

Violation and Annihilation at Sodom and Gomorrah: Revisiting the Sexual and Divine Ethics of Gen 19:1–11

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ABSTRACT

Conservative biblical scholars and those on the Christian Right often deploy bigoted readings of Gen 19:1–11—the infamous story of Sodom and Gomorrah—that demean and censure the experiences and identities of LGBT communities. The worldview bolstered by these readings has also been known to empower those who commit acts of violence against LGBT persons. Following the heritage of commentaries and studies that precede it, this study is committed to engaging critically with retrograde, corrosive thinking about Gen 19:1–11. This study will situate the text in both its literary and ancient Near Eastern contexts to comprehensively understand why Genesis 19 indicts with severity the townsmen of Sodom. This study will also explore the problematic implications of the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah for modern readers.

The fiery fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19:1–11 often serves as a locus for the Christian Right’s criticisms of LGBT sexuality. Holly Toensing alludes to the more extreme and vocal groups of the Christian Right—like the Westboro Baptist Church—who, with righteous indignance, often tout signs and posters portraying such slogans as “Homosexuality = Death (Gen 19)” and “God Hates Fags (Gen 19:24–25)” at pride parades around the US.¹ The views of the Westboro Baptist Church concerning Genesis 19, however unfortunate, are not in the minority among the Christian Right—though the ways in which the Church aggressively expresses such views certainly is. A brief query on any major internet search engine will reveal an alarming number of articles that identify and sully homosexuality—or any form of sex or sexual identity that is not heterosexual—as a sin. One of the most often-cited prooftexts used to bolster these arguments is Gen 19:1–11.

Even among the rhetoric of conservative biblical scholars Sodom and Gomorrah is commonly

linked with homosexuality. Robert Gagnon, for example, believes this connection is obvious: “If same-sex intercourse were not an issue among their readers, there would have been little need to address it explicitly.”² Toensing cites Weston Fields who states that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was dealt by Yahweh to combat “the sex-crazed homosexually inclined male population of Sodom.”³ Adorned in more eloquent prose, Robert Alter oblates an argument that accuses the Sodomite men of failing to recognize the moral value behind the act of progeny creation in heterosexual sex, that their desires for homosexual sex were a divinely meted curse.⁴ “A society that rejects the moral bonds of civilization for the instant gratification of dark urges,” Alter writes on, “can be swept away in a moment; . . . the very danger of illicit sexuality may blight a kingdom with sterility.”⁵ In a recently-published article, Brian Peterson claims that the primary issue that confronts readers in the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah is consensual homosexual sex, because the verb *yādā* ‘(to know)’—used euphemistically for sexual intercourse—is not further defined by any other lexical modifier, and thus one might infer that the Sodomite men sought nothing more than to court and sleep with Lot and his male guests.⁶

Both the Christian Right and conservative biblical scholars appear to justify their arguments against non-heterosexual sex vis-à-vis Gen 19:1–11 using a similar approach. They impose upon the text an interpretation of the declaration made by the Sodomite men—that they desire to ‘know’ Lot’s male guests—as being what they call “homosexual sex,” assuming that the text communicates the sexual orientation of the Sodomite men, and tacitly identifying homoerotic desire with physical violence.⁷ Because both Sodom and Gomorrah were utterly annihilated as a result of the actions of these men, this assumption is particularly corrosive, for it inaugurates a sweeping worldview of condemnation directed at non-heterosexual sex, that practitioners of such forms of intercourse are worthy of divine wrath. Toensing cites Mark Jordan who states that “the prevailing history of interpretation of the Sodom and Gomorrah story abstracts “sodomy” from the geographical reference, “Sodom,” through a series of processes that essentialize persons, making them identifiable across time and cultures and further permitting a punishment as near as one can get to divine annihilation to be pronounced in all cases.”⁸

Unfortunately, assumptions made about the sexual identities of the Sodomite men likely influence individuals to act aggressively toward LGBT persons today. Toensing identifies a report from the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs which states that after the US Supreme Court ruled to overturn the sodomy laws in 2003, “the country experienced a 24% spike in hate incidents based on sexual orientation.”⁹ Over a decade after these laws were overturned, LGBT persons are now the most targeted minority group in all of the US.¹⁰ Though certainly not all of these hate crimes are motivated by assumptions concerning Genesis 19, the caustic interpretive history of this text among the Christian Right looms like a grim and incriminating specter over the scenes of violence against LGBT persons.

For people of faith observing these horrific scenes unfold up close or from afar, who take the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) seriously as scripture, two questions confront readers. First, how ought one read Gen 19:1–11 against the current climate of LGBT hatred and resentment in the US? Second, does the utter annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah undermine any affirmative or hope-inspiring message in the text? Certainly, many articles and commentaries have been dedicated to correct destructive readings of Gen 19:1–11 for LGBT persons, but many of these same articles and commentaries overlook the ethical

implications of Yahweh's annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah a few verses later. Thus, the following study will pursue a different route of analysis by attempting to address both questions; one cannot approach the first question without engaging the second. If Genesis 19 implicitly criticizes the violence of the Sodomite men, why does Yahweh's violence against both cities seem to go unchecked? On the one hand, this study will engage a number of relevant ancient Near Eastern same-sex law codes and the literary structure of Gen 19:1–11 itself; on the other hand, it will explore ethical implications of divine annihilation in Gen 19:1–11 for further discussion. Accordingly, this study will attempt to demonstrate that the violence of the Sodomite men in Gen 19:1–11 does not implicate their sexual identities but, instead, criticizes their use of intercourse as a socially constructed form of violence. The concomitant evisceration of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, introduces a whole host of problems for a practical theological reading of the text.

