is ostensibly all male.

In the both accounts, we are told that the crowd wants to force the guests into non-consensual sex – in other words, rape. However, since the Genesis account, the crowd consists of men, women, boys, and girls, the issue in play is not a matter of homosexuality, but humiliation, a lack of hospitality, a violent putting of the visitors in their place as a show of force. In the Judges account, the story is retold as the rape of a woman – the concubine – by men. Clearly, the underlying point in this version of the story is not homosexuality, but the violence, the rape, the denial of hospitality and human dignity.

Remember from our first session the honor/shame mindset of the ancient world—specifically, the supposed superiority of males and inferiority of females:

*[It is] an issue of the preservation of male honor – specifically, what they perceive to be a superior place of honor over women’s place. The idea is that a man shames himself by supposedly assuming the place of a woman by being penetrated, and the penetrating man shames himself by being willing to cause the other man to be so “shamed.”*

The people of Sodom intend to “shame” the visitors in order to let them know who’s boss – and that the bosses don’t welcome people who “aren’t from around here” who might upset the status quo. This becomes obvious in the story, when the crowd criticizes Lot himself as an “outside agitator” - even though he’s lived in the small town of about 1,000 people for 20 years or more.

Further indicating that the Genesis story is not a story about homosexual sex, let alone *consensual* homosexual practice – and as is quite clear in the Judges version - Lot doesn’t see the crowd as being primarily concerned with homosexual sex, as he offers to send out his two virgin daughters to the crowd. Clearly, he understands that their intentions are subjugation and humiliation.

Horrifyingly in both Genesis and Judges, the females – those of lower status in the operational honor/shame hierarchy – are offered, by Lot, their father; and by the Levite, the husband of the concubine, who he physically tosses out to the crowd to be gang-raped. , which would hardly have been any interest to the crowd if the issue was homosexuality.

Remember also that we’re told the crowd in Sodom is made up of all the town – by definition, clearly not all of them would have been gay or merely seeking homosexual sex.

Let’s take a look at the other references to Sodom and Gomorrah, and what the issue was with them (there are a few other mentions, but they’re too vague for use here). Read through the Isaiah and Jeremiah passages together. Then, let’s look at Ezekiel 16:49:

*This was the sin of your sister, Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me.” – Ezekiel 16:49-50a*

Clearly, homosexuality – much less consensual homosexuality – isn’t even on the list of what God, through Ezekiel, declares to be the “sin of Sodom.”

Finally, let’s jump to the New Testament momentarily, where Jesus himself mentions Sodom:

*But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.” – Luke 10:10-12 (Matthew 10:14-15)*

Jesus continues this emphasis on the sin of Sodom being a lack of hospitality and sharing of one’s resources with others, especially visitors/outsideers.

Homosexuality was not an emphasis of this story – and certainly not of its version in Judges – in its own times. It isn't the emphasis found in other scriptural references. It isn't the emphasis Jesus places on it. In fact, a focused on the supposed homosexual content of the Sodom story comes only later, in nonbiblical literature influenced by Greek philosophy, and also in the Qur'an.

In fact, virtually no respectable modern biblical scholar – liberal, conservative, or moderate – considers “the sin of Sodom” to be homosexuality. Even those who hold anti-LGBTQ+ positions based on other texts grant that the Sodom and Gomorrah story is not applicable to that stance. Still, this claim is heard often from laypeople who don't know the full scriptural record of the story, and who haven't done sufficient study to understand it.

Sources:

James V. Brownson: *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*

Jack Rogers: *Jesus, the Bible, & Homosexuality*

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<https://outreach.faith/2022/09/amy-jill-levine-how-to-read-the-bibles-clobber-passages-on-homosexuality/>

Matthew Vines: *God and the Gay Christian*

Colby Martin: [Unclobber: Rethinking our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality](#)