

## From the destruction of Sodom (Génesis 19) to the Christmas story: a lesson in contrasts

Although for more than 2000 years the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was used in synagogues and churches as the principle biblical basis for justifying persecution and violence against sexual minorities (“sodomites”), in the last half century most biblical interpreters have come to recognize that Sodom was condemned for attempting gang rape of the two visiting angels, instead of showing them proper hospitality. Although our lectionaries have yet to include Genesis 19 as an appropriate text for Advent and Christmas, an examination of the New Testament makes clear the surprising appropriateness of such a selection, since visiting angels, refusal of hospitality, and violence are major motifs.

In Luke’s story angelic visits obviously dominate, but in the first, Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, suffers judgment (dumbness for nine months) for not believing Gabriel’s message (Lk 1:5-25). Mary, in contrast, believes Gabriel’s promise regarding Jesus’ miraculous birth. When it occurs the shepherds also receive with enthusiasm the angelic proclamation, but then discover the newborn Jesus lying in a manger “because there was *no room...in the inn*” (Lk 2:7). Although John’s gospel lacks a comparable birth narrative with accompanying angels, the prologue on the incarnation focuses even more emphatically on the motif of hospitality denied: “He came to what was his own, and his own people *received him not*. But to all who received him, who believed in his name....” (Jn 1:11-12)—a text that even equates hospitality to saving faith, as does the memorable image of Jesus knocking at the door of the arrogant, inhospitable Laodicean church (Rev 3:20).

More than the other Gospels, Matthew’s birth narrative highlights the prominent place of sexual minorities, first breaking with tradition to include women in Jesus’ genealogy (1:1-17) and then by selecting four infamous for their sexual minority status (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba), thus preparing us to accept Mary’s scandalous situation. Above all, however, Matthew focuses on the angelic appearance to Joseph, who first subversively redefines what it means to be “just” by refusing to have Mary stoned for adultery (Mt 1:19; see Jesus with the adulteress in John 8:1-11), is about to divorce her, but then believes the angel’s message about the Spirit’s role in Jesus’ conception (Mt 1:20-25). Also in Matthew, his story of the “slaughter of the innocents” by King Herod (2:13-18) reminds us that, as in the Sodom story, a refusal of hospitality commonly is linked with expressions of violence.

Given these parallels between the Sodom story and the Gospel birth narratives, we are not surprised that when Jesus himself refers to Sodom, on sending out his disciples in mission, he specifies its sin as a refusal of hospitality (Mt 10:14-15 // Lk 10:8-12). Hebrews similarly emphasizes hospitality as fundamental to the Christian praxis of love, “since many have thereby entertained angels unawares” (13:1-2), and along with James, highlights the prostitute Rahab’s unique place in salvation history (the only woman exemplar of hospitable faith in Heb 11:31; on par with Abraham in James 2:25).

With the disappearance of the Bible’s 48 texts on Sodom from the churches’ arsenal of conventional weapons for discrimination, oppression and violence against “sodomites” (sexual minorities of all sorts), efforts began in earnest to fabricate an adequate one-shot nuclear device out of Romans 1:26-27. A major problem not usually disclosed to gullible allies was that Rom 1:26 actually said nothing explicit about lesbians and had been recognized by church fathers until around 400 A.D. as referring to women who offered themselves to men for anal sex (thus avoiding procreation). Moreover, the remaining handful of outmoded weapons—Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; Jude 7—all shared the embarrassing deficiency of referring only to males (in abusive anal sex, corrupting boys and raping slaves and sex for pay with young male prostitutes in idolatrous cultic contexts). Hence the obsessive determination to make Rom 1:27 a silver bullet against “homosexuality.”

The Apostle Paul, unfortunately, proved singularly uncooperative, since careful exegesis revealed that (1) the literary genre he had selected in Romans 18-32 was that of a Decline of Civilization narrative purportedly describing a fall of the entire human race into an idolatry that God punished with abandonment to sexual uncleanness of all sorts; (2) the text involved setting a rhetorical trap that was then sprung in Rom 2:1-16, thus condemning all who had sought to use to 1:18-32 to condemn others; (3) four of the elements that sounded so negative in 1:24-27 (as the trap was being laid) suffered a kind of deconstruction later in the letter thus eliminating any basis for condemning all male homoeroticism (as being “unclean,” “unnatural,” “shameful,” or

involving a dastardly “ex/change”). Although the fifth negative element in the rhetoric of 1:24-27 (the condemnation of coveting, an excess of passion that harms the neighbor) underwent no deconstruction, Paul’s sense of fairness and justice led him to apply this norm to sexual excesses of all sorts, especially heterosexual adultery, and not just to homoerotic excesses (in both 1:24-27 and 13:8-14).

Finally, worst of all, scholars came to recognize that Paul only revealed his ultimate purpose in writing the letter with his exhortation to feuding house churches in Rome to quit being so judgmental and rather “Receive/welcome one another, as also Christ welcomed us to the glory of God” (Rom 15:7). So, instead of providing a silver bullet targeting “sodomites” Romans was recognized as echoing the Gospel message of hospitality. Even Paul’s great doctrine of “justification by faith alone” came to be interpreted as expressing in legal metaphor the message of Jesus’s parable of the Prodigal Son, where the Father (representing God) welcomes the lost son, whom the elder brother arrogantly condemned (Lk 15:11-32).

Perhaps if those churches that still defend an “Elder Brother” policy against welcoming sexual minorities would reread the Christmas story and the New Testament in the light of the true sin of Sodom in Genesis 19, we might see fewer church splits and more loving outreach and welcome to sexual minorities “*to the glory of God*” (Rom 15:7).