METHODOLOGY

Before proceeding, a little more must be said about the methodology of this study. Indeed, interest is situated primarily in a literary-critical approach to Gen 19:1–11, with a broad comparative approach to ancient Near Eastern same-sex law codes that aids this reading of the text. To cover the scope of ethics regarding divine wrath, this study will also use a reader-response method of analysis. "Reader-response criticism takes seriously the temporal reading process regarding how meaning of a text is created, with both the text and any given reader exerting a degree of control in that meaning."¹¹ The reader-response approach is often applied to biblical writers and orators themselves, who at times played the role of cultural critic: "Far from accepting passively the values that they had imbibed, their strategy was to probe, question, modify and even reject some of their inherited traditions."¹² In the context of Gen 19:1–11ff, it is unclear if the writer supports the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. At first glance it appears that the writer might, in fact, *endorse* divine annihilation. But there are some details in the literary context of Gen 19:1–11 that might complicate this reading—but more on this later. The reader-response approach, therefore, not only highlights the writer's dialogue with the ancient Israelite custom of divine annihilation but also engages modern readers in critique of the text itself. Divine annihilation was a traditional theological expectation for executing justice in ancient Israelite religion, but this concept in the setting of a modern, western world holds terrifying implications for practical theological use, especially when applied to bigoted readings of Genesis 19 against LGBT persons.

SAME-SEX LAW CODES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

As has been discussed earlier, the Christian Right and conservative biblical scholars tend to impose a particular modern, western understanding of queerness onto their readings of Genesis 19. Though it has been demonstrated that a number of operative concepts of queer sexual identity were extant in the ancient Mediterranean world,¹³ the assumption is made that the writer of Gen 19:1–11 implies gay sexual identities for the men of Sodom. This assumption is erroneous, however, because male-male intercourse held a

particular array of functions in the broad ancient Near Eastern social context of which Genesis 19 was a part, and these functions never implicate the sexual identities of the practitioners. Consider these same-sex law codes as they are presented below.

Šumma alu

One epigraphic example comes from a collection of Babylonian dream omen tablets known as the *Šumma alu*. Omens were interpretations of individual events by diviners for the purpose of augury.¹⁴ Scribes would then record each omen in the form of a conditional clause: the protasis would be the event about which the omen is concerned, and the apodosis the implication of this event for one's future.¹⁵ In the context of sex omens, "the protasis . . . presents a single act, habit, or event; the apodosis specifies a future physical, emotional, economic, or social condition."¹⁶ These omens were then transcribed into a series of casuistic laws, which served as criteria by which one evaluated individual court cases.¹⁷ Most of the laws outlined in the *Šumma alu* address heterosexual intercourse, but five laws implicate same-sex intercourse. Consider the following translation of these five same-sex laws:

1. If a man has intercourse with the hindquarters of his equal (male), that man will be foremost among his brothers and colleagues.
2. If a man yearns to express his manhood while in prison and thus, like a male cult-prostitute, mating with men becomes his desire, he will experience evil.
3. If a man has intercourse with a (male) cult-prostitute, care [in the sense of "trouble"] will leave him.
4. If a man has intercourse with a [male] courtier, for one whole year the worry which plagued him will vanish.
5. If a man has intercourse with a [male] slave, care will seize him.¹⁸

Laws two through four address some fundamental boundaries in male-male coupling, suggesting that it was appropriate only for divination in a cultic context. Laws one and five deal with same-sex intercourse between men of different social strata. For example, if a man were to penetrate another man of a lower social caste, then the penetrating partner would risk sully his reputation among the community. If, however, the receiving partner were of equal or greater status, then the penetrating partner would be endowed with the privilege to network among those in the upper echelons of society.¹⁹ According to the above law codes, cultic sanctity, societal power and honor figure prominently in the *Šumma alu*'s

treatment of same-sex intercourse.²⁰ Nowhere in these five laws is there any comment or assumption made about sexual identity or preference; male-male sexual intercourse was merely perceived as a useful social tool, divorced from sexual identity or preference, in the ancient Mesopotamian world, and was integrated accordingly into its cultic milieu.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Like the *Šumma alu*, two references to same-sex coupling in the Levitical law code of the Hebrew Bible share an affinity for societal power and honor: Lev 18:22 and 20:13. These two verses are also perennial favorites among the Christian Right and conservative biblical scholars for constructing arguments against LGBT persons. Peterson, for example, identifies Lev 18:22 and 20:13 to make his case that Genesis 19 paints in a negative light same-sex relationships.²¹ In his defense, Peterson does well noting that the topical collection of incest (18:6–18), intercourse with a menstruating woman (18:19), adultery (18:20), and bestiality (18:23) also includes male-male intercourse (18:22), all of which are cited as morally reprehensible actions worthy of corporal punishment (20:13).²² However, Peterson, like other conservative biblical scholars, seems to furtively sidestep an important phrase present in both verses that holds the key to understanding their indictment of same-sex coupling: *miškēbē ʾiśāh* (“as with the lying of a woman”). Saul Olyan compares the above phrase to an analogue found in Judg 21:12, which describes female virginity alternatively as not knowing “the lying down of a man” (*miškab zākār*).²³ Olyan proposes that “the lying down of a man” could be understood as vaginal penetration by the male partner; on the converse, *miškēbē ʾiśāh* could refer to vaginal reception by the female partner.²⁴ Remarkably, there is no language anywhere in Leviticus that explicitly mentions anal intercourse as a male-male activity.²⁵ The receiving partner in the male coupling is addressed indirectly as a passive, lesser partner vis-à-vis feminine language, because a woman would have been identified in ancient Near Eastern court disputes with similar terms.²⁶ Considering the clear power dynamic at play in both couplings, one can infer that both Lev 18:22 and 20:13 view male-male intercourse as an act that brings shame upon those who penetrate someone of a socially inferior stratum.

However, it must be accounted for why both Leviticus 18 and 20 appear to deal harshly with participants of same-sex intercourse, and why both parties are culpable in the eyes of the law. Olyan states that while the verb *šākab* occurs with an Imperfect 2ms conjugation in Lev 18:22, the same verb shifts to 2mp half-way through Lev 20:13, indicating that there might have been a redactional hand in the text.²⁷ Prior to its penultimate stage, Lev 20:13 might have referred to the penetrating partner alone as the culpable party (2mp), which supports the grammar of Lev 18:22 and thus maintains some level of ideological continuity with neighboring cultures (i.e., Mesopotamia and the *Šumma alu*).²⁸ But why would a redactor go about shifting the culpability from one to both parties? Ephraim Radner posits that this redactional shift was the product of a priestly editor, who showcased a specific set of cultic concerns that came to be known as the Holiness Code.²⁹ This Holiness (or H) redactor was principally interested in maintaining ideological boundaries around Israelite social order, which protected the sanctity of the geographical territory inhabited

by Yahweh's people. Thus, deviant intercourse practices listed in Leviticus 18 and 20, which involved the mixing of bodily fluids (i.e., semen, menstrual blood, etc.), were deemed iniquitous precisely because they blurred Israelite cultural boundaries, deconstructed created order, and thereby defiled the physical ground upon which the people of Yahweh were situated, opening up the possibility that they could be exiled from their homeland.³⁰ Timothy Willis states likewise that the H redactor was fixated upon Israelite purity and cultural boundary maintenance to distinguish Israel from its neighbors.³¹ This observation is qualified through the admonitions in Lev 18:21 and 20:2–5 against worshiping the Canaanite god of child-sacrifice, Molech, arguing that same-sex intercourse—among other practices listed by Peterson—were tantamount in abhorrence to the worship of foreign deities.³² Thus, Lev 18:22 and 20:13, like the *Šumma alu* omens, evidently have no concern for one's sexual identity or preference but a vested interest in ancient Near Eastern conceptions of honor and shame.

Middle Assyrian Law Codes

Much like the former, the Middle Assyrian law codes (or MAL) address punishments for transgressing social boundaries through illicit sex, but they do so in a manner that will clearly frame the events in Genesis 19. From the two laws concerning male-male intercourse in the MAL, one law in Paragraph 20 specifies that if a man were to sexually assault his comrade (*tappāšu inīk*), he would warrant the communal *lex talionis*: a group of men shall gang rape the sexual offender (*inikkūš*) and then castrate him (*ana ša rēšēn utarrūš*: [idiom.] “they shall turn him into a eunuch”).³³ Phyllis Bird states that this punishment was intended to inspire utter humiliation on multiple levels for the perpetrator, the most significant level of which she calls the deprivation of his “sexual weapon.”³⁴ As one may deduce from this section of the MAL, same-sex intercourse was not only viewed as a tool to network with the powerful in Near Eastern antiquity; the male penis was also regarded as an instrument for executing acts of violence (i.e., a weapon). The function of penis as weapon will be the primary focus of this study moving forward.

SEXAS SOCIOPOLITICAL DOMINATION

In ancient Near Eastern city-states laws were not established as a uniform canon that applied to every community but, instead, were inaugurated according to specific customs of each society.³⁵ In Mesopotamia, for example, Wallis Budge states that laws “were few and simple, and were drawn up chiefly to protect the property of the god and the community.”³⁶ In other words, ancient city-states functioned more-or-less independently from one another, governing by their own sense of what they valued as both god and country. Such values and property were conserved through sanctioning socially constructed acts of violence to enforce societal obedience, evidence of which, according to Budge, is replete throughout Mesopotamian law codes, such as the law codes of Hammurabi.³⁷ If one incorporates this notion that ancient societies functioned culturally and legally off of an honor-based system, then one might imagine how ancient

communities—like those comprising Mesopotamia—treated with severity the act of defending the honor of god and country.

Consider a vase that has survived from Greek antiquity called, “I am Eurymedon, I have bowed down.” Images upon its surface recount a Greek victory over Persian forces at the Battle of River Eurymedon in 460 BCE.³⁸ The crowning moment of military achievement is portrayed—rather explicitly—by a Greek soldier with erect penis in hand, preparing to penetrate a fearful Persian archer from behind, cementing his military and cultural victory over his defeated foe.³⁹

Though a powerful image, why take a vase seriously as a descriptor of culture? Lyombe Eko asserts that for as long as humans have walked the earth, they have used various mediums of expression—such as art—to communicate the realities of the world in which they lived.⁴⁰ The artist who constructed the above Greek vase likely perceived acts of sexual domination as a significant component of ancient military reality, hence why they bothered to depict the fear of being penetrated with such vivid detail. While male-male intercourse was used as a means to navigate the social hierarchies of Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel alike, Martti Nissinen argues that it was also common to use this form of penetration to emphasize political victory over a conquered subordinate, particularly over outsiders who threatened a city-state’s homogenous values of god and country.⁴¹ Thus, same-sex intercourse was not only a fundamental component of one’s everyday lived experience in the ancient Near East, but it also served as a socially constructed tool for exercising dominance over outsiders, transforming them into passive agents of sexual humiliation. Would it be fair, however, to assume that socially constructed sexual violence of this nature figures prominently in Gen 19:1–11, or is the text an anomaly amidst its ancient Near Eastern cultural backdrop?

WE WILL VIOLATE YOU (GEN 19:1–11)

Rife with conflict and terror, Gen 19:1–11 relates how Lot and his family attempt to navigate the safety of his guests in a harrowing conflict with the depraved townsmen of Sodom. As one surveys the literary landscape of this debacle, one question serves as a guide: Are the Sodomite men merely gay men looking for intercourse, or is there something more systemically nefarious afoot?

Like Gagnon, Bill Arnold considers it obvious that the men of Sodom desired intercourse with Lot’s guests, and were willing to acquire their company by any means necessary.⁴² Arnold believes that it is impossible not to see homosexuality as a problematic element at the core of the narrative.⁴³ In contrast to both Arnold and Gagnon, Miguel De La Torre claims that, “Sodom’s sin is an abomination before God—a perverse and prevalent sin that undermines the very foundations of faith. Its constant practice contributes to the downfall of civilization and leads nations toward barbarism.”⁴⁴ The text is not concerned with one’s sexual identity but, instead, critiques acts of communal injustice. Walter Brueggemann also argues that the Hebrew Bible does not support a view of the sin of Sodom as homosexuality but, rather, provides substantial evidence for communal depravity as the root problem (cf. Isa 1:10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Ezek 16:49).⁴⁵ Brueggemann’s argument finds support in Gen 18:20–21 and 19:13, where the appeal against Sodom and Gomorrah is leveled as an ‘outcry’ (*ša ‘āqâh*) against societal injustice. Likewise, De La Torre claims that it

is highly improbable for the sin of Sodom to be homosexuality since Ezek 16:49, for example, is abundantly clear that the sin of Sodom manifests as a reckless disregard for those who are fiscally and culturally marginalized within a community.⁴⁶ However, in Ezek 16:50, Peterson retorts, the writer employs the attributive adjective *tô 'ēbah* (“abomination”) to describe the nature of same-sex intercourse in Genesis 19, which he also claims shares a consonant pejorative function to Lev 18:22, inferring that the Hebrew Bible views homoerotic coupling as fundamentally immoral.⁴⁷ As has been discussed earlier in this study, however, the appearance of *tô 'ēbah* within the Holiness Code does not indicate a demeaning attitude towards consensual queer sex but likely refers to the worship of foreign deities through non-native Israelite sociocultural practices. Thus, Peterson appears to be overstating what he reads in Gen 19:1–11. While there is more to the sin of Sodom than what De La Torre concedes, De La Torre and Brueggemann are certainly on to something regarding this concept of ‘societal injustice’.

At the outset of the text vv. 1–3 highlight how Lot—an outsider in the land of Sodom—meets two foreign messengers at the city gate and invites them to spend the night in his home. Lot then prostrates himself before the messengers (*šāhā*; cf. Gen 19:1), urges them to spend the night (*lūn*; cf. Gen 19:2), washes their feet (*rāḥaṣ*; cf. Gen 19:2), and prepares unleavened bread for them (*'āpā*; cf. Gen 19:3). Hermann Gunkel states that Lot’s behavior exemplifies practices paramount to ancient Israelite traditions of hospitality.⁴⁸ What is remarkable about Lot housing these specific guests in this particular fashion was how he did so as an outsider offering care to other outsiders. The writer of Genesis 19 makes it abundantly clear from the outset that Lot is a prominent symbol of righteousness to whom readers must pay attention.

Verses 4–8 shift focus to the shameful acts of the Sodomites, which are meant to stand in sharp contrast to Lot’s acts of hospitality in vv. 1–3. In v. 4 the construct phrase *'nšē hā 'ir* (lit.: men of the city) and the supporting clause *kol hā 'ām miqāṣeh* (“all of the people from every extremity”) communicate how every male resident in Sodom intended to surround Lot’s property. In v. 5 the group of townsmen call for Lot to bring out his guests so that they “may know them” (*nēdē 'ā*). Though the verb *yādā'* occurs here as a 1cp jussive, connoting a group request, it would be a stretch to associate predisposed sexual attraction to its grammatical function, as have many conservative biblical scholars. Citing D. Sherwin Bailey, Nissinen rejects the identification of *yādā'* as a descriptor for consensual intercourse, instead arguing that such forms of intercourse are more often indicated by the verb *šākab* throughout the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁹ Thus, *yādā'* might have a completely different meaning in this context. In fact, one can observe the role of *yādā'* begin to take shape in vv. 7–8 as Lot admonishes the townsmen against acting wickedly (*tārē 'ū*) by instead offering them his virgin daughters, who have “not known a man” (*lō' yād 'ū 'iš*), in place of his male guests.

A few matters of which to take note. First, *yādā'* presumably carries with it the concept of betrothal. Does this negate the former assertion about the Sodomite men asking to *know* Lot’s guests? Certainly not! Like Peterson, Bird claims that *yādā'* in itself does not contain any element of coercion. The function of *yādā'* is not clear unless ascribed meaning by the context of which it is a part via the speakers in the narrative, especially when involving dialogue between righteous and unrighteous characters.⁵⁰ For example, when the wicked men of Sodom use *yādā'*, one can assume their ill intentions. When Lot employs *yādā'*, however, one can infer that he has purer motives, since he is the text’s paragon of righteousness (vv. 1–3). Second, where are the women? Miguel De La Torre raises this question in light of the astounding lack of

female presence amidst the text's persistent referencing of the wicked *men* of Sodom.⁵¹ He claims that it is the patriarchal values of the writer which force readers not to consider the Sodomite women as either complicit with or oppositional towards their male counterparts, and thus represents a central problem to be confronted in the text.⁵² Dianne Bergant asserts, likewise, that Lot's willingness to send his daughters to the mob in place of his male guests bellies his patriarchal values, marking him as an agent of inhospitality.⁵³ The voices of Lot's daughters and the Sodomite women are effectively silenced, and their safety stripped away, amidst an overwhelming male presence in the narrative.

Indeed, feminist literary criticism is invaluable to modern scholarship in the field of Biblical Studies, especially here. And this conclusion put forth by De La Torre and Bergant speaks clearly about and problematizes the sexist elements of Gen 19:1–11—a valid reading of the text, no doubt. According to the reader-response approach, however, it is possible that multiple readings can be gleaned from a single text, and thus this indictment of Lot's sexism might not be capturing the whole story.⁵⁴ Gunkel states that it was admirable, according to hospitality ethics of ancient Israel, for Lot to sacrifice his daughters in lieu of his foreign guests (cf. Judg 19:25). Bird substantiates this claim by alluding to Lev 21:13–21 and Gen 34:7, 31, which maintain that it was a great dishonor for a man's daughters to lose their virginity outside the purview of betrothal.⁵⁵ Though modern sensibilities might call Lot's actions sexist, as some scholars have, it appears that the social context of the author identifies Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters to the men of Sodom as evidence of his righteous character, his willingness to go to any length to preserve his guests' honor and risk his own. Sitting in this narrative tension between Lot's sexism and the author's ancient Near Eastern ethics of hospitality certainly confronts modern readers with a quandary. Would it be fair for modern readers to recognize and accept the reality of the author's ethics as situated in their time in place, or should readers criticize Lot outright for his sexist language and disposition? Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between: Accepting the reality of the author's context and calling out Lot's sexist disposition would be a persuasive position.

Arriving at the crux of the narrative in Gen 19:9, one observes the true intent of the Sodomite men coming to the fore. In v. 9a the men forcefully order Lot to stand back, since they are unsatisfied with his daughters as a counteroffer.⁵⁶ The men then call Lot's outsider status into account (this one came in as a foreigner; *hā'ehād bo' lāgūr*) by accusing him of severely condemning their behavior (lit.: and he will surely judge; *wāyišpōt šāpōt*),⁵⁷ suggesting that if Lot were a sojourner, then he was socially inferior to the native-born Sodomite men.⁵⁸ One might recall a connection with the honor/shame value system discussed earlier in this study, which suggests that Gen 19:1–11 might be conceptualizing same-sex intercourse as a socially constructed tool for violence. The virulent intensions of the townsmen become all the clearer in v. 9b when they proclaim '*atā nār' lēkâ*' ("Now, we will violate you!").⁵⁹ Then, the men attempt to break down Lot's door. Simply put, the Sodomites were not promiscuous men looking for intercourse—they sought to violently assault Lot and rape his guests. Rounding off the pericope, vv. 10–11 relate how Lot's guests revealed their identities as supernatural, divine beings, who then executed the wrath of Yahweh by cursing the mob with blindness. This curse is later followed in vv. 12ff. with a pronouncement of a malediction of fire and brimstone upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness.

Lastly, it is worth revisiting some of Peterson's philology and exegesis of Gen 19:1–11 mentioned earlier

on in this study. To refresh: Peterson ventures that the express role of *yādā* ' bears in mind consensual homoerotic intercourse.⁶⁰ When combined with the Sodomite's rejection of Lot's daughters, Peterson contends that the downfall of Sodom was due to the sexual identity of its male inhabitants—a claim supported by a number of other conservative biblical scholars.⁶¹ However, from the present examination of the text, 19:9 in particular, it has been determined that the townsmen were explicitly interested in sexually violating Lot's male guests, likely because they were outsiders in Sodom, and thus the function of *yādā* ' in this literary context is unambiguous: it means to violate, to rape. Furthermore, because Gen 19:1–11 addresses socially constructed sexual violence against outsiders similarly to other communities in the ancient Near East, it can be reasonably maintained that the text is not concerned with consensual queer relationships, nor can readers infer the sexual identities of the Sodomite men. Gen 19:1–11 presents readers with a clear sexual ethic of hospitality. The virtue of protecting outsiders from harm, especially sexual harm, is placed front and center in the narrative and is prized accordingly. Threats of sexual coercion and violation, on the other hand, are implicitly criticized as fundamentally inhospitable. Thus, it follows that this ethic might be interpreted in a modern context as an imperative to protect those who are vulnerable from groups or institutions that might seek to cause them harm. Whether one donates to a local safe house for LGBT youth experiencing homelessness, actively supports access to appropriate care for women at their local Planned Parenthood clinic, or volunteers as a support worker for the witness protection program, the practical implications of this ethic are multifarious.

IS YAHWEH A MONSTER?

Schadenfreude. It is a common and powerful emotion, often expressed as a longing for the 'bad guy' to get his 'just deserts,' much like when one witnesses a hated rapist or murderer receive the death penalty in a drama-filled true crime television series. But what about when that same court decides to execute everyone else in the town of which this criminal was a part? This is the quandary that confronts readers of Genesis 19. The story does not end with the cursing of the iniquitous townsmen of Sodom; the text indicates that the actions of these men not only warrant their death but the destruction of everyone and everything in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 19:12–13; 24–25). Indeed, it seems odd that a text criticizing the violence of human agents not only takes for granted Yahweh's violence but also allows it to go unchecked. Thus, echoing the second question from the introduction of this study in different words, does Yahweh's annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah undercut the text's sexual ethic of hospitality?

Some scholars claim that this expression of divine judgment fits into a broader thematic pattern of annihilation spanning the primeval history (Genesis 1–11). Both Claus Westermann and Umberto Cassuto, for example, note how Genesis 19 describes condemnable human behavior as warranting primordial destruction in a manner similar to the flood narrative (Genesis 6–9).⁶² Gordon Wenham also speaks about the thematic relationship between Genesis 19 and the flood story, but he is skeptical that the writer is merely accepting this longstanding trend of divine judgment.⁶³

Wenham states that both Genesis 18 and 19 are linked by two crucial means. First, both chapters are comprised almost exclusively of material by J, thus demonstrating source unity.⁶⁴ Second, both chapters appear to have been written in a parallel panel-writing style, where “the two hospitality scenes (18:1–8; 19:1–3) and . . . the pleas for the two cities (18:23–32; 19:18–22)” are intended to be read together.⁶⁵ This parallel panel-writing style not only demonstrates thematic continuity between chapters 18 and 19 but also a congruity of ideology, for both chapters come from the same literary source.

Wenham identifies how the writer of Genesis 18 appears to be critical of this cultural assumption of divine judgment vis-à-vis annihilation, with Abraham, quite literally, debating Yahweh about the fates of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 18:22–23).⁶⁶ Eryl Davies even highlights this particular episode between Abraham and Yahweh as an example *par excellence* of the reader-response approach in action: The writer acknowledges the reality of this form of divine punishment in the Israelite cultural milieu and decides to push back against it.⁶⁷ So too does one observe this form of reader-response criticism in the narrative of Genesis 19, although the witness against divine annihilation is not as clear as it is in Genesis 18. There is a brief section of the text where Lot pleads with the divine messengers on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 19:18–22), but Lot never expresses a desire outright for the cities to be spared from wrath; he primarily expresses anxiety about how his family might escape this coming destruction. A stronger argument for the writer’s reader-response criticism would be the nature with which Lot treats the messengers’ warning of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In v. 15 Lot appears to relay this message of divine wrath to his family as if it were a joke (*kimṣahēq*; the conjugated verb derives from a root meaning ‘to laugh’), indicating that he does not take seriously, and perhaps is critical of, the threat that Yahweh will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. After these cities are decimated in the following verses, however, the text leaves open the possibility that Lot could be dismayed that Yahweh followed through with plans for utter annihilation, but this last postulation might be merely wishful thinking.

How, then, might the writer of Genesis 19 characterize Yahweh’s act of utter annihilation? Is Yahweh a monster that destroys the many because of the actions of a few? Perhaps the writer would not use those exact words, but the sentiment might be shared all the same. Indeed, there are some notes of reader-response criticism similar in tenor to Genesis 18 (cf. Gen 19:15), which might suggest that Genesis 19 is likewise critical of divine annihilation. But the broader literary setting in Genesis 19 appears to present readers with an ambiguous witness of divine annihilation. At some points the writer appears to be critical of Yahweh’s wrath (vv. 15, 18–22); elsewhere the writer shows tacit acceptance of Yahweh’s wrath (vv. 12–13, 23ff.). This perplexing witness of divine annihilation obfuscates a practical reading of the text, but perhaps this perplexity is intentional. Given that the reader-response approach allows for the reader to engage with multiple readings of a text and the various conclusions of these readings,⁶⁸ and it has been established that the author of Genesis 19 engages critically with the problematic elements of divine annihilation (cf. Gen 18:1–8, 23–32), it is not farfetched to assume that a practical approach to reading Genesis 19 might be critical reader-response engagement. Perhaps the ambiguity woven into Genesis 19 encourages readers to ask critical questions of divine annihilation. Is it ethical that Yahweh destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for the violent threats of a group of Sodomite men? Shifting to a modern context, it would be satisfying,

indeed *Schadenfreude*, for example, to witness a heinous murderer of trans women in Houston, TX be sentenced to death for his crimes. But what if the court decided to sentence the entire population of the city of Houston to death as well? Surely, one might exclaim, with horror and dismay, that the actions of this court are absolutely heinous, perhaps even monstrous. How, then, might readers respond to Yahweh's utter annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah for the heinous violence of a few? Is this the God to whom one dedicates worship? Is Yahweh a monster? Engaging critically, therefore, with the ambiguous witness of divine annihilation in Genesis 19 is absolutely necessary for one to maintain the value of the sexual ethic of hospitality presented in vv. 1–11. If one does not engage critically with divine annihilation, however, then the ethical conclusion of Genesis 19 necessarily yet unfortunately follows: Yahweh *is* a monster.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study engaged with the story of Lot and the depraved townsmen of Sodom in Gen 19:1–11. The Christian Right and a number of conservative biblical scholars have often used—and still use—this biblical text to further marginalize LGBT persons, claiming the text, in no uncertain terms, denounces as unethical non-heterosexual sex. As a corrective to this misguided reading, the present study implemented a broad comparative approach to introduce readers to a number of ancient Near Eastern same-sex law codes, all of which demonstrate that male-male sexual coupling was not linked to the sexual identities nor preferences of the men involved. A literary-critical approach was then employed to read Gen 19:1–11, and this study deduced, likewise, that readers cannot infer the sexual identities nor preferences of the Sodomite men. Moreover, because of the prevalence of language about sexual violence in Gen 19:1–11, it has been determined that the men of Sodom were not seeking consensual homosexual intercourse but, rather, were using a form of socially constructed sexual violence to abuse outsiders that threatened their cultural homogeneity, a form of violence present in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. This study concluded, therefore, that Gen 19:1–11 presents a sexual ethic of hospitality, where the text encourages readers not only to notice their altruistic impulse but, indeed, to act and protect those who are vulnerable and marginalized in their midst. Several practical implications of this reading were introduced. This study also utilized a reader-response approach to engage critically with the problematic implications of Yahweh's annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah for the actions of the Sodomite men, and this study encouraged readers to engage likewise with the text. Indeed, there is no easy answer at which one may arrive concerning how to reckon with divine annihilation in Genesis 19, but if one wishes to retain the ethical value of vv.1–11, then the immorality of Yahweh's acts of violence is something with which readers must contend.

NOTES

1 Holly Joan Toensing, "Women of Sodom and Gomorrah: Collateral Damage in the War against Homosexuality?" *JFSR* 21 (2005): 61–74.

- 2 Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 90.
- 3 Toensing, “Women of Sodom and Gomorrah,” 61.
- 4 Robert Alter, “Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative,” in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 151, 157.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Brian Neil Peterson, “The Sin of Sodom Revisited: Reading Genesis 19 in Light of Torah,” *JETS* 59 (2016): 17–31.
- 7 Toensing, “Women of Sodom and Gomorrah,” 62.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Haeyoun Park and Iaryna Mykhyalyshyn, “L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely to Be Targets of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group,” *NYT*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-against-lgbt.html>.
- 11 Toensing, “Women of Sodom and Gomorrah,” 63–64.
- 12 Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 133.
- 13 For more information about the construction of ancient queer identities, particularly in the Hellenistic period, see Amy Richlin, “Not before Homosexuality The Materiality of the *Cmaedus* and the Roman Law against Love between Men,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1993) 523–573; see also Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 14 Ann Kessler Guinan, “Auguries of Hegemony: The Sex Omens of Mesopotamia,” *G&H* 9 (1997): 462–479.
- 15 Guinan, “Auguries of Hegemony,” 462.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 126.
- 18 Greenberg, *Construction of Homosexuality*, 127.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Though the cultic elements of the *Šumma alu* are irrelevant for reading Genesis 19, this tablet collection’s interest in the dichotomy between societal honor and shame figures prominently in the biblical text.
- 21 Peterson, “The Sin of Sodom Revisited,” 24.
- 22 Ibid.

23 Saul M. Olyan, “And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying down of a Woman: On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13,” *JHS* 2, no. 2 (1994): 179–206.

24 Olyan, “And with a Male,” 184–85.

25 Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 42–44, 130.

26 Olyan, “And with a Male,” 185.

27 Olyan, “And with a Male,” 186.

28 Ibid.

29 This term was coined by August Klostermann during the late nineteenth century when he successfully identified Leviticus 17–26 as a specific grouping of legal concerns that appeared to take shape apart from other priestly sources. Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 186.

30 Olyan, “And with a Male,” 205.

31 Timothy M. Willis, *Leviticus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 162. While I disagree with Willis both on the translation of *lāmōlek* and the existence of a god or demon of child-sacrifice in antiquity named Molech, his view of Leviticus 18 and 20 as critical of foreign practices is nonetheless compelling. For further reading on *lāmōlek* and child sacrifice in ancient Israel, see Heath D. Dewrell, *Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

32 Ibid.

33 Phyllis A. Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation concerning Homosexuality: Old Testament Contributions,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 174. See also Ann Kessler Guinan, “Laws and Omens: Obverse and Inverse,” in *Divination in the Ancient Near East: A Workshop on Divination Conducted during the 54th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Würzburg, 20–25 July 2008*, ed. Jeanette C. Finke (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 111–112. While the above translation of the phrase *ana ša rēšēn utarrūš* is understood by Assyriologists to be a loose idiomatic translation, given its context in paragraph 20, the literal translation of the phrase raises some interesting and hotly contested issues of Akkadian grammar. First, the preposition *ana* which introduces the noun-modifier combination *ša rēšēn* is read together literally as, “into a *ša rēši*, or into a ‘one of the head.’” A number of Assyriologists disagree on what exactly it means for one to be *ša rēši*, because there are no clear clues in the panoply of definitions offered which suggest that this identifies one as a eunuch. However, Sakkie Cornelius posits that this term refers to a eunuch because eunuchs often served in the palaces of Mesopotamian kings and were often referred to as *ša rēši šarri* (the head of the king). For more information on the discussion of *ša rēši*, see Sakkie Cornelius, ““Eunuchs”? The Ancient Background of *Eunouchos* in the Septuagint,” in *Septuagint and Reception: Essays Prepared for the Association for the Study of the Septuagint in South Africa*, ed. Johann Cook (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 326–329. Second, the finite verb *utarrūš* (D perf 3cp; from *erēšum*) offers an interesting agrarian metaphor for the act of castration; namely, that the

ša rēši is made a eunuch by their genitals being “tilled,” as the verb *erēšum* may suggest. Not much has been discussed in the professional literature on the exact tools and methods used in the act of castrating sexual offenders of this type, but perhaps the use of *utarrūš* might offer some clues as to how it might have been executed.

34 Ibid.

35 E. A. Wallis Budge, *Babylonian Life and History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 96.

36 Ibid.

37 Though some of the enumerated laws specify monetary compensation for crimes committed, a significant number of punishable offenses necessitated the death penalty. Budge, *Babylonian Life*, 100–104.

38 Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 73.

39 Ibid.

40 Lyombe Eko, *The Regulation of Sex-Themed Visual Imagery: From Clay Tablets to Tablet Computers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 25–26.

41 Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 129–130.

42 Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 184.

43 Ibid.

44 Miguel De La Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 190.

45 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 164.

46 De La Torre, *Genesis*, 190.

47 Peterson, “The Sin of Sodom Revisited,” 21.

48 Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 207–208.

49 Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 45.

50 Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” 147.

51 De La Torre, *Genesis*, 191; see too Toensing, “Women of Sodom and Gomorrah,” 62.

52 Ibid.

53 Dianne Bergant, *Genesis: In The Beginning* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 77.

54 The reader-response approach “asserts that there cannot be just one meaning to a text that is somehow extracted from the text, and instead acknowledges multiple meanings—local, ad hoc, and partial—based on how each reader makes sense of a text.” Toensing, “Women of Sodom and Gomorrah,” 64.

55 Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation," 148.

56 Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 45.

57 When an infinitive absolute appears before or after a corresponding perfect or imperfect finite verb the action of the finite verb is intensified by attributing to it a sense of urgency (i.e., he will *surely* judge).

58 To clarify, the term "native-born" is used here and elsewhere to communicate how the persons identified were born and/or live in the nation of their citizenry, as opposed to the term "indigenous," which is typically associated with native peoples who are subject to oppression from occupying empires or groups in power.

59 The root verb of the first common plural *nār'*, which is *rā'a'*, is often translated as "worse," as in "we will deal worse with you," in most English Bibles. However, in the common lexical range of the verb, *rā'a'* simply means "to do evil, bad, or to violate." Thus, I chose to translate *nār'* as "we will violate," because I believe it fits closer with the lexical range of the root verb, on the one hand, and remains true to the literary context in which the verb is situated, on the other hand.

60 Peterson, "The Sin of Sodom Revisited," 19–20.

61 Ibid.; Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 90; Alter, "Sodom as Nexus," in *The Book and the Text*, 151; Arnold, *Genesis*, 184.

62 Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. David E. Green (New York: T&T Clark, 1987), 142; see too Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Noah to Abraham*, part two of *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Skokie, IL: Varda Books, 1992), 83–88.

63 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2 of the *World Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), 35.

64 Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2 of the *World Biblical Commentary*, 38.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Davies, *The Immoral Bible*, 133.

68 Toensing, "Women of Sodom and Gomorrah," 63–64